

## Article

# Research on Buddhist Cosmology from the Perspective of Religious Comparison

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**Abstract:** With regard to the assertion of the nature of the world, primitive Buddhism advocates “all phenomena that arise from causes” and opposes the existence of “God” or “Creator”, who created everything in the universe, which is significantly different from monotheistic beliefs such as Brahmanism, Christianity, and Islam and is therefore often called “atheism”. This paper introduces the Buddhist cosmology of Mount Sumeru and the tri-sahasra mahā-sahasra lokadhātu under the perspective of comparative religions and the first human beings who came to this world from the ābhāsvara-deva as recorded in the Buddhist scriptures and explores the question of whether Buddhism is atheistic. It is believed that the key to the debate between Chinese and Western scholars on whether Buddhism is atheistic is the difference in understanding the concept of “God”. Buddhism does not deny the supernatural power of “ghosts and gods”, so its essence is still theism.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; atheism; cosmology; comparative religion

## 1. Introduction

Buddhism is atheism or has an atheistic tendency, which is the most popular viewpoint in the academic world. Some scholars claim that Buddhism is both atheism and theism or that there are differences between Buddhist atheism and Marxist atheism. However, the lack of discernment of the concept of “God” is not deep enough and does not touch on the core idea of Buddhism, thus bringing confusion in understanding. The discussion on Buddhist atheism still has room for exploring the understanding of Buddhist thought by Western academics with a Christian background, as well as the differences between Buddhism and Christianity from this perspective. In view of this, this paper attempts to clarify the origin of this claim, to clarify the differences between the concepts of “God” in Buddhism and Chinese culture and Christianity. Finally, it compares the Buddhist concept of origins with the Christian concept of creation through the Buddhist “Mount Sumeru-centered” cosmology and the emergence and evolution of mankind and analyzes the boundary between religion and science.

Whether Buddhism is atheistic or not has always been a question worthy of inquiry, and Chinese scholars have two general views: first, Buddhism is atheistic or has an atheistic tendency; second, Buddhism is both atheistic and theistic.

Jia Titao (賈題韜), Wang Zhen (王珍), and Xu Xianjun (徐獻軍) insist on the former view. For example, Jia Titao believes that Buddhism is atheistic, which is a unique feature of Buddhism among all religions. It denies that there is a supreme god who controls human destiny and creates everything, and advocates “all phenomena that arise from causes” and that “all phenomena are equality of the nature of reality” (De 1987). Wang Zhen and Xu Xianjun, on the other hand, expounded the atheistic tendency of Buddhism from different angles. According to Wang Zhen, Buddhism’s idea of “Anatman” is in direct harmony with its atheism, and the idea of “Anatman” in the Agama clearly demonstrates the atheistic stance of Buddhism at the time of its founding (Wang 2010). Xu Xianjun points out that Buddhism has opposed Brahminism’s theism from the very beginning and has the quality



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and tendency of plain atheism; the plain atheistic thought in Buddhism can fully become a useful supplement to science and Marxist materialism (Xu 2017).

Zhao Puchu (趙樸初), You Youwei (游有維), and Yao Weiqun (姚衛群) insist on the latter, i.e., that Buddhism is both atheistic and theistic. Zhao Puchu pointed out that the Buddhist “theory of dependent arising” denies that there is a master who creates all things in the universe, i.e., “there is no Creator”; that the Buddha is not the Creator, and that the Buddha is also governed by the law of causality; and that Buddhism does not deny that there is a Creator. At the same time, Buddhism does not reject Brahmanical deities but only sees them as beings, some of which were later absorbed into Buddhism as Dharma protectors, and should recognize the fact that the Buddha was later deified (Zhao 2012). It should be noted that by “there are gods”, Zhao refers to “gods” as a category of living beings, Buddhist “protector deities”, and “deified Buddha”. You Youwei claimed that the specific question of whether Buddhism is theistic or atheistic must be analyzed specifically; from the aspect that Buddhism does not recognize a Creator or a God who manages the world, Buddhism is atheistic; from the aspect that Buddhism advocates the *hetu-phala*, the doctrine of transmigration, and even entering into enlightenment and becoming a Buddha, Buddhism is theistic. From the point of view of Buddhism’s advocacy of the “immortality of the spirit” (*adana-vijñāna*), Buddhism is also theism (You 1987). Yao Weiqun suggests that Buddhism has both atheistic and theistic concepts, which need to be analyzed at different levels and with different emphases, and that the concept of “god” in Buddhism should be clarified in comparison with other religions such as Christianity (Yao 2004).

Scholars in the West have also paid attention to this issue. A Sharma, Stephen Batchelor, and Thierry Meynard paint a groundbreaking portrait of the historical Buddha told from the Drawing from the original Pali Canon, the seminal collection of Buddhist discourses compiled after the Buddha’s death, the author’s unique perspective as a former Buddhist monk and modern seeker. Drawing from the original Pali Canon, the seminal collection of Buddhist discourses compiled after the Buddha’s death by his followers, Batchelor shows us the Buddha as a flesh-and-blood man who looked at life in a radically new way (See Sharma 1977; Stephen 2011; Thierry 2011). Damien Keown has a different view: “In terms of the available Western categories, this would make Buddhism atheistic. One problem with this designation, however, is that Buddhism recognizes the existence of supernatural beings such as gods and spirits. Another is that Buddhism seems not to have much in common with other atheistic ideologies such as Marxism” (Keown 2000, p. 4). This view attempts to discern the difference between Buddhist atheism and Marxist atheism but argues that “Buddhism endorses God”, which is obviously a new misunderstanding of Buddhism.

## 2. Mount Sumeru and the Buddhist Cosmology

Buddhism’s opposition to a creator god is inextricably linked to its cosmology centered on Mount Sumeru. Buddhism advocates that the origin and evolution of the world and human beings is a natural, karmic process, which is distinctly different from the “divine creation” of other religions such as Christianity and Brahmanism.

In the Chinese translation of the *Dirgha Agama*, Vol. 18, “Chapter of Jambudvīpa”, the cosmic picture of Mount Sumeru, the four continents, and the *tri-sahasra mahā-sahasra lokadhātu* is described in detail. Mount Sumeru is the center of the world, towering over the waters of the ocean, entering and exiting the sea at 84,000 *yojana*, with its roots connected to the earth, lush vegetation, and fragrance all over the place, and inhabited by many sages and heavenly deities (*Zhangahanjing* 長阿含經 (*Dirgha Agama*) 1962, T1, p. 114c). Mount Sumeru is on all sides of the four major continents: the northern continent named *Uttarakuru*, the eastern continent named *Pūrvavideha*, the southern continent named *Jambudvīpa*, and the western continent named *Apara-godānīya*. Four continents in the saltwater sea, which are around seven layers of mountain and seven layers of sea, layer by layer around; the outermost is Mount *Cakravāda-parvata*, for a world (horizontal) edge. Mount Sumeru is deep in the sea, and its elevation is very high. In the center of the mountain, in

all directions, there are four mountains, the dwelling places of the Caturmahārājakayikas. The sun and the moon surround the mountainside. The top of Sumeru mountain is ruled by Śakra and his eight ministers, so it is named Trayastrimśa, which means thirty-three layers of heaven. The Indians claimed to reside in Jambudvīpa. Among the four continents, the inhabitants of Uttarakuru are the most blessed, but there is no Dharma. Here, there is no family—no mutual possession between men and women, no economic private ownership. Clothes, food, lodging, boats, vehicles, baths, and equipment are all public and can be used as much as one likes. Ven. Yin Shun (印順), a modern Buddhist mentor, once regarded Uttara-kuru as “all the ideal society of ancient times, similar to the Great Harmony of the Confucianism, the Kingdom of Heaven in Christianity, and the Utopia of the West” (Shi 2011a, p. 48). Ven. Yin Shun also expounded on atheism in humanistic Buddhism. He pointed out: “Some Westerners, from studying Theravada Buddhism, got the feeling that Buddhism is atheistic and was not a religion originally. Little do they know that religion doesn’t necessarily have to involve gods. Atheistic Buddhism, the doctrine of anatta (non-self), and Buddhism itself are the same kind of religion. Buddhism is a religion without gods, a religion of enlightenment, and a religion of self-reliance. It cannot be understood through the concept of theism” (Shi 2011b, p. 12).

In response to the phenomenon of the co-worship of the Christian God, Islamic Allah, and Buddhist figures in Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia, this article suggests that it is a result of “Buddhism’s contextualization” and “religious syncretism”. This phenomenon is related to the historical accumulation of Buddhism in the region and reflects the diverse co-existence of religions in the area. Similar to certain temples in mainland China (such as the “Three Saints Hall” in the Guandi Temple in Zhuxian Town, Kaifeng City, Henan Province), where Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist saints are worshipped side by side, the aforementioned religious phenomenon should be understood as a necessity for the propagation, survival, development, and adaptation of Buddhism to the local social environment. The co-worship of God, Allah, and the Buddha in Buddhist temples does not necessarily imply that Buddhism inherently (doctrinally) acknowledges “a creator God or Allah”.

According to the desires and morphological characteristics of living beings, Buddhism divides the world into three parts, namely, kāma-dhātu, the rūpa-dhātu, and the ārūpya-dhātu, which are collectively known as “trai-lokya”, also known as the Boundary of Living Beings and the World of Living Beings. Kāma-dhātu, in addition to the akuśala-gatīh, asura, human, also includes six layers of heaven: Caturmahārājakayikas, Trayastrimśa, Yāma, Tuṣita, Nirmāṇarati, Para-nirmita-vaśa-vartin, known as kāma-dhātu-deva. The Palace of Caturmahārājakayikas is located on the mountainside of Sumeru, Trayastrimśa Palace is located on the top of the mountain, and then the palaces of Yāma, Tuṣita, Nirmāṇarati, and Para-nirmita-vaśa-vartin, etc., are located in the order (*Zhanghanjing* 長阿含經 (*Dirgha Agama*) 1962, T1, pp. 115a–15b). There are 18 heavens (one says 22) in rūpa-dhātu, from the Brahmāpārisadya all the way to Akanisṭha. The beings of rūpa-dhātu have been freed from attachment to desires but have not yet been liberated from the bondage of form. The ārūpya-dhātu: The Formless Realm; from ākāśa-anantya to naivasamjñā-nāsamjñā, totally devoid of all materiality and suffering. It comprises four states: boundless space. Buddhism believes that one can achieve anuttara-samyak-sambodhi by Dhyāna. There are four kinds of Dhyāna that were practiced during the Buddha’s time, so all the virtues of meditation are found in the fourth Dhyāna.

The tri-sahasra mahā-sahasra lokadhātu is the very vast cosmic space centered on Mount Sumeru, as advocated by Buddhism. From the four continents to Brahma, the sun and moon travel around the four worlds, and the range of its light (below the first Dhyāna of Brahma) is called a small world. Such a thousand small worlds, with the second Dhyāna heaven above them, are called small thousand worlds. One thousand small worlds are called the middle thousand worlds and are governed by the Third Dhyāna heaven. One thousand middle thousand worlds are called the great thousand worlds, and they are governed by the fourth Dhyāna heaven. The Great Thousand Worlds, i.e., the area which only was transformed by Shakyamuni Buddha, is also known as the Three Thousand Great

Worlds because it is called “thousand” three times (*Zhangahanjing* 長阿含經 (*Dirgha Agama*) 1962, T1, pp. 114b–14c). These three thousand worlds, assembled layer by layer, are the entirety of our world system. According to Buddhism, there are infinite worlds like this in the universe.

Regarding the formation of Mount Sumeru, according to Buddhism, the evolution of the world has four kalpas, namely, Completion (formation), Existing (abiding), Destruction (decay), and Annihilation (the succeeding void), which are repeated in a cyclical manner. At the time of destruction, the world was subject to the “three plagues” of floods, winds, and fires, and Mount Sumeru was created by the “turbulent winds blowing the great foam of water”. What is the cause of Mount Sumeru? According to the *Dirgha Agama*, a turbulent wind arose and blew this watery foam to create Mount Sumeru, which is 608,000 yojanā high and 84,000 yojanā wide and is made of four treasures, i.e., gold, silver, crystal, and glass (*Zhangahanjing* 長阿含經 (*Dirgha Agama*) 1962, T1, p. 139a). The “water foam” mentioned above is the foam that gusts of wind blow into the water and gather. Not only Mount Sumeru but also the palaces of the Caturmahārājakayikas at the waist of Mount Sumeru, the Trayastrimśa Palace at the top of Mount Sumeru, the neighboring mountains, the palaces of the sun and moon, and everything are all formed by “turbulent winds blowing the great foam of water”. The four seas are caused by “the wind blowing the ground into a big pit, and the water in the streams all enter into it”. The Buddhist world-view implies the idea of *pratītya-samutpāda*, the so-called Buddhist *pratītya-samutpāda*, refers to all things (the law of being), are due to a variety of conditions (i.e., karma) and the establishment of the world, everything, are interdependent, so in the Buddhist classics emphasize that, “this is there so that there is, this is born so that they are born”, “this is not so that there is not, this is extinguished so that they are extinguished” (See *Zaahanjing* 雜阿含經 (*Samyukta Āgama Sutra*) 1962, T2, p. 100a). From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, “the three realms are only the mind, and all dharmas are only the consciousness”, the world is also not created by some supreme god but by the mind or consciousness of all sentient beings.

In the Christian scriptures, God created all things in the universe in six days, and the order and manner of His creation of heaven and earth are also disclosed. According to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, God first created heaven and earth, saying, “Let there be light”, and there was light. God separated the light from the darkness, and there was evening and there was morning—the first day (*National TSPM & CCC 中國基督教兩會 n.d.*, Genesis 1:1–5). In the following days, God continued to create and separate things through His “words”. For example, on the second day, God said, “Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters”. So God made the vault and separated the waters that were under the vault from the waters that were above the vault. And it was so. God called the vault “sky” (Genesis 1:6–8). On the third day, God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered to one place, and let the dry ground appear”. And it was so. God called the dry ground “earth”, and the gathering of the waters He called “seas”. And God said, “Let the earth sprout with grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in it, on the earth”. And it was so (Genesis 1:9–13). The same applies to the creation of light bodies on the fourth day, fish and birds on the fifth day, and livestock, insects, wild animals, and humans on the sixth day.

According to Christian doctrine, God not only created all things through His “words” (as Augustine stated, “By the word of God, all things were mad”), but also arranged the relationships of management and being managed between all things through His “words”. For instance, on the sixth day, after God created the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, and the creeping things of the ground, He also said the words to create man in His own image, male and female, and appointed them to rule over the land and manage other animals. He gave vegetables and fruits to man as food, and grass to the cattle and birds as food (Genesis 1:24–30).

In summary, in contrast with the Buddhist worldview of the “Sumeru Mountain center” theory based on the doctrine of dependent origination, Christianity maintains that all things are the creation of God’s will. God brought all things into existence, including time and space, through His word and set their inherent relationships, such as human dominion over animals and the distribution of food. While later Christian theologians have proposed various specific theories regarding God’s creative activities, the power of God to create from nothing is widely accepted among theologians. Some ancient Western thinkers emphasized that God formed the world using preexisting materials rather than creating *ex nihilo* (from nothing). However, this view is not representative of the history of Western religion (Yao 2004). Therefore, regardless of whether it is “creation from nothing” or “creation from something”, the fundamental concept of “God creating the world” in Christianity remains consistent, with only differences in the content and extent of creation in the two scenarios.

### 3. The Emergence of Human Beings and the Evolution of Human Society

The emergence of human beings is also described in detail in the Āgama Sutra. At the beginning of the world’s “destruction”, there will be “three disasters”, namely flood, wind, and fire. After the three plagues, all sentient beings are born in the ābhāsvara-deva, where they live in peace and happiness with their bodies and minds in joyful desires and the freedom of their Abhiññā; as the world becomes more and more “corrupted”, “those whose life span has been exhausted” in the ābhāsvara-deva are partly reborn in the palace of Brahma, and some of them were born here (on the earth) and lived there for a long time. At that time, there was no such thing as “men and women of good and bad character”; because of their constant craving for the “fertilizer of the earth”, their bodies, skins, and colors gradually changed, even to the extent that their appearances changed. Because of their constant craving for “food of earth”, their bodies, skin, color, and appearance gradually changed, to the extent that “there was no more light” and “their Abhiññā were extinguished”, and the world became dark, with “the sun, the moon, and all the stars” and the distinction between day and night (*Qishijing* 起世經 (*Sutra on the Arising of Worlds*) 1962, T1, pp. 358a–58c).

Then later, when the food of the earth became inedible, they began to eat natural japonica rice (wild rice). Again, there was the exchanging of the sexes, the combination of families, and on the basis of the family, the relationships of husband and wife, father and son, brothers and other kindred spirits were formed, and villages and towns were established. For example, according to The Sutra on the Arising of Worlds—The Chapter of Most Wondrous, “Bhikkhus! With this cause, the ancient people created villages and towns and settlements, kingdoms and palaces, and all the rest of the dwellings that formed the worlds were born in the next order” (*Qishijing* 起世經 (*Sutra on the Arising of Worlds*) 1962, T1, p. 362a). With families, the world’s selfishness grew and began to compete for the natural terraces of rice, and to resolve this conflict, they suggested planting “in separate territories” (zoning) and entering into a “contract of necessity”. In the terminology of social history, this can be said to be a step from the primitive collection of human beings to the stage of planting crops artificially. To a certain extent, these elements in the Buddhist texts reflect the survival and living conditions of early human societies.

According to the Buddhist scriptures, thereafter, the state emerged, with caste hierarchies and occupational divisions. According to the sutra, as far as the “four castes” are concerned, the Kshatriya, represented by the king, first appeared, followed by the other three castes, such as the Brahmins and Vaishyas. The Kshatriya, originally meaning “lord of the field”, was initially the “rightful man” and “guardian” who was elected by the people, and so was justifiably supplied with rice and given a share of the “field” by the people. There is a description of the emergence of this caste in Sutra on the Arising of Worlds: “For this reason, in the past, there was a victorious bhakti that was born in the world, according to the law, not less than the law. Bhikkhus! There is the Dharma, the worldly bhakti, the most victorious birth” (*Qishijing* 起世經 (*Sutra on the Arising of Worlds*) 1962, T1, p. 364b). The Brahmin species, on the other hand, are initially those who renounce worldly life and

enter the mountains and swamps to “sit and meditate”, as the saying goes, “These are the beings who practice the best karma and who renounce the world’s streams of ungodly and evil dharmas, the Brahmins” (*Qishijing* 起世經 (*Sutra on the Arising of Worlds*) 1962, T1, p. 364b). Secondly, there is the emergence of the two types of caste, Vishnu and Chandra, as the Sutra on the Rise of the World says: “There is again the remaining class of beings who create all kinds of things that seek profit kabuki can work and art all kinds of births, and for this reason, they are called Vishnu”, and again, “After these three castes have been born in the world, there is a fourth caste that is born in the world afterward” (*Qishijing* 起世經 (*Sutra on the Arising of Worlds*) 1962, T1, p. 364c). By placing “Kshatriya” rather than “Brahman” at the head of the four castes, the Buddhist classics in a sense express their class position. From the scriptures, Buddhism does not deny the rationality of the existence of the four castes (“In this world, they are also fitting in with the Dharma, not against the Dharma”), but only opposes the idea of their “inequality”.

The above is a brief introduction to the emergence of human society and its evolution in the Buddhist texts. It can be seen from this that Buddhism, in regard to the emergence of human society, generally acquiesces to its original existence and does not emphasize explicitly that it is God’s creation as Christianity does.

Based on the previous information, the Biblical creation story of God making man in His own image, male and female, and appointing them to rule over the earth and other creatures does indeed share some similarities with the Chinese mythological legend of Nüwa creating mankind. According to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, God created man from the dust of the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and became a living creature. His name was Adam (Genesis 2:7). Nüwa also used soil to create mankind, though she did not possess the authority to arrange human affairs as God did. After creating Adam, God established the Garden of Eden (also known as “Paradise”) and placed Adam there to cultivate and keep it. The Garden of Eden was filled with various trees that were pleasing to the eye, and their fruit served as food. There was also the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Four rivers flowed out of Eden to water the garden. Once Adam and the Garden of Eden were created, God gave Adam instructions and made him a companion to assist him. This companion was Eve, created from one of Adam’s ribs. From a sociological perspective, the emergence of Adam, the Garden of Eden, and Eve can be seen as a metaphor for the prototype of the family. With men and women and a suitable dwelling place, human reproduction became inevitable.

According to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, after creating man, male and female, God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). One can imagine that Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit was also God’s intentional arrangement, as it was necessary for them to “be fruitful and multiply” and rule over the earth and other animals. Therefore, in Christianity, the emergence and evolution of human society, like the creation of heaven and earth and other animals and plants, are all permeated with God’s will.

In the Christian creation myth, a noteworthy aspect is the naming of things. These things can be divided into two parts: one part named by God, and the other by man (Adam). In terms of the former, examples include day (“God called the light Day”), night (“God called the darkness Night”), sky (“God called the expanse Heaven”), and earth (“God called the dry ground Earth”). As for the latter, it includes all the livestock, birds of the air, and beasts of the field. However, even the naming of these latter things falls under God’s arrangement, as it was God who brought them to Adam, and whatever Adam called each creature, that was its name.

In conclusion, regarding the emergence and evolution of human society, Christianity insists that it is the purpose and creation of God. While Buddhist views have a mythical color to them (such as the belief that people on Earth descended from the realm of Light and Sound), the emergence of humans is not the work of a supreme deity with supernatural powers, and the evolution of society is not controlled by such a deity.

#### 4. The Concept of “God” and Its Difference with Christianity

Buddhism emerged in Indian society 2500 years ago in response to the Brahmanic monotheistic ideology practiced by Brahmanism, and its worldview is opposed to the Brahmanic doctrine of divine creation. Brahmanism is the mainstream, dominant religion in India, with three major propositions: the Vedic Divine Revelation, the Sacrificial Omnipotence, and the Brahmanic Supremacy. It is written in the *ṛgveda* that Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the Trimūrti, Brahma is the god of creation; Vishnu is the guardian of the universe and life; and Shiva is the Destroyer (the three-eyed destroyer, lord of the universe). The four castes are all born of Brahma: Brahman from the mouth, Kshatriya from the shoulders, Vaishya from the legs, and Shudra from the feet. There is a similar view in the *Aitokarya Upanishad*: “In the beginning, there was only the One in this world. There are no others. He thought to himself, “I have created the world!” “This is my world, and I am the protector of the world, and I create food for it!”

Christianity and Islam, both of Jewish origin, have similar views. From the above, in Christianity, God created heaven, earth, and everything in six days. In Islam, it is also believed that all things in the heavens and the earth were created by Allah. Brahma in Brahmanism, God in Christianity, and Allah in Islam are all creators, all gods who created everything in heaven and earth as well as human beings.

Buddhism emerged around 5–6 centuries B.C. when human civilization was in the midst of a great “Axial Age”. At that time, there was an emerging trend of Shamanism in Indian society, and there were a number of monks outside of Brahmanism who were called “śramaṇa”. Representing the rights of the newly emerging secular kings and merchants, the śramaṇa challenged centuries-old Brahminism, rejecting its claims to the Vedic apocalypse, ritual omnipotence, and the supremacy of the Brahmins. With the rise and development of Buddhism, it once positively overwhelmed Brahminism and other orders. Buddhism was criticized by Brahminism as “atheistic” because it was founded on the theory of *prafitya-samutpāda* and denied the Creator (Brahma, God) who founded the world and mankind.

The key to the difference between China and the West, or between Buddhism and Christianity, on the question of whether Buddhism is atheistic is the concept of “God”; Buddhism does not deny supernatural powers such as “ghosts and gods”, but is still theistic in essence. Scholars who propose that Buddhism is atheistic are actually confusing the concept of “God”. Because the meaning of “God” has both a broad and a narrow meaning, it has its own specific meaning in the Western Christian and Islamic traditions, as well as in the Brahmanic tradition of India and the Chinese cultural tradition. Yao Weiqun summarizes the basic points of the concept of “God” in Christianity as follows: monotheistic tendency, creator of the world, reality, savior, symbol of goodness, and free will, which can communicate with and guide people (Yao 2004). A Western scholar defines God in this way: God is conceived as a cosmic architect of the world order rather than its *ex nihilo* creator, and the mind as a capacity rather than an entity. God, by whom all natural things are directed to an end (Swinburne 1995). Clearly, this scholar’s definition of “God” is one-sided because, in Christianity, God plays multiple roles and holds multiple meanings. He is not only the arranger of the world order but also the hidden presence as an “entity” and the creator of making something out of nothing. The Western monotheistic traditions all refer to the being who created all things in heaven and earth as “God”, such as God, Lord in Heaven, and Allah, whereas in India, although polytheistic, Brahma also has this function, the concept of “god” in China is generally deities and ghosts. Buddhism denies that Brahma is the sole creator and administrator of the world, but it was born and developed in the soil of Eastern pantheism and still believes in the existence of multiple supernatural gods.

It is worth mentioning here the comparison between the Christian concept of “God” and the Buddhist concept of “Dharmakaya”. In Christianity, God is not only the creator of all things in the world but also the ultimate reality. From the perspective of religious philosophy, both the Buddhist “Dharmakaya” and the Christian “God” possess ontological

significance as well as characteristics of mystery (in Esoteric Buddhism, the Dharmakaya of Vairocana has a form) and sanctity. This highlights a commonality in the concept of “God” between Buddhism and Christianity, showcasing specific aspects of similarity.

Friedrich Engels pointed out that “All religions are but the fanciful reflection in the minds of men of the external forces that govern their daily life, and in which earthly forces take the form of super-earthly forces”. This shows the nature of religion according to Marxism. Whether it is God-centered or the personal experience of the subject of faith, there are limitations that make it difficult to reveal the nature of religion. Marx affirms that religious suffering is, at the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. Marx affirms that religion is a response to alienation in material life and cannot be removed until human material life is emancipated (Marx 1843). It is known that Marxism believes that a truly atheistic religion does not exist. Western scholars with a Christian background almost universally assert that “Buddhism is atheistic”, and many scholars in China also hold this view. This is likely because they understand the concept of “God” from the narrow perspective of a “creator” standard.

In summary, Buddhism has a set of its own rich and complete theoretical system, incorporating other religions and doctrines into its own system of thought, and the goodness of mankind. This is why Western scholars believe that Buddhism tends to be a “monologue” type of religious dialogue (Swidler 1996). Comparative Religion, on the other hand, is an effective way to promote religious dialogue, social harmony, and world peace. Western scholars point out that when we apply evaluative criteria to religious persons and communities, we appraise not only them but also their religious traditions (Gualtieri 1967). Ven. Tai Xu, a Buddhist monk in modern China, is representative of the doctrine of comparative religion, in which he summarizes the cultures and religions of the world into five: the manusya-yāna, the deva-yāna, the śrāvaka-yāna, the pratyeka-buddha-yāna, and the bodhisattva-yāna, the first two of which are also called the “deva-manusya-yāna”, and the last three are also known as the “Hinayana” and the “Mahayana” of Buddhism. Brahmanism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, and Christianity in the West are all categorized under the Hinayana. “Confucianism teaches that one can attain immortality by being a sage and a saint; the Taoist followers of Laozhuang enable one to attain immortality; Western Christianity says that one can go into heaven after dying; and Indian Brahminism says that one can be born into Brahman by being humane, and so on. This shows that the belief in God is a common thing in the religions of the world. But the view of Buddhism is the best which takes human beings to the true world as the ladder” (Tai 2005, p. 336).

Buddhism does not deny supernatural powers such as “ghosts and gods”, so it is still theistic in nature, which is fundamentally different from Marxist atheism. It is also not as the epistemology of science, but that religion and science have their own boundaries and cannot be mixed up.

The cosmology of Buddhism is the understanding of the universe and the emergence of human beings in the ancient Buddhist classics, not the epistemology of the experimental sciences since modern times, and Buddhism as a religion has its own boundaries with the sciences, which should not be mixed up with each other. Since the “God” in ancient Indian Brahmanism, Christianity, and Islam usually refers to the “Creator” who created all things in the universe, while in Chinese conception, “God” advocates supernatural powers such as “deities” and “ghosts”, so there is a significant difference between Eastern and Western concepts of “God”. Although Buddhism advocates the theory of “all phenomena that arise from causes”, and denies the existence of a “God” who created everything in the universe, it does not deny the existence of supernatural forces, and its essence is still theism. Merely, compared with the theism of other religions or cultures like Christianity, the status of God in Buddhism is greatly reduced, and God is neither the object of faith



nor the goal of Buddhists' pursuit. In the Mahayana Buddhist system, the Buddha is the master of the Dharma, the Bodhisattva is the main body for learning and practicing the Dharma, and the gods are mostly subordinate to the Dharma protectors (and the devils are destructive).

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