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## Saving our Planet through Faith: A Buddhist-Christian Response

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## **Saving our Planet through Faith: A Buddhist-Christian Response**

By Guillermo Gonzalez

**Abstract:** The main topic of this essay is how certain attributes and teachings from Christianity and Buddhism can inform us of what path we can take to combat global climate change. Although environmental work is not limited to these traditions, this paper aims to point out the teachings that help understand our role as humans as interconnected within these two traditions. One of the main points that are made for Christianity is a reinterpretation of *Imago Dei* which is explained in detail in the first section. In short, *Imago Dei* is the idea that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God which means that we can engage in behavior that is associated with God. The reinterpretation of this term is essential to the global climate change crisis since it explains the role that humans have in relation to the environment and its creatures. It is part of the creation story that many Christians are taught and is a fairly familiar and common notion for those in the Christian faith. Just as *Imago Dei* is essential to the Christian tradition, Karma is also an essential teaching for Buddhism. Karma is both an internal and external force since our actions affect our own livelihood as well as the world around us. In Buddhist cosmology, it is understood that humans hold a special place in the world in that they are able to both achieve enlightenment and hold the most possibility of using karma to shape the world for the better. Both traditions can learn from each other since they have a fairly similar understanding of our interconnectedness. Interfaith dialogue is crucial to finding what methods work best for each individual, be it a Christian, Buddhist, or other faith traditions or even non-faith persons. Interfaith dialogue between these traditions is possible due to our interconnectedness to each other, through different interpretations such as *Imago Dei* and interdependence. For Christianity, creation can be seen as a gift from God and this notion can be further expanded by the Buddhist notions of the kinds of gifts there are. Another fruitful teaching that Christianity can learn from Buddhism is the practice of meditation. Christianity can use meditation to focus on their own personal healing. In turn, Buddhists can also acknowledge Jesus Christ as a spiritual teacher and learn from his teachings. The point of this interaction between traditions is about growth rather than conversion, learning from each other is a mutually beneficial exchange and should be encouraged.

**Keywords:** *Imago Dei*, Sin, Karma, Interdependence, Global Climate Crisis

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## **Introduction**

In our current global climate crisis, what role do the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity offer towards reinterpreting the issue and creating an effective action plan that to save the planet? A reinterpretation and demystification of certain Christian teachings are needed to recognize the relation to God that allows us to be connected to all of creation and its creatures. This is due to the isolation of humans from the notion of their duty to the God-given gift of creation, not as overlords, but as caretakers and protectors. I will focus on the concepts of *Imago Dei*, sin, and the recognition of our relationship with all of creation to better understand our duty. Similarly, staying true to Buddhist teachings helps us determine which attitudes will result in the ultimate healing of the Earth, starting with acknowledging our interdependence due to doctrines such as no-self and karma. For Buddhists, if one ignores this interdependence, suffering will become unbearable not just for the individual, but also the planet itself. I will focus on the doctrine of karma, the notions of no-self and emptiness, and the concept of impermanence to better understand this interdependence.

Buddhist and Christian morality and ethics must be reevaluated individually for each tradition, noticing similarities and differences, and searching for areas of growth and reeducation as a society. Ultimately, I want to use teachings from both traditions to appreciate humanity's innate ability to be intimately connected to the rest of the planet in a mutual relationship that requires us to be empathetic starting from within and eventually outwards. By staying true to the teachings, we can better understand our role in this crisis. Additionally, each tradition can not merely compare and contrast their teaching, they must be willing to learn from each other. Therefore, I believe that there is a need to address common misconceptions that block progress and accept teachings from both traditions that allow us to move forward to face this large issue of global climate change.

## **Christianity**

Christian values prove to be beneficial to understanding our duty towards the environment and correcting the misconceptions that have led to such destruction. A common

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misconception of our role on Earth is dominion over all creation. This is due to misrepresentation of the Christian concept of *Imago Dei*: the concept that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Our dominion over Earth can be found in Genesis 1: 26-28 as it mentions this idea of our likeness to God and our dominion over several parts of creation such as its creatures. Hence, Daniel Migliore states that instead of understanding *Imago Dei* as dominion, “In agreement with numerous contemporary theologians, I would contend that the symbol ‘image of God’ describes human life in relationship with God and with the other creatures.”<sup>1</sup> *Imago Dei* refers to our relationship with God and creation, not our ownership of it. Furthermore, if there is an owner of creation it would be none other than God, as God is the Creator. A reinterpretation and reinforcement of *Imago Dei* helps address our ecological crisis as it is necessary to debunk the misconception of ownership, which often stems from sin. This is due to our “alienation not only from God but also from our fellow creatures and ourselves...driven to disobedience by their desire to be gods or ‘like God,’ Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. This very alienation is tied to the disobedience that can be seen in humans' attitude as superior to all other creatures, to the extent of believing we can be powerful gods that have dominion over the Earth. Our duty, according to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, then demands “gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate God’s generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.”<sup>2</sup> Humans are indeed made in the image of God but not as powerful God-like owners of the Earth. Instead, we are supposed to imitate God’s generosity and recognize the gift of creation. Once the gift of creation is recognized we are challenged to treat it as a gift, we must take care of it and protect it from harm.

Unfortunately, due to our failure to recognize the world as God’s gift, we have damaged our environment and neglected our duty of caring for creation. As Pope Francis mentions in *Querida Amazonia*, “to abuse nature is to abuse our ancestors, our brothers and sisters, creation and the Creator, and to mortgage the future.”<sup>3</sup> By failing to protect and care for the environment we are not only affecting creation itself, but we are insulting humankind’s past, present, and future. Furthermore, we are compromising our responsibility to God to respect and show our

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), par. 160.

<sup>3</sup> Francis, “‘Querida Amazonia’: Post-Synodal Exhortation to the People of God and to All Persons of Good Will,” February 2, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html), par. 32.

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gratitude for the gift that is the world. This is because “sin may take the form of rejecting God’s grace and absolutizing ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> In this case, humanity is rejecting the gift of the duty that God has given us to protect and care for creation. We are absolutizing ourselves by failing to accept this duty. Instead, we are abusing nature, bending it to our will without caring for its well-being.

There is still hope, though. We have a great capacity to “living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork [which] is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”<sup>5</sup> Specifically, to live the full Christian experience, protecting the environment must be placed among the essential teachings of Christianity. It then makes sense that “inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life.”<sup>6</sup> Caring for the environment not only helps us internally, but it also opens us to appreciate creation for what it is, separated from our abuse and avaricious consumption that has long reigned. Through accepting our duty, “we can confront the needs of creation as they are presented to us and respond to them not out of fear or self-defense but out of a heart full of mercy and love.”<sup>7</sup> Once we allow our hearts to be open to mercy and love, we are then able to acknowledge and address the damage that we have caused and accept this damage as our own as well. From this, humanity can be called to action to reject sin, repair the environment, maintain a consciousness that we have a mutual relationship with the environment, protect it and in return, it maintains its status of being a God-given gift.

Humans must also recognize their relationship with other creatures including other human beings. This is because “we cannot progress toward a more sustainable society without addressing questions of economic development and social justice.”<sup>8</sup> In our journey to reclaim our duty as protectors of the environment, we must also address the social and economic situation of other human beings. In *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis explains that the Amazon forest, as well as the indigenous people living there, are mutually affected by the environmental crisis and are often neglected or exploited. Pope Francis states that “if we devote our lives to their service,

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<sup>4</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, par. 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Ilija Delio, Keith Warner, and Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), 172.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

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to working for the justice and dignity that they deserve, we cannot conceal the fact that we do so because we see Christ in them and because we acknowledge the immense dignity that they have received from God, the Father who loves them with boundless love.”<sup>9</sup> This brings us around full circle to the notion of *Imago Dei*; the Amazonian peoples are also made in the image of God along with the rest of humanity and this must not be ignored. It is because of the interconnectedness of the environment, economy, and social justice that these people require our assistance and at the very least, an acknowledgment of their human dignity made clear by the concept of *Imago Dei*.

The next step for those within the Church and everyone else would be to do their part in reducing injustices. We can do our part by understanding “the virtue of ‘enough-ness’ that does not hoard or appropriate excess goods at the expense of another. It is living in the spirit of moderation, realizing that happiness does not come with a gift coupon but with a heart centered in God.”<sup>10</sup> First, we should be considerate of other's needs, effectively sharing the environment as well as avoiding human exploitation. Secondly, we should opt for a life of moderation to allow for the world to be shared. Once again, the notion of *Imago Dei* is resurfaced, this time it pushes us to recognize that likeness of God in others. This can be done “once we realize our need for God [and] begin to realize our need for others including the created world itself.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, we also need other humans given that we have the ability to find the same love of God within them as it resides in us through our creation in the image of God to imitate his actions of love. We also need creation since it is the gift that God gave to all humanity, regardless of economic or social status. This reveals the interdependent relationship that humans have with other humans, creatures, and creation itself. Therefore, these Christian teachings show how we should understand our relationship with those around us and our duty to the Earth to save the home we share.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhist traditions offer valuable insight into how we can approach the environmental crisis that we currently face. To begin, Buddhists believe that “the physical universe is formed by the interaction of the five elements, namely earth, water, fire, air, and space (*ākāśa*).”<sup>12</sup> This

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, par. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Delio, Warner, and Wood, *Care for Creation*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

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concept of interaction can be found within various Buddhist teachings, most notably in the notion of karma. In fact, “a world inhabited by ignorant and selfish people, for example, would decline at a faster speed than one with a wise and virtuous population. This notion that beings are not just the caretakers of their environment, but in some sense create it, has important implications for Buddhist thinking on ecology.”<sup>13</sup> Our actions indeed do have consequences, but this does not come from an external source, but rather from within everyone. This is because “as the proverb has it: ‘Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.’”<sup>14</sup> This proverb perfectly describes what the notion of karma represents in the Buddhist tradition. The actions we make influence who we are and what the world becomes. But what does this have to do with the environment? We have created our environment, “since greed and attachment are short-sighted, mentally deadening and dehumanizing, the environment will reflect back those very qualities we inject into it. Decaying inner cities, gutted hillsides and polluted rivers are therefore the consequence of intentions of the human mind.”<sup>15</sup> Our devotion to material objects has blinded us to the living beings that surround us and the suffering that they are enduring.

Luckily, all hope is not lost, and just as we can affect the world negatively, we can also help it heal and in the process heal humanity. This is because, “as we open and empty ourselves, we come to experience an interconnectedness, the realization that all things are joined and conditioned in an interdependent arising.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, we are interdependent and interconnected to one another and once we realize this, understanding our relationship with the environment is that much easier. An example is, “a drop of water suspended from one leaf of a mahogany tree in a Burmese rainforest is united with the exhaust fumes belching from a battered Chevrolet in Mexico City.”<sup>17</sup> We do not exist independently from the world around us; we are all dependent on each other.

A common misconception of the modern world is to “place responsibility for these things on the shoulders of industrialists and politicians, as we are prone to do... in this case by dividing

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Batchelor, “The Sands of the Ganges – Notes Towards a Buddhist Ecological Philosophy,” in *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown (London and New York: Cassell Publishers, 1992), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Kornfield, “No Self or True Self?,” in *Radiant Mind: Essential Buddhist Teachings and Texts*, ed. Jean Smith (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 385.

<sup>17</sup> Batchelor, “The Sands of the Ganges,” 2.

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the world into ‘innocent’ and ‘guilty.’ Yet, if we participate in the same delusions of separateness, then we too are responsible - by upholding instinctively a view of the world that allows such things to be possible.”<sup>18</sup> We cannot escape our responsibility and the role that we play in this struggle. We do not exist in a separate world from those we see as our enemies. By simply taking sides, we do not stop the flow of interdependence that exists. As a matter of fact, “the Buddha saw all social structures as impermanent, contingent products of human interaction, and as revealing the law of dependent co-arising.”<sup>19</sup> The Buddhist notion of impermanence promotes the change that is needed and the hope that motivates us to be that change.

An essential Buddhist teaching that helps understand impermanence is the Four Noble Truths that explain the nature of suffering and the options of dealing with it. Additionally, “from our dependent co-arising, the Four Noble Truths emerged. In their traditional and highly condensed form, these are the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the truth about our suffering’s cause (*samudaya*), the truth of its cessation (*nirodha*), and the path (*magga*) leading to its cessation.”<sup>20</sup> To explain briefly, the first noble truth is about acknowledging the presence of suffering. The second noble truth is about figuring out what is the cause of that suffering that we have identified. The third noble truth is about understanding that suffering can be ended, both during our life on Earth or through Nirvana which is the ending of the cycle of birth and rebirth in Buddhism. The fourth and final noble truth is about determining the best path to achieve the end of suffering, for Buddhist being the Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path is characterized as steps of action listed as right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are divided into three divisions which are wisdom, ethics, and meditation. Dependent co-arising is the foundation of these four noble truths and is important in understanding our interdependence to the rest of creation. Indeed, interdependence helps us understand what role we play in the suffering of our world and those who inhabit it, eliminating the misconception of separateness and inaction that is hurting our planet.

In the Buddhist tradition, humans play a crucial role and have a special ability that no other creature has. It is believed that “hedonistic and conceited gods, warring titans, animals, hungry ghosts and denizens of hell also inhabit the world systems, living out their own dramas

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: A Guide to Living Fully in Turbulent Times* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 27.

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and sufferings alongside human beings.”<sup>21</sup> Humans are not the only beings that suffer, even animals suffer, meaning that it should not come as a surprise that the Earth also suffers alongside us. Additionally, “human beings have reason and free will, and can use these to understand the Dharma and implement Buddhist teachings. Life as a human being is thus seen as the 'middle way' in offering an appropriate balance between pleasure and suffering.”<sup>22</sup> This takes us back full circle to the notion of karma, as humans we are the most capable of affecting the world around us and have the privilege to do so. A Buddhist teaching that can help us understand how to acknowledge suffering and remove our greed and attachment is the notion of no-self. Buddhists believe that “when we are silent and attentive, we can sense directly how nothing in the world can truly be possessed by us.”<sup>23</sup> We are all responsible for the destruction of our planet. An important step to stop this is to recognize that the planet does not solely belong to us.

From Mahayana Buddhism, we learn the notion of emptiness which “refers to the underlying nonseparation of life and the fertile ground of energy that gives rise to all forms of life.”<sup>24</sup> This notion helps us reinforce the concept of interdependence and understand that we don't have a self. In fact, “the Buddha taught detachment from ego, not detachment from the world” but many misinterpret that “world and self are essentially separate, they imagine they can heal one before healing the other.”<sup>25</sup> Both the world and humanity are intertwined, one cannot heal without the other, meaning that understanding our suffering helps us reinterpret the planet's suffering. Therefore, Buddhist teachings of suffering through the Noble truths, karma, impermanence, emptiness, and no-self all feed into each other and show us how as humans, our actions matter, and we must change our bad habits of mistreating the Earth.

## **Comparison**

Christianity and Buddhism have certain similarities and differences as two major faith communities and can learn a lot from each other through simply having an interfaith dialogue with each other. Before this dialogue, it must be made clear that “if you are Christian, it is better to develop spiritually within your religion and be a genuine, good Christian. If you are a

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<sup>21</sup> Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Keown, *Buddhism*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Kornfield, “No Self or True Self?,” 283.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 19.

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Buddhist, be a genuine Buddhist. Not something half-and-half!”<sup>26</sup> Although interfaith dialogue can be fruitful, the goal is not to convert or attempt to merge both faiths into one, it’s more about learning to see a different perspective. On the other hand, “no single tradition monopolizes the truth. We must glean the best values of all traditions and work together to remove the tensions between traditions in order to give peace a chance. We need to join together and look deeply for ways to help people get re-rooted.”<sup>27</sup> To gain a new perspective, one must be respectful and realize that both traditions exist in the same reality meaning that neither one is the sole owner of the truth. Such interfaith dialogue is crucial since “Buddhism, like Christianity and other traditions, has to renew itself in order to respond to the needs of the people of our time.”<sup>28</sup>

The environmental crisis is very much a modern-day issue that wasn’t in consideration when the traditions first arose, at least not to the degree of focus that is needed nowadays. As seen in the previous sections, both traditions offer teachings that can be reinforced and reinterpreted to consider the environmental crisis. Modern problems require modern solutions. Both traditions can learn from each other by simply turning to essential teachings, in this case, concerning the environmental crisis. To begin with, building upon the notion that for Christians creation is a gift from God, they can learn from the Buddhist elaboration of what a “gift” means to think about their responsibility for creation. In fact, “In Buddhism, we say there are three kinds of gifts: (1) the gift of material resources, (2) the gift of helping people rely on themselves, and (3) the gift of non-fear.”<sup>29</sup> Christianity could use the gift of creation as a basis to motivate individuals to work on permanent solutions to the environmental crisis and to not let fear control our actions. Similarly, “compassion represents the emotion, or heart, and the application of analytic meditation applies the intellect. So, when you have arrived at that meditative state where compassion is enhanced, you see a special merging of intellect and heart.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, all three kinds of gifts can be used to expand and inform the Christian notion of creation being a gift from God. The gift of material resources helps us understand the importance of the preservation of our planet. This gift can also be used to promote a less materialistic outlook as a society. Similarly,

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<sup>26</sup> Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, ed. Robert Kiely, trans. Thupten Jinpa (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1996), 46.

<sup>27</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*, 47.

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the gift of helping people rely on them, can help look for ways to not be so reliant on the environment so as to relieve the overburdening of the earth. Using these Buddhist kinds of gifts, Christianity is now given points of focus to understanding the gift of creation.

Compassion is an important aspect of both traditions, especially through the notion of *Imago Dei* in Christianity. Similarly, wisdom can also be seen in both traditions, essential for understanding the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism. And in Buddhism, it is through meditation that one can realize the interdependence with each other that is the basis for compassion, including compassion for the earth. This could be another important learning for Christians. Meditation, though most common in Buddhism, is helpful, as the Dalai Lama suggest “for example, you might be engaged in the analytic process of thinking that we are all creations of the same Creator, and therefore, that we are all truly brothers and sisters. In this case, you are focusing your mind on a particular object.”<sup>31</sup> Through meditation, in both traditions, individuals can focus their mind on whatever or whomever they choose, with the capacity to heal themselves, and as a result, heal the Earth. Here, the Dalai Lama offers an example for Christians – for God to serve as a possible object of meditation to remind Christians that they are deeply interconnected with the earth. Essentially, the Earth is their “brother and sister” (as Pope Francis reminds us in the words of Francis of Assisi); therefore, inspiring compassion towards creation based on the concept that God is the Creator. Thich Nhat Hanh states, “before I met Christianity, my only spiritual ancestor was the Buddha. But when I met beautiful men and women who are Christians, I came to know Jesus as a great teacher. Since that day, Jesus Christ has become one of my spiritual ancestors... I feel stronger because I have more than one root.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Jesus is a valuable teacher for Buddhists and Christians alike, but this does not mean that Buddhists must be devoted to him, it means that they find Jesus as another teacher in their journey. In fact, “as a force of spiritual renewal, Buddhism would seek to inject into our social structures a fresh awareness of undisputed values-but without these depending on belief in God.”<sup>33</sup> The very notion of non-attachment makes it possible for Buddhists to adopt Christian teachings and teachers for their own traditions without the need convert or attach to God, being able to respect the notion of *Imago Dei* through notions of interdependence. Christians would find it worthwhile to recognize that non-believers are able to respect other’s traditions and that they too can respect and learn from other traditions, such as meditation and extending the gift of creation. As seen

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 3.

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above, although similarities and differences are a good place to start, areas of growth and contemplation prove to be advantageous in adapting each tradition to the environmental crisis.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Christianity and Buddhism offer teachings that can help us formulate solid and permanent solutions to the environmental crisis that our planet is suffering from. Christianity offers a mutual responsibility through sharing the God-given gift of creation and our duty to protect the environment. Buddhism points toward our interdependence and how we must recognize our privilege as being humans, our readiness to change our karma, and the impermanence of attempting to possess the world as solely our own. Christians and Buddhists must not only reconnect themselves to the roots their traditions, but they must also be able to consider modern issues and adapt accordingly to better serve their communities of faith.

Through respect, each tradition can adopt certain aspects of their teachings to strengthen their own and gain a new perspective. Interfaith dialogue is valuable to understanding our changing yet suffering planet. Finally, though the concepts I went over are easy to grasp, for them to serve the purpose of protecting and healing our world, one must contemplate on how it applies to the individual first. Then, one must observe how these concepts function through practice since reflection is only half of the work needed. Humans have the responsibility of doing everything our power to change our habits to save our planet.

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