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Buddhism as a Religion

Religion is not as simple as it seems. It is very difficult to define. One religion that does not fit traditionally with other religions is Buddhism. Some question whether it is a religion or a philosophy, arguing over the core definition of what religion is. Additionally, Buddhism has no real belief in a God or gods. However, it has many other things in common with other religions. Finally, Buddhism struggles to fit in with other religions because it does not fit the traditional English definition of religion.

Something that can be misunderstood or misinterpreted about Buddhism is whether it is a religion or a philosophy. Buddhism can be treated as a philosophy by some, but it is truly a religion. According to *Religion Matters*, religion is “an analysis of the human problem; a solution to that problem; techniques for achieving that goal; exemplars who chart the path toward the goal.” (Prothero 20). Philosophy is defined as “a particular set of or the study of ideas about knowledge, truth, the nature and meaning of life, etc. [or] a set of ideas about how to do something or how to live.” (Merriam-Webster). It is possible in some cases for people to follow the philosophy of Buddhism rather than the religion. One may agree with the ideas of Buddhism, such as karma and the Four Noble Truths, without truly following the religion’s rituals or beliefs. This, however, does not mean Buddhism is a philosophy. Buddhism has an analysis of the human problem (suffering), a solution for the problem (nirvana), techniques to achieve the solution (visualization, meditation, etc.), and exemplars (buddhas and arhats). (Prothero 89). This

makes it a religion. While some may treat Buddhism as a philosophy, it follows the outline of a religion.

Additionally, Buddhism has a lot in common with other religions, apart from ideas of God or gods. Buddhism follows the problem solution outline of religions described in the previous paragraph. This defines it as a religion according to Prothero. Two religions that come to mind when thinking of similarities to Buddhism are Hinduism and Christianity. Hinduism and Buddhism are very different religions existing in close proximity to each other, however, there are several similarities. These include the ideas of reincarnation, karma, and escaping the cycle of rebirth. Another religion that has a similarity in ideas to Buddhism is Christianity. The idea of treating others how you wish to be treated is both part of Christianity (in the Bible) and part of Buddhism (through karma). While there are differences in the idea of God or gods between Buddhism and other religions, there are many fundamental similarities in ideas.

While Buddhism is a religion and has things in common with other religions, it may not fit the English definition of religion. Many times, religion is assumed to be a belief system. In English, belief systems are synonymous with a belief in God. However, early Buddhism had no God or gods. Prothero states, “[R]eligions are not ‘belief systems.’ Are they ritual systems? ethical systems? That depends on where you are looking, since the world’s religions vary widely when it comes to their relative emphasis on ritual and ethics. But all religions are ‘story systems.’” (89). If religion is a story system, Buddhism is most definitely a religion, even if it does not fit the English definition of what religion is or should be. The definition of religion in English comes from a long line of religions who believed in God or gods. Whether it be the polytheism in Greece or Scandinavia or the monotheism of Christianity, religion has always referred to a belief in a superior being or beings. Buddhism, particularly early Buddhism, had no

God or gods. For this reason, the English definition of religion struggles to refer or apply to Buddhism. Though it does not fit the definition of religion in English as other religions like Christianity do, Buddhism is a religion.

While some may choose to follow a philosophy of Buddhism rather than treat it as a religion, most followers have rituals and beliefs and stories, making it a religion. Buddhism also has many ideas in common with other religions, such as Hinduism and Christianity. Finally, though Buddhism struggles to fit in with the English definition of religion, its structure, stories, and beliefs make it a religion. Religion is a very difficult word to define. Many cultures see it as different things. For some, it is a belief in God. For others, it is a set of beliefs and values. The most basic summary of all religions, however, is the ability to tell a story.

Works Cited

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