

‘Neither Christians nor Buddhists should worry about how the world was created’¹

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Introduction

In this essay I will explore whether Christians or Buddhists should worry about the creation of the world, and see if the answers differ between and within Christianity and Buddhism. I will also ask further questions such as should everyone worry about the earth's creation regardless of their religion?

To critique the question however, the study of *how* the earth was created can be answered through scientific research and inquisition, such as the *Big Bang* theory. The question of *why* the world was created however cannot be answered by mere human philosophical thought, but rather perhaps through religion and faith.

Therefore, perhaps the more pertinent statement to evaluate rather than the title above², would be ‘Neither Christians nor Buddhists should worry about *why* the earth was created’, as this directly involves and questions the differences in faith between the two religions, invoking answers to one of the most profound questions ‘why are we here?’ rather than finding an objective answer concerning the physics of the earth.

¹ Hamilton prize question 1: ‘Neither Christians nor Buddhists should worry about how the world was created.’ Discuss, with reference to primary texts.

² ‘Neither Christians nor Buddhists should worry about how the world was created.’

Christianity

For most Conservative Protestant Christians, the question of protology can be answered in Genesis, because for them the Bible is seen as the inspired word of God, which is factually and scientifically reliable.

Firstly, they would argue that the pre-lapsarian creation story in Genesis, shows and validates God's Omnipotence, as he created everything out of nothing ('*creatio ex nihilo*') in six days on the command of his word:

*"And God said "Let there be light," and there was light."*³

Secondly, they would also say that the creation of the world shows God's Omnibenevolence, as God brought us into the world out of his own loving kindness.

Thirdly, the Trinity is described as being Omnipresent at creation as the word 'logos' meaning 'word' is mostly understood to be God the Son: "*In the beginning was the Word.*"⁴ The '*Spirit of God*'⁵ is also said to have been there when the earth was '*formless*':

*"The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."*⁶

Conservative Protestants also believe that Christians should worry about creation because of the importance of humans being created in '*imago dei*'. The idea of being created in God's image and being created by God, validates human beings' purpose or telos in life, as well as emphasizing the sanctity of human life.

Finally, Conservative Protestants would say that perhaps the most important reason for Christians to worry about the creation of the world, is because of the idea of Soteriology. The Fall, as described in chapter 3 of Genesis, explains and justifies the need for Jesus' death on the cross to save humans from our sins. This demonstrates God's unconditional love towards us, because he let his son, Jesus, die for us. Subsequently this also explains the second coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead. This therefore gives Christians incentive to lead a moral life, abiding by the ten commandments.

For a Christian to understand this crucial chain of logic, it is essential for them to worry about the creation story in Genesis, otherwise the logic and meaning of their faith falls apart.

In my judgement, I would say that Christians not only *should* worry about how the world was created, but it is essential for Christians to think deeply on this subject, as Protology legitimises Christian faith as a whole: Why should we worship and pray to a God who is not Omnipotent, Omnibenevolent, Omniscient and Omnipresent? A God who did not create us and the world? Why should we follow commandments if one day our souls will not be judged and saved?

³ Genesis 1:3

⁴ John 1:1

⁵ '*Spirit of God*' referring to the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Genesis 1:2

On the other hand however, for most Liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics, the book of Genesis, should not be interpreted literally because of the use of poetic and metaphorical language, and because of the limited understanding at the time it was written. Therefore they would give less importance to worrying how the world was created, as stories in Genesis are less important to their faith.

Instead they would argue that we should accept further scientific theories regarding creation, such as the earth being 4.5 billion years old (based on carbon-14 dating), and the 'Big Bang Theory', Therefore Liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics would leave this thinking to scientists. This, however, does not answer why the earth was created.

Buddhism

In the *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta*⁷, one can find what seems to be a definite answer to whether Buddhists should worry about the creation of the world, as we see the Buddha teaching the bhikkhu Malunkya about the Avyakata⁸.

In this Sutta the Buddha tells Malunkya the *Parable of the Poisoned Arrow*, which is the story of a man who has been shot by a poisoned arrow, however he will not have it removed until he knows the answers to questions about the origin of the arrow, which are irrelevant in that circumstance:

*"I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker..."*⁹

The Buddha then concludes the parable by saying:

*"The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him."*¹⁰

The poisoned arrow can be seen to be a metaphor for the Three Poisons, or more generally dukkha, which the Buddha teaches to remove from our lives. He tells Malunkya that this is why his position on the Avyakata remains undeclared, as it is *"not connected with the goal"*¹¹ (the goal being enlightenment by means of the cessation of dukkha). In this way, the Buddha encourages 'noble silence'.

⁷ The *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta* is part of the Pali Canon, the central Buddhist sacred text.

⁸ The Avyakata is the 10/14 unanswerable questions.

⁹ *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta*

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta*

The Buddha goes even further and says that not only are such metaphysical questions irrelevant, but they are in fact harmful because one becomes trapped in a “*thicket of views*”¹², as he says in the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*¹³ :

*“It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, and fever,
and it does not lead to... direct knowledge full awakening, and unbinding.”*¹⁴

The Buddha also taught of *pratitya-samutpada*, the idea that everything is interconnected in an infinitely complex web of cause and effect with no first cause or initial creation, like a circle.

On the other hand however, from a philosophical point of view, one might argue that in the *Parable of the Poisoned Arrow*, if the man had asked, for example, the questions ‘what type of poison is this?’, would be a wise question. Therefore not all efforts to find the answers to these questions are useless, but some questions (if answered) would aid the treatment of the metaphorical poison/wound of the human condition.

My judgement on this argument is that such wise questions have already been answered by the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths: he has identified the poison as *dukkha*, and the antidote is following the *magga*.

One might also argue that a *bhikku* could wrestle with the question of how the world was created as part of *vipassana* meditation¹⁵ (as one does with the Three Poisons for example), as a means of achieving *nirvana* or for a *tathagata* to think about after their enlightenment.

I would argue that thinking about the creation of the world through *vipassana* meditation as a means of achieving *nirvana* is too complicated, as one could simply be a Pure Land Buddhist, chant the *nembutsu*¹⁶ ‘*namu amida butsu*’ without worrying about the *Avyakata*, and be reborn in the Pure Land where enlightenment is much easier.

I would say that the Buddha's ‘noble silence’ on these topics is perhaps *misology*, as the Buddha is avoiding the Socratic method. Therefore people should worry about questions that are interesting to them and that stimulate the mind.

¹² *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*

¹³ The *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* is part of the Pali Canon, the central Buddhist sacred text.

¹⁴ *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*

¹⁵ *Vipassana* meditation is insight meditation.

¹⁶ Chanting and devotional practice in Pure Land Buddhism.

Conclusion

Overall, I would conclude that based on the primary texts we have explored in this essay, Christians (especially Conservative Protestants) very much should worry about the creation of the world, as the creation story told in the book of Genesis justifies and legitimizes Christian faith because it shows God's Omnipotence, Omnibenevolence, and the Trinity being Omnipresent, as well as giving evidence that humans are made in 'imago dei' which shows our sanctity of life. Genesis also explains and justifies Soteriology, why to believe in Jesus and why to follow the ten commandments.

In Buddhism however, the Buddha teaches not to think about metaphysical questions such as how the earth was created as it will trap you in a 'thicket of views', instead what people should worry about is removing dukkha and achieving nirvana through meditation and following the magga. I agree that if achieving nirvana is the absolute goal, then thinking about these things is a distraction.

Finally I would argue that regardless of one's religion or faith, the question of how the world was created should be one that interests all people, and that all people should worry about it purely because it stimulates the inquisitive human mind. I give the last words to Einstein:

*"The important thing is not to stop questioning.
Curiosity has its own reason for existing."¹⁷*

¹⁷ Albert Einstein

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1,500 words (1,500 word limit) including quotations, but excluding footnotes, acknowledgements, and bibliography/references.

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Appendix

- Thích Nhất Hạnh¹⁸ adds to the Buddha's teaching, by saying that we do not have time in our lives to worry about such unanswerable, metaphysical questions, (shown by the man dying because of refusing to remove the arrow):

*"Life is so short. It must not be spent in endless metaphysical speculation that does not bring us any closer to the truth."*¹⁹

- For many conservative Christians, chapter 2 of Genesis also provides insight into the position of women in society:

*"I will make a helper suited to him....
the Lord God then built the rib that he had taken from the man
into a woman."*²⁰

- The Buddha says that thinking of these unanswerable questions leads one to become trapped in a *"thicket of views"*²¹, making dhyana²² (and therefore enlightenment) impossible. Therefore the Buddha teaches not only to not worry about metaphysical questions, but to avoid them altogether, as they bring distraction, suffering and craving to know unattainable answers.
- This shows that the Buddha teaches that such metaphysical questions (on creation in this case) should not be worried about as they are irrelevant. Instead what people should worry about is removing dukkha and achieving nirvana through meditation and following the magga.

¹⁸ Thích Nhất Hạnh is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master, born 11 October 1926.

¹⁹ Thích Nhất Hạnh

²⁰ Genesis 2:21

²¹ Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta

²² Dhyana is the training of the mind, also known as meditation.