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Interreligious Ethics in the Chinese Context: A Comparative Study of the Ten Commandments and the Five Precepts

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I. INTRODUCTION

Religious ethics is a widespread aspect of major world religions, offering moral interpretations of concepts like suffering, divinity, and the nature of the world, also explaining the relationships between humans and the divine, as well as between individuals within the society. Religious laws or precepts are essential elements of religious ethics, providing behavioral guidelines for believers and helping to sustain and unify religious communities. For example, Jewish culture stands as one of the two pillars of modern Western civilization, while Buddhist culture is a gem of Eastern civilization. These two cultures shine on opposite ends of the Eurasian continent, with religious laws or precepts playing significant roles within them. Specifically, the Ten Commandments form the core content of Hebrew Bible law, and according to the oral law codex "Talmud" in Israelite tradition, the Ten Commandments constitute the essence of the religion.¹

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On the other hand, the Five Precepts have always been regarded as the moral guidelines for humans and celestial beings, representing the fundamental principles of Buddhist precepts. Interestingly, despite originating from completely different cultural contexts, certain aspects of these two laws exhibit surprising similarities. Jesuit missionaries have even used Buddhist terminology to translate the Ten Commandments, highlighting the common religious ethical foundation of humanity.²

In Chinese academic circles, research on religious ethics typically concentrates on the internal principles of single religion, while comparative ethical studies across different religions are relatively uncommon. Lao Zhengwu, drawing on Chinese Buddhist literature, conducted a detailed examination of the precepts studies within Chinese Buddhism and critically assessed the historical development of vinaya studies in China.³ Master Sheng Yen, based on his years of practice, authored *A Compendium of Vinaya Studies* aimed specifically at Buddhists, particularly monastics. In this work, he provides a comprehensive overview of the different ordination methods in Buddhism and their associated requirements.⁴ Zhang Xuesong places particular emphasis on gender issues within Buddhist precepts, noting that the development of Buddhist vinaya is rooted in the principle of gender equality. Zhang argues that stricter precepts do not necessarily align more closely with the Buddha's compassionate intent.⁵ Chinese literature on Jewish law is not as extensive as that on Buddhism, with most works focusing on the translation and introduction of the Talmud. The most significant work in Chinese scholarship is Tian Haihua's *Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible*.⁶ This book analyzes the Ten Commandments within the cultural context of the Hebrew biblical text, placing special emphasis on the

² Ibid, p. 2.

³ Lao Zhengwu. *Buddhist Vinaya Studies*. Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 1999.

⁴ Master Shengyan, "A Compendium of Vinaya Studies," Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2006

⁵ Zhang Xuesong, "On Gender Equality Issues within Buddhist Vinaya", *Buddhism Study*, 2018, no.2.

⁶ Tian Haihua, *Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible*, Beijing: People's Publishing House. 2012.

¹ Tian Haihua, *Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible*, Beijing: People's Publishing House. 2012. p. 54.

reception of the Decalogue within the historical context of China when the Bible was introduced during the Ming Dynasty.

Comparative studies between religions have been a fundamental method in the field of religious studies since Max Müller.⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, a prominent scholar of religious studies known for his advocacy of comparative methodology, employs diverse and seemingly exotic examples, such as Maori cults in nineteenth-century New Zealand and the events at Jonestown, to argue that religion should be understood as conventional, anthropological, historical, and an exercise in imagination. Smith critically examines core issues in taxonomy and comparison within religious studies, offering redefinitions of fundamental categories such as canon and ritual. He further argues that frequently analyzed myths may more accurately reflect situational incongruities rather than presumed mimetic congruities.⁸ Comparing different religious ethics contribute to identify general principles of religious ethics. The comparative study of religious texts in Chinese is of significant importance to contemporary religious studies in China, particularly in shedding light on the reception of religious law and ethics within Chinese society.

This article aims to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the biblical Ten Commandments and the Buddhist Five Precepts from a textual criticism perspective within Chinese context. It seeks to explore the characteristics of general religious ethics and the relationship between religious ethics and the societies in which they exist.

II. THE INTERPRETATION OF TEN COMMANDMENTS IN BIBLE

In the English context, the concept of "law" in the Bible, translated from the Hebrew word "torah" or the Greek word "nomos," is actually a mistranslation.⁹ Among the Greeks law had a secular development. Nomos might mean either Statutory Law, or Constitutional Law or Case Law. The Hebrew has these variants of the Law in the words "misvah".¹⁰ The English translations have been more influenced by the Greek versions. In terms of the original meaning of "torah," a better translation would be "instruction" or "guidance." It also refers to the "Five Books of Moses," which

encompasses a broader concept than just "law."¹¹ However, within the "Five Books of Moses," which include the Ten Commandments, there are indeed sections that resemble legal texts, regulating the daily conduct of the Israelite people. The Ten Commandments are not strictly legal texts but rather the fundamental religious and ethical principles of the ancient Israelites. They were received directly by Moses from God on Mount Sinai and written on two stone tablets, given to the Israelites in the form of a covenant. The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Bible, in Exodus (20) and Deuteronomy (5), hence there are two versions of the Ten Commandments.¹²

The original Hebrew meaning of "Ten Commandments" is "Ten Utterances" or "Ten Words." When Moses recited the Ten Commandments to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, he referred to them as "these words of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 5:22) or "the words of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 5:5). The term "words" was used here instead of "commandments" to signify the absolute authority of God's speech and the directness of God's relationship with the Israelites through "direct speech." The use of "诫" in Chinese translation of commandments also reflects its nature as "persuasive words of instruction." This style of translation highlights the discourse features rooted in the Hebrew context, where God's commandments are conveyed more through auditory rather than visual means.

From a textual perspective, the "Ten Commandments" can be divided into three parts: the preamble, the commandments, and the epilogue. The preamble of the "Ten Commandments" states, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). This preamble serves as God's self-revelation in the role of a redeemer, stating the historical fact of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and emphasizing God's active involvement in the history of the Israelite people.

The epilogue of the "Ten Commandments" consists of a series of sanctions and curses for

⁷ See Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, London: Longmans Breen And Co. 1882. p. 9.

⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁹ Roy B. Blizzard, *The Nature of Law*, Part II, Bible Scholars, <https://www.biblescholars.org/2013/05/the-nature-of-law-part-ii.html> (Access on 1 April 2024)

¹⁰ Muliyl, F. "Torah—Nomos—Law." *The Bible Translator* 13.2 .1962. pp. 117-120.

¹¹ John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2006. p. 351.

¹² From the perspective of the Documentary Hypothesis, the Ten Commandments in *Exodus* belong to one of the Priestly (P) documents, Yahwist (J) documents, or Elohist (E) documents. On the other hand, the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy belong to the Deuteronomist (D) source, and they exhibit distinct linguistic style and content characteristics associated with the D source. Therefore, the version of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy was formed earlier than the version in Exodus, which was added by Deuteronomist scholars. The Documentary Hypothesis, proposed by German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen, suggests that the *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Bible) was composed by multiple authors from five sources: The Yahwist, The Elohist, The Deuteronomist, the Priestly source, and Torah redactors. Steven L. McKenzie and Matt P. Graham, *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. 1998. p. 48.

violations of the commandments (Deuteronomy 27:15-26). The textual structure of the "Ten Commandments" is similar to the common form of ancient Near Eastern legal codes.¹³ Durkheim divided society into two realms, the sacred and the secular, while the main body of the Ten Commandments could also be divided into two groups corresponding to these realms.¹⁴ The first group of commandments deals with matters of the sacred realm and regulations regarding the relationship between humans and God, from the first commandment to the fourth commandment. The second group regulates the relationships and responsibilities between individuals in the secular realm, including the fifth commandment to the tenth commandment.¹⁵

The first commandment is the most crucial one among the Ten Commandments, stating, "You shall have no other gods before Me." It establishes the fundamental characteristic of monotheism in Jewish religion, distinguishing it from other ancient religions of the same era.¹⁶

The second commandment states: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." This commandment opposes idol worship and complements the first commandment. Worshiping other idols would violate the first commandment's declaration of the uniqueness of God, while the second commandment provides guidelines on how to ensure the Israelites can safeguard this uniqueness.

An idol refers to a crafted object symbolizing other deities or totems, representing the religious practices of foreign nations that, from the Israelite perspective, are considered acts of fetishism. Notably, God does not explicitly forbid the creation of an image of Himself. However, He did say, "So pay attention and watch yourselves carefully—for you did not see any form [of God] on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb

from the midst of the fire" (Deuteronomy 4:15). Thus, God only revealed Himself in the form of a voice and did not manifest any visual image. Therefore, any representation of God in the form of an image is a human imagination and cannot be sculpted for Him. The latter part of the second commandment uses a parallel structure to pronounce curses and blessings upon the Israelites, demonstrating God's absolute authority.

The third commandment is "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain." The first-person narrative tone in the first two commandments shifts to a third-person narrative in this commandment. It is generally understood that this commandment prohibits falsely swearing by the name of the Lord, as it would be an offense against the divine sanctity of God's name. The name of God itself possesses an inviolable sacredness. The ninth commandment also deals with false oaths, but the third commandment specifically focuses on God rather than solely addressing the breach of trust between individuals. Additionally, the usage of God's name is not limited to swearing falsely. It also extends to the invocation of God's name in praise (Exodus 34:5) and prayer (Samuel 22:4).¹⁷

The fourth commandment is about observing the Sabbath. From the two versions of the Ten Commandments, we can observe differences in the purpose of establishing the Sabbath. In the Exodus version, it states, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11). Here, the emphasis is on the Sabbath as a memorial to God's creation of the heavens and the earth, demonstrating the Israelites' imitation of God's actions. Working on the Sabbath is seen as a denial of the order established by God's creation and would incur severe punishment (Exodus 31:14-15).

On the other hand, in the Deuteronomy version, the Sabbath is observed as a commemoration of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It states, "And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm;

¹³ Tian Haihua, Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible. p. 102.

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Qu Dong and Ji Zhe, Beijing: Commercial Press. 2011. p. 45-46.

¹⁵ The Ten Commandments can be divided in various ways, and Philo divides them in a 5-5 manner. "One group of commandments begins with God the Holy Father and the creator of all things, and ends with parents imitating God's essence by nurturing life. The other group of commandments includes all prohibitions, such as adultery, murder, theft, false witness, and covetousness." Philo, *On the Decalogue*, tran. Francis H. Colson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1937. p. 33

¹⁶ Some traditions include "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" as part of the first commandment.

¹⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1988. p. 88.

therefore, Yahweh your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath." (Deuteronomy 5:15). In both versions, there is a clear acknowledgment of recognizing the power of God.

The fifth commandment states: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). This commandment serves as a bridge between the two sets of commandments, mentioning the name of the Lord and beginning to discuss relationships with neighbors. "That your days may be long" implies longevity and is a blessing from God for those who honor their parents. It is the only commandment in the Ten Commandments that does not mention punishment but instead provides a positive promise. The last five commandments are presented in a very concise imperative form.

The sixth commandment is "You shall not murder." This commandment has raised theological difficulties in Old Testament theology because the Bible is filled with violence, and many wars and killings were carried out under God's instruction. What form of killing does this commandment refer to? Is it murder, manslaughter, or killing in warfare? In Deuteronomy, a series of curses supplement the Ten Commandments, indicating that it refers to murder (Deuteronomy 27:24). Various passages in the Bible declare the principle of proportional retaliation (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 24:17), while unintentional killing can be forgiven (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:11; Deuteronomy 19:4-13). Another viewpoint suggests that "You shall not murder" does not refer to killing in an absolute sense but rather to unlawful killing, specifically the situations that endanger life within the Israelite community. It aims to protect the Israelites from unlawful acts of violence and does not apply to situations involving non-Israelites.¹⁸

The seventh commandment is "You shall not commit adultery," aiming to protect the sanctity of marriage among the Israelites. According to feminist interpretations, this commandment reflects the patriarchal centrism and unequal status of men and women in the Bible. "A woman who is betrothed or married, if she engages in sexual relations with a man other than her husband or fiancé, is considered to commit adultery, while a man is only considered to commit adultery if he has relations with another man's wife or fiancée."¹⁹ In the Hebrew context, a husband is only convicted if he threatens someone else's marriage, while a wife is guilty if she threatens her own marriage.²⁰ Violating the virginity of a woman is not considered a crime for men; they only need to provide monetary compensation (Exodus 22:16; Deuteronomy 22:28). This

reflects the objectification and commodification of women. In addition to threatening marital relationships, same-sex sexual acts are also viewed as detestable acts of adultery (Leviticus 18:22).

The eighth commandment needs to be contrasted with the tenth commandment. The eighth commandment is "You shall not steal," while the tenth commandment is "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Scholars have different discussions on how to accurately distinguish these two commandments. One theory suggests that the former initially prohibited stealing "people," such as kidnapping, while the latter refers to property.²¹

In contemporary understanding, the eighth commandment lacks a specific object and includes all forms of encroachment. On the other hand, the tenth commandment (especially in the Deuteronomy version) emphasizes the inner impulse of wrongful acquisition, expanding the traditional interpretation from a concrete understanding to an abstract understanding. At the same time, these two commandments aim to uphold the interests of neighbors, and all forms of violence, deception, and unfaithfulness towards neighbors are considered sinful. In modern times, these two commandments have also been used to justify the sanctity and inviolability of private property. John Calvin attributed private property to God's arrangement, stating that "each person's possession is not accidental but is God's distribution, and to deprive another person of their property is to disregard God's distribution."²²

The ninth commandment is "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." The focus of this commandment is not on lying itself, but on the harm caused to one's neighbor through false testimony, especially in the context of judicial proceedings.²³ The Bible addresses various issues of legal justice. The Israelite legal tradition imposes severe sanctions on the misuse of testimony and emphasizes the requirement for multiple witnesses, and it repeatedly discusses this offense (Exodus 23:1, 6-8; Leviticus 19:11, 16; Deuteronomy 19:15).²⁴

The Ten Commandments are central to *Deuteronomy* and the entire Pentateuch, later inherited by Christian culture. When Catholicism was introduced to China in the Ming Dynasty by missionaries such as Matteo Ricci, it inevitably encountered substantial

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 94.

¹⁹ Tian Haihua, Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible. p. 98.

²⁰ Johann J. Stamm, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*. London: SCM Press. 1967. p. 100.

²¹ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, p. 100.

²² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. 1960. p. 408.

²³ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. Michigan: Zondervan. 1991. p. 95.

²⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. p. 102.

cultural conflict. Although commandments like "You shall not murder" and "You shall not steal" align with universal ethical principles, the monotheistic nature of Hebrew culture sharply conflicted with Chinese traditions of ancestor worship and reverence for Confucius and Mencius. This clash culminated in the Rites Controversy during the Kangxi Emperor's reign. A similar issue arose in Japan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where State Shinto clashed with the Christian prohibition against idol worship. Such conflicts underscore the inevitable ethical tensions that arise between civilizations on fundamental moral issues.

III. THE ETYMOLOGY OF BUDDHIST PRECEPTS

The original meaning of Buddhist precepts, known as "戒律" (jiè lǜ) in Chinese, refers to the common guidelines established by the Buddha for the monastic community. From the late Western Han to the Tang Dynasty, Indian Buddhism took several centuries to be transmitted and established in China, passing through generations of eminent Buddhist translators from Kumārajīva to Xuanzang. Early Buddhist text translations were largely phonetic transcriptions from Sanskrit, with Chinese characters selected based on their approximate sounds. Similarly, the choice of Chinese terms for various vinaya (disciplinary) concepts was initially influenced by phonetic considerations. It later expanded to become the ethical norms and standards for all Buddhist followers. The Tripitaka, which consists of the Sutra Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidharma Pitaka, is collectively known as Three Baskets. Among them the Vinaya Pitaka, also known as the "毗尼藏" (pí ní zàng) or "毗奈耶藏" (pí nài yē zàng) in Chinese, records various precepts and their discussions in Buddhism.

The Seven Buddhas' Verse on Universal Precepts states: "Cease from all evil, practice all that is good; purify one's mind—these are the teachings of all Buddhas."²⁵ This verse summarizes the essence of precepts in Buddhism from both negative aspects of prohibitions and positive aspects of actions.

Japanese scholar Akira Hirakawa suggests that in early Buddhism, precepts ("戒" or "śīla") and discipline ("律" or "vinaya") were separate. Precepts were voluntarily observed by those who were determined to practice Buddhism, emphasizing personal commitment and self-discipline. On the other hand, discipline (vinaya) was a set of regulations enforced to maintain the order of the monastic community, emphasizing external regulations.²⁶ In later periods, precepts and

discipline were often combined, but they carry four layers of meanings in practice.

The first layer of meaning is "尸罗" (śīla), which literally means "coolness" and is generally translated as "precepts."²⁷ During the Sui Dynasty, Master Huiyuan wrote in the Essay on the Meaning of Mahayana, "The term 'śīla' refers to this cooling aspect, also known as '戒' (precepts). The three poisons (greed, anger, ignorance) burn Buddhist practitioners, which can be compared to heat. But precepts can prevent and extinguish them, thus called 'coolness.' The name 'coolness' exactly signifies the ability to prevent and prohibit, hence it is called 'precepts.'"²⁸ In other words, "尸罗" refers to all virtuous actions and conducts that can extinguish the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance and bring about a state of coolness.

The second layer of meaning is "毗奈耶" (pí nài yē), also known as "毗尼" (pí ní), which is translated as "vinaya" or "disciplinary code." Its original meaning is "to distance oneself" or "to extinguish evil." Master Xuanzang translated it as "调伏" (tiáofú), meaning "to regulate and subdue." It is the revered comprehensive set of regulations for the monastic community. "In ancient translations, '毗尼' was often rendered as '灭' (miè). Nowadays, we use seven kinds of disciplinary codes to eliminate four kinds of slanders. This is the meaning of "law". Law refers to the precepts in Buddhism. It is a law named after Buddhism and is used for cutting off heavy and light offenses, opening up obstacles, holding violations, and determining non-lawful offenses. Therefore, we now take "law" as the appropriate translation of "Pi Ni".²⁹

The third aspect is the Prātimokṣa, which literally means "freedom in every respect" or "distinct liberation." Essay on the Meaning of Mahayana states: "Why is ethical conduct called liberation? It has two meanings. Firstly, ethical conduct enables one to be free from non-virtuous actions, hence it is called liberation. Secondly, it is the result of that liberation, thus it is called liberation. Therefore, the scriptures say, 'Ethical conduct is the foundation of proper and direct liberation,' and thus it is called Prātimokṣa."³⁰ Prātimokṣa specifically refers to the

²⁵ The Zengyi Ahan Jing (Ekottarikagama) can be found in *The Tripitaka*, Vol. 02, No.125, p. 6.

²⁶ Akira Hirakawa's. *A History of Indian Buddhism*, translated by Chuang Kun-mu, Taipei: Business Weekly Publications, 2004, p 73.

²⁷ The Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra (Great Exegesis) records ten connotations of a śrāvaka (disciple) known as the "Ten Virtues of the First Stage." They include tranquility and clarity, Peaceful Sleep, Recitation and Practice, Attainment of Concentration, Agile and Alert, Mirror-like Wisdom, Steps to the High Seat, Increase and Advance, and First Fruits. See The Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra, found in the Tripitaka, Vol. 27, No. 1545, p. 306.

²⁸ Master Huiyuan. Essay on the Meaning of Mahayana, *The Tripitaka*, Vol 44, No.1545. p.306.

²⁹ Master Yuanzhao. Commentary on the Fourfold Vinaya with Annotations, recorded by Master Daoxuan., *New Compiled Continued Canon*, Vol. 39, No. 714. p. 30.

³⁰ Master Huiyuan. Essay on the Meaning of Mahayana. see *The Tripitaka*, p.5.



external liberation through the observance of precepts related to bodily actions such as refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, as well as verbal actions such as refraining from false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle talk. It is distinct from precepts that target the mind or spirit (such as the bodhisattva precepts or the precepts of the path), hence it is called "distinct liberation." Prātimokṣa is the core of the monastic discipline observed by both Bhikṣus (monks) and Bhikṣuṇīs (nuns). It was recited by Venerable Upāli during the first Buddhist council and compiled as the "Prātimokṣa Sūtra," also known as the "Vinaya Sūtra," which is the core text of the Vinaya Piṭaka.

The fourth aspect is Uparakṣa, also translated as "Vinaya." The "Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra" states: "In foreign lands, it is called Uparakṣa, which is translated as Vinaya. Its explanation has two aspects: one is teaching and theory, and the other is practice and discrimination. If it is regarding teaching and theory, it is named Vinaya based on its interpretation and measurement. If it is regarding practice, it is named Vinaya based on its control and subjugation. The teachings of the monastic discipline expound on this Vinaya practice, and thus it is called Vinaya. Moreover, it gives rise to the Vinaya practice, and therefore it is named Vinaya." Uparakṣa is generally synonymous with Vinaya and is rarely used in the sutras, treatises, or scriptures.³¹ The term "Vinaya" is used more commonly in Mahayana Buddhism to refer to the monastic code. In Theravada Buddhism, it is often referred to as either "Vinaya" or "Prātimokṣa" when discussing monastic rules, such as the "Fourfold Vinaya" or the "Ten Recitations Vinaya."³² The Five Precepts and the Ten Virtuous Actions are considered the fundamental basis of all Buddhist precepts and disciplines.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE FIVE PRECEPTS

The Five Precepts, refer to abstaining from killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, speaking falsely, and consuming intoxicants. Many Buddhist scriptures discuss the Five Precepts, but the most comprehensive is the Sutra on the Five Precepts for Upasakas (Householder Disciples), which provides detailed explanations. Regulations related to vinaya were initially derived from the translation of Buddhist sutras; however, their interpretation—particularly the correlation established between the Five Precepts and the Ten Virtues in Chinese Buddhism—was later developed through commentaries on the sutras, such as those found in works like *The Forest of Gems in the*

Garden of the Dharma (Fayuan Zhulin), written by Buddhist monks or lay practitioners. The text begins by emphasizing the distinction between upholding the Five Precepts and violating them, stating, "If there are good men who receive and uphold them without violation, due to these causes and conditions, they will attain the path to Buddhahood. But if there are violations without repentance, they will constantly remain in the three lower realms."³³ Interestingly, Buddhism differentiates between regrettable and irrevocable offenses regarding violations of the Five Precepts. Certain transgressions can be absolved through repentance, allowing practitioners to continue on the path to enlightenment through ongoing cultivation and practice.

First is the precept against killing, which can be divided into killing humans and killing other living beings. The former carries a heavier offense, while the latter is a lesser offense. This is because the motivations and consequences of killing are different, thus resulting in different karmic consequences. In summary, the motivations for killing can be classified into four categories:

- 1) Those who create convenience for killing humans, such as setting traps, poisoning, arson, etc. "Killing humans, if succeeded, cannot be repented; killing non-humans³⁴ is a moderate offense that can be repented; killing animals is a lesser offense that can be repented."³⁵
- 2) Those who create convenience for killing non-humans, "Killing non-humans is a moderate offense that can be repented; killing humans is a lesser offense that can be repented; killing animals incurs a lesser offense."³⁶
- 3) Those who create convenience for killing animals, whether humans, non-humans, or animals are killed, all incur a lesser offense that can be repented.
- 4) Those who act without specific intentions, meaning they are prepared to kill whatever they encounter. Killing humans' results in an irreparable offense, killing non-humans incurs a moderate offense that can be repented, and killing animals incurs a lesser offense that can be repented.

It can be seen that the severity of the offense of killing is determined based on the motivations towards the object of killing. Intentionally killing humans is the most severe offense that cannot be repented, while intending to kill non-humans and animals is relatively less severe. From the regulations concerning abortion, it

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lao Zhengwu. *Buddhist Vinaya Studies*. Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 1999, p. 4.

³³ The Buddha's Discourse on the Five Precepts for Upasaka, see *Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 24, No. 1476, p.1.

³⁴ Non-human beings refers to the non-human beings in the sentient realm, such as Celestial Beings, Dragon Beings, Yakshas, Asuras, Garudas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, Mahoragas. These eight categories represent different classes of protective deities in Buddhism.

³⁵ The Buddha's Discourse on the Five Precepts for Upasaka, p. 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

can also be observed that although the consequences of killing are significant, the primary focus of Buddhism is on the underlying intentions. "If abortion is performed with the intent to kill the mother, if the mother dies, it incurs an irreparable offense; if the fetus dies, it is an offense that can be repented; if both die, it is an offense that cannot be repented; if neither die, it is a moderate offense that can be repented. If abortion is performed with the intent to kill the fetus, if the fetus dies, it incurs an irreparable offense; if the fetus does not die, it is a moderate offense that can be repented; if the mother dies, it is a moderate offense that can be repented; if both die, it incurs an irreparable offense. This is known as the act of abortion causing death."³⁷

The second precept is the precept against stealing.³⁸ Taking anything that belongs to others, whether it is from individuals, nations, or temples, whether taking it oneself, instructing others to take it, or sending someone to take it, all constitute stealing. Venerable Master Shengyan summarized that violating the precept of stealing and satisfying six conditions results in an irreparable offense. These conditions are as follows: First, it involves someone else's belongings. Second, there is the thought of taking something, meaning one knows that it belongs to someone else and not oneself. Third, there is the intention to steal, which means having the premeditated thought of stealing. Fourth, employing various means to facilitate the act of stealing. Fifth, the object stolen has a value of five copper coins.³⁹ Sixth, it involves taking the stolen property away from its original place, including moving it, changing its shape, altering its color, etc. Whenever the owner of the stolen item experiences a loss due to the intention to steal, it is considered as taking it away from its original place.

Among these conditions, the intention to steal is the primary focus of the precept. If a layperson carries objects for others and shifts them from the left shoulder

to the right shoulder or from the right hand to the left hand with the intention to steal, it is considered as taking it to a different place. Moving the wheels, axles, and yokes for vehicles, fore and aft sides for boats and beams, columns, and corner supports for houses with the intention to steal to different places is a violation of the precept. It is evident that whenever the intention to steal arises, even in small matters, it results in an irreparable offense, as the precepts are strict.⁴⁰ According to Buddhist teachings, stealing is prohibited under any circumstances, such as hunger, illness, natural disasters, human calamities, filial piety towards parents, or providing for one's spouse and children. If one engages in stealing, it is considered an offense. In times of difficulty, one may seek alms, and receiving donations from others is not an offense. However, borrowing without returning constitutes a violation of the precept against stealing.⁴¹

The third precept is the precept against sexual misconduct. "Sexual misconduct" refers to all forms of sexual relationships between men and women. Buddhism does not oppose all forms of sexual activity but rather condemns sexual misconduct. In the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, it is stated: "All beings in the various worlds, whether born from eggs, wombs, moisture, or transformation, operate normally due to sexual desire. We should understand that the root of the cycle of rebirth lies in desire, and desire is fueled by various cravings. Therefore, it perpetuates the cycle of birth and death."⁴² It can be seen that Buddhism recognizes the presence of sexual desire as the driving force behind the endless cycle of birth and death, affirming the legitimacy of its existence. The term "sexual misconduct" refers to "engaging in sexual activities with individuals other than one's own spouse, including men, women, spirits, and animals. Engaging in such acts is considered as engaging in sexual misconduct. Even though one may be faithful to one's own spouse, it is necessary to avoid engaging in sexual misconduct in inappropriate situations, which are considered as non-virtuous places."⁴³ It is also forbidden to engage in sexual activities during pregnancy to prevent harm to the

³⁷ Ibid, p. 2

³⁸ Stealing precept is the most intricate precept among the Five Precepts. Master Hongyi believed, "Among the precepts of both monastic and lay practices, the precept against stealing is the most elaborate. In the Vinaya texts of the Dharmagupta School, there are five volumes dedicated to the precept against stealing. In the Ten Recitations Vinaya, there are four volumes. In the Śūbhakarasimha Vinaya, there are three volumes. Even in the various writings by authors from Vinaya school Nanshan and Lingzhi, there are also three volumes dedicated to describing the precept against stealing. As the elaboration on the precept against stealing is so extensive, it is not an easy task to uphold it." Refer to Lao Zhengwu, *Buddhist Vinaya Studies*, pp. 195-196.

³⁹ The Buddha, according to the laws of the Magadha kingdom in ancient India at that time, established that theft of five coins or more was considered a capital offense, punishable by death. The specific value of these five coins cannot be determined today.

⁴⁰ The Buddha's Discourse on the Five Precepts for Upasaka, pp. 1, 2, 4.

⁴¹ Master Shengyan, "A Compendium of Vinaya Studies," Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2006, pp. 64, 66.

⁴² The Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra, *Taishō Tripitaka*. Vol. 17, No. 842, p. 6.

⁴³ The "Satyasiddhi-sastra" states, "Regarding the non-virtuous parts of the body parts for sexual intercourse, it refers to the mouth and the anus. All women are protected by their parents and children. Engaging in sexual activity with ordained women or other women who have renounced worldly life is also considered sexual misconduct. However, if a woman with no husband comes, any man can marry her as his wife publicly, which may not be considered an offense if the precepts are followed." See the "Pearls of the Dharma Garden: Volume 88" *Taishō Tripitaka*, Vol. 53, No. 2122, p. 1047.



fetus.⁴⁴ Except for legitimate heterosexual relationships, acts such as oral sex, anal sex, and sexual activities during pregnancy are also prohibited. The severity of sexual misconduct is determined based on the motivation behind the actions and the consequences, whether the actions were fulfilled or not. "If a male disciple engages in sexual misconduct with a human woman, a non-human woman, or an animal, in any of these three cases, it incurs an irreparable offense. If a male engages in sexual misconduct with another male, a non-human male, or an animal, it incurs an irreparable offense. If one has the intention to engage in sexual misconduct but does not carry it out, it incurs a forgivable offense. If the two bodies come together but abstain from sexual misconduct, it incurs a forgivable offense."⁴⁵

Notably, in the early Buddhist schools, involvement in prostitution was not regarded as a breach of the precepts. The verse states, "If a male disciple engages in sexual misconduct with a prostitute without paying the price, it is an unforgivable offense regardless of the amount."⁴⁶ Here, the term "price" refers to the exchange of money. Laypeople spending money on prostitution did not violate the precepts. Master Shengyan explains, "This is because India is a tropical nation where casual relationships between men and women are common. It is a widespread practice for men to engage with prostitutes, so it is not prohibited. However, in the Mahayana Bodhisattva precepts, unless one is a Bodhisattva on the earth, engaging in such behavior for the purpose of guiding and transforming sentient beings is not permitted."⁴⁷

The fourth precept is the precept of abstaining from false speech. "False speech" refers to deceptive and misleading language. In Buddhism, false speech is categorized into three types: "gross false speech," "minor false speech," and "skillful means false speech." Gross false speech refers to claiming to possess supernatural powers, achieve enlightenment, and so on. Minor false speech refers to general lies that are not considered grave offenses. It is stated, "If a layman claims to have heard or seen something he has not heard or seen, or speaks falsehood with an intention to deceive, or speaks falsehood without knowing the truth, or speaks the truth with an intention to deceive, all these are considered false speech and are to be confessed."⁴⁸ Skillful means false speech refers to non-malicious lies and does not constitute a transgression.

Gross false speech is considered a grave offense under five conditions: (1) when it is directed

towards humans, meaning it is spoken to deceive others; (2) when it is intended to deceive others, assuming that the person being deceived is a human and not a non-human being or an animal; (3) when there is a deliberate intention to deceive; (4) when one speaks gross false speech, claiming to have attained the fruits of Buddhahood of realizing the doctrines without actually attaining them, or claiming to have achieved meditative absorptions (jhanas) that one has not attained, or claiming to have seen celestial beings, dragons, gods, or ghosts when one has not seen them; (5) when the recipient of the false speech is capable of understanding the meaning conveyed. However, if the recipient is deaf, mentally impaired, or unable to understand language, or if the false speech is spoken to non-human beings or animals, it does not incur a serious offense.⁴⁹

The fifth precept, which advises abstaining from intoxicants, differs from the other Four Precepts in its nature. While the first four are considered "principled precepts" because they inherently violate core moral and legal standards independent of Buddhist doctrine, the precept on intoxicants is regarded as a "protective precept." This distinction arises because consuming alcohol is not inherently a legal, moral, or social violation, but rather a breach of Buddhist ethical conduct. Drinking itself is neither intrinsically good nor evil, yet it can easily lead to disruptive or criminal behaviors. The term "protective" thus signifies the intention of this precept to prevent further transgressions that may arise from intoxication.

During the time of Gautama Buddha, there was a lay follower who had always observed the Five Precepts. However, on one occasion, he accidentally drank a bowl of wine and ended up eating a chicken that wandered in from his neighbor's house. When the neighbor's wife noticed the missing chicken and asked about it, the lay follower proceeded to rape her. Eventually, he was brought to court but refused to admit his guilt. Due to drinking that bowl of wine, he violated not only the fifth precept but also the other four precepts, resulting in a grave offense. The magnitude of his wrongdoing was significant. However, it should be noted that the use of alcohol for medical purposes does not violate the precept. The Vinaya Pitaka states, "If wine is used as medicine or applied to wounds, there is no offense."⁵⁰

Since the Sui and Tang dynasties, Chinese scholars have begun to explore the concept of the "unity of the three teachings," leading to the integration of the Buddhist Five Precepts with the Confucian Five Constants "五伦" and the Five Elements "五行". The

⁴⁴ Collection of Essential Precepts, edited by Hongzan in *The Newly Compiled Continued Tripitaka*, Vol. 60, No. 1129, p. 13.

⁴⁵ The Buddha's Discourse on the Five Precepts for Upasaka, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Master Shengyan, "A Compendium of Vinaya Studies," pp. 66, 67.

⁴⁸ The Buddha's Discourse on the Five Precepts for Upasaka, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Master Shengyan, "A Compendium of Vinaya Studies," p. 70.

⁵⁰ Master Yuanzhao. Commentary on the Fourfold Vinaya with Annotations, recorded by Master Daoxuan, p. 525.

Great Calming and Contemplation states, "Deeply understanding the significance of the Five Constants and the Five Elements is similar to the Five Precepts. Kindness, compassion, and nurturing without causing harm to others correspond to the precept of not killing. Righteousness, humility, integrity, and benefiting others correspond to the precept of not stealing. Observing rituals, rules, and customs to enter into and maintain marriage correspond to the precept of not engaging in sexual misconduct. Wisely discerning what's at stake and upholding righteousness act in accordance with principles correspond to the precept of not consuming intoxicants. Trustworthiness, sincerity, and not deceiving others correspond to the precept of not speaking falsehood. Confucius established these Five Constants as medicinal remedies to cure the ailments of people in the world. Similarly, the Five Elements are akin to the Five Precepts: not killing corresponds to protecting Wood Elements against harm; not stealing corresponds to keeping metal elements secure; not engaging in sexual misconduct corresponds to preventing water from being excessive; not speaking falsehood corresponds to preventing the earth elements; not

consuming intoxicants corresponds to prevent fire elements from thriving in excess."⁵¹

Within Buddhism, the Five Precepts are interconnected with the Ten Virtues. The Ten Virtues, also known as the "Ten Wholesome Paths of Action," are not specific precepts themselves but rather ten categories of conduct derived from the Five Precepts, thus referred to as the Ten Virtues. They can be divided into the three aspects of "body," "speech," and "mind," often mentioned in conjunction with the Five Precepts. The discussion on the Ten Virtues is mainly found in the "The Mahayana Sutra Spoken by the Buddha to the Nāga King Sāgara," which states, "The Ten Wholesome Paths of Action refer to abstaining from killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, speaking falsehood, engaging in divisive speech, using loose speech, using harsh speech, engaging in idle gossip, and even staying away from greed, anger, and ignorance. If one can refrain from such actions, it is considered the Ten Wholesome Paths of Action, which is fundamental to abiding in both the worldly and the transcendental realms."⁵²

Table 1: The Correspondence between the Five Precepts and the Ten Virtues

Five Precepts	Not killing	Abstaining from killing,	Saving lives	Three Karmic Actions of Body	Ten Virtues
	Not stealing	Abstaining stealing,	giving		
	Not engaging in sexual misconduct	Abstaining from engaging in sexual misconduct,	Pure practice		
	Not speaking falsehood	Abstaining from speaking falsehood	Speaking truthfully	Four Karmic Actions of Speech	
		Abstaining from divisive speech	Speaking reconcilingly		
		Abstaining from using harsh speech,	Speaking with loving and kind words		
		Abstaining from using loose speech	Speaking straightforward speech		
	Not consuming intoxicants	Abstaining from greed	Contemplation of Impurity	Karmic Actions of Mind	
		Abstaining from anger	Contemplation of Compassion		
		Abstaining from ignorance	Contemplation of Causality		

V. RELIGIOUS ETHICS AND THE NATURAL LAW TRADITION

The Ten Commandments of the Bible and the Five Precepts of Buddhism, although arising

from different origins with different purposes, also exhibit significant similarities. Firstly, the latter five commandments of the Ten Commandments and the first four precepts of the Five Precepts of Buddhism are roughly the same. "In general, the Ten Commandments

⁵¹ Venerable Master Ziyi (Master Zhiyi). The Great Calming and Contemplation, recorded by Master Zhangan Guanding See, Vol. 46, No. 1911, p. 102.
⁵² The Mahayana Sutra Spoken by the Buddha to the Nāga King Sāgara, "Taishō Tripitaka", Vol. 15, No. 601, p. 5.

are recognized as the minimum moral commandments necessary for an orderly and healthy society."⁵¹ The latter five commandments among them are essential ethical requirements for any human society, and thus it's only natural that their similar content appears in Buddhist precepts.

Similar precepts can also be found in other ancient religions of ancient India. The Five Precepts of Brahmanism in the Manusmriti include not to kill, not to lie, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to be greedy or malicious. The Five Precepts of the Yogic tradition include not to kill, not to lie, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, and not to be greedy. The Five Precepts of Jainism include not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to engage in sexual misconduct, and to renounce desires. Thus, these precepts conform to the general principles derived from human rationality, that is, the regulations of natural law, containing universal ethical values of human society.⁵²

The Roman philosopher Cicero once commented, "(Natural) Law is the highest reason rooted in nature, commanding what should be done and prohibiting the opposite... When this reason is firmly established and fully developed in human consciousness, it becomes law... In fact, by adhering to the standards of nature, we can perceive the difference between what is just and unjust; not only do we distinguish between justice and injustice, but also between what is honorable and shameful."⁵³ The Ten Commandments uphold the social cohesion and stability of the community of the Israelite nation, while the Five Precepts of Buddhism and the Ten Good Deeds regulate the behavior of Buddhists in secular domains and ensure the stable functioning of the monastic community. Both are expressions of the fundamental ethical norms of natural law within religious contexts.

Secondly, the precepts are all promulgated or imparted by the highest authority or the founder of the respective religion. The Ten Commandments are the direct words of God, relatively concise, engraved on stone tablets, signifying their immutability and indelibility. The Five Precepts of Buddhism were expounded by the Buddha Shakyamuni for sentient beings and later compiled into scriptures by the monastic community during the First Compilation of Buddhist Classics. These scriptures were then passed down to future generations. However, during the process of compilation and continuous translation, it became difficult to maintain the exact words spoken by the Buddha. Hence, it was

necessary for the subsequent monks to constantly provide annotations and commentaries to interpret and adapt them for practical implementation.

Thirdly, in terms of linguistic style, both the Ten Commandments and the Five Precepts predominantly use the negative form of absolute imperative mood, highlighting the seriousness, authority, and inviolability of the laws. In various parts of the Bible, there are references to the punishments and curses for violating the Ten Commandments. Similarly, in the "Sutra of the Discourse on the Upasaka Precepts" in Buddhism, the Buddha also outlines the consequences of transgressing the Five Precepts in different forms.

VI. NATIONAL LAWS AND MONASTIC CODES

The Ten Commandments and the Five Precepts in Buddhism also have significant differences. Firstly, the ways in which the laws are taught and the scope of their enforcement differ between the two religions. The Ten Commandments were given by God through Moses to the entire nation of Israel, and every Israelite was required to accept them without individual autonomy. In the Jewish-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments are seen as applicable to all humanity, regardless of their faith, and the Jewish law has been inherited by Christianity, indicating a universal tendency. In contrast, Buddhist precepts are more akin to moral guidelines aimed at encouraging people to do good. For non-voluntary Buddhist followers, the precepts are not obligatory. Although the Five Precepts were formulated by the Buddha, receiving the precepts as a Buddhist disciple requires lineage transmission and the emphasis on the transmission and acceptance of the precepts. Only those who have received the precepts can pass them on to others. "This precept body is directly transmitted from the Buddha. Receiving and accepting the precept body means incorporating the Buddha's Dharma body into one's own mind and nature, connecting the Buddha's Dharma body with the inherent Dharma body of every individual, aiming to guide individuals to realize their own Buddha nature."⁵⁴ If one breaks the precepts after receiving them, it is considered breaking the Buddha's Dharma body, committing a significant offense. If one commits wrongdoing without having received the Buddhist precepts, they may be subject to legal sanctions under secular law, but it does not count as breaking the precepts. From this, it can be seen that the adherence to Jewish laws is predetermined and does not require the consent of the individual, while the adherence to Buddhist precepts depends on the subjective will of the individual. If one voluntarily takes the precepts, they are subjected to greater restrictions and responsibilities. Buddhist precepts also have different levels of hierarchy,

⁵³ Tian Haihua, Study on Decalogue of the Hebrew Bible, p. 55.

⁵⁴ Gao Hongjun: "The Pluralistic Characteristics of Traditional Indian Law," *Tsinghua Law Review*, 2020, Issue 1, pp.17, 22.

⁵⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica; De Legibus*, translated by Shen Shuping and Su Li. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1999, pp. 158, 171.

⁵⁶ Master Shengyan, *A Compendium of Vinaya Studies*, 2006, p. 54.

with the Five Precepts being the foundational precepts in Buddhism, which both lay practitioners and ordained monastics are expected to uphold. Monastics, such as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, have additional, more stringent precepts such as the Bodhisattva precepts and monastic precepts.

The underlying reason for this is that Judaism itself is an ethnic religion, and the Israelite community is inherently a religious community of the Jewish faith. The two are combined into one. Besides, because some of the content in the Ten Commandments follows natural law, there is no need to distinguish between religious laws and laws of the national society. Christianity, which inherited the Jewish legal tradition, later became the religion of the entire European society. When Christianity encountered other cultures, questions arose about whether the Ten Commandments could be applicable, leading to debates such as the "Dispute over Rituals." On the other hand, Buddhism emerged as a marginal religion, and when it spread throughout East Asia, it coexisted with various ethnic groups and cultures. Although the content of the Five Precepts overlaps with natural law in many respects, it is not the law of an ethnic community. Therefore, it becomes necessary to differentiate between religious precepts and laws of the national society. Only practitioners who have received the precepts need to adhere to religious ethics.

Therefore, deeply rooted in the secular society of reality, the punitive aspect of Jewish law manifests as realistic punishments in this world (Exodus 21-23). It is more akin to statutes and regulations, with clear guidelines for the consequences of various violations of the precepts. Judges can directly impose penalties based on the biblical scriptures. Religious law and the secular law of the Israelite nation are integrated and indistinguishable.

In contrast, the consequences in Buddhism are often non-worldly. The causes of wrongdoing can hinder future spiritual progress or perpetuate the cycle of samsara, but they do not have the operability for judges to enforce punishments based on Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist law is separate from secular law. Buddhist transgressions are categorized as those that can be repented and those that cannot, which affirms its inclination towards religious interpretation rather than secular legal interpretation. The Five Precepts encourage virtuous behavior, and after repentance, individuals can continue their spiritual practice, rather than facing direct punitive measures in the realm of worldly justice.

Apart from the differences in the scope of precepts or commandments and the consequences of breaking them, the role of God in the precepts is also distinct. The first three commandments of the Ten Commandments are about God, establishing His uniqueness and inviolable divinity. At the same time, God is involved in the historical process of the Israelites;

He is the creator of history. When Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the Israelites built a golden calf as an act of idolatry, which angered God. Moses, in his anger, shattered the stone tablets containing the commandments and destroyed the golden calf. The Israelites faced punishment, and none of them entered the land of Canaan alive. The punishment for violating the commandments was carried out by God. In Buddhism, the Buddha is not a personal god but rather an enlightened being. After formulating the Five Precepts, the Buddha did not involve himself in the execution of the precepts or the imposition of punishments. The negative consequences of breaking the precepts all come as a result of karmic causation.

The first four commandments of the Ten Commandments deal with the sacred domain of the relationship between humans and God, while the remaining six commandments address the secular domain of human relationships with others. In both cases, the subjects who implement the commandments are humans, and the objects they protect are also humans. On the other hand, the Five Precepts, although applicable to humans (upasakas and upasikas), have a much broader range of objects of protection, including non-human beings and animals. Taking the precept of non-killing as an example, the Ten Commandments explicitly state "You shall not murder," while the Five Precepts state "Refrain from killing." Although there are differences in the severity of transgressions between killing humans and killing non-human beings or animals, the objects of protection in the Five Precepts include humans and all sentient beings. In other words, the Five Precepts address the relationship between humans and all living beings.

Furthermore, the Ten Commandments regulate behavior itself, focusing on the consequences of actions, and the punishments are imposed after the actions have taken place. However, the focus of the Five Precepts in Buddhism is not limited to the actions themselves but also extends to the intentions and thoughts. It recognizes that a single thought can give rise to countless other thoughts, and the cessation of a single thought can extinguish countless other thoughts. Negative consequences can arise even if one has not committed any actual wrongdoing, but harbors the intention to break the precepts. Therefore, compared to Judaism, Buddhism places greater emphasis on the psychological motivations behind individual followers' behaviors.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Ten Commandments and the Five Precepts of Buddhism are the fundamental religious ethical norms of Judaism and Buddhism, respectively. Through textual analysis of both in Chinese, we can identify common characteristics in general religious ethics. Firstly, both



are teachings imparted by the highest deity or the religious founder. Over time, these teachings became textualized and standardized, transitioning from oral tradition to written precepts. This process demonstrates the evolution of religious law from oral customs to written codes, which ultimately require the authority of the highest religious figure. Secondly, there is an overlap in the precepts of both religions when it comes to guiding relationships between individuals and their neighbors, as well as between individuals and all sentient beings. This confirms the expression of a shared natural law within religions, which continues to serve as constant ethical boundaries in modern society. Lastly, in terms of language style, both utilize a negative form of absolute imperative mood, highlighting the seriousness and inviolability of the laws.

On the basis of common human ethics, the ethical teachings of different religions aim to express their core doctrines. The distinctive feature of the Ten Commandments in the Bible is the emphasis on the relationship between humans and God, as well as the uniqueness of God. God is portrayed as actively involved in human history, and both God's punishments and curses have a strong sense of judicial reality. The religious law is intertwined with secular law, allowing the Israelite society to punish wrongdoers according to God's commandments, reflecting the social cohesion achieved through faith in the Israelite community. On the other hand, the Five Precepts in Buddhism do not address the relationship between humans and Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are regarded as beings who have achieved enlightenment, rather than personal gods or enforcers of punishment. According to Buddhist scriptures, although the consequences of violating the Five Precepts do not involve immediate judicial punishments, they hinder the spiritual progress of the faithful practitioners. However, the Five Precepts represent the embodiment of the Buddha's teachings that practitioners undertake, emphasizing the warning against negative intentions and thoughts. From its initial establishment by the monastic community to becoming the fundamental precepts for all Buddhist followers, the Five Precepts form the core ethical guidelines.

The Buddhist ethics within the Five Precepts bear the characteristics of their origin in India, yet they are also in line with the ethical norms of various ethnic groups and societies. In this regard, the Buddhist precepts demonstrate greater flexibility compared to the Ten Commandments in Hebrew culture. However, the form of religiously oriented punishment expressed in the Five Precepts indicates that they have not been completely assimilated into secular law. They remain as teachings to guide individuals towards virtuous conduct, as imparted by the Buddha.

Natural law is grounded in the traditional customs of human society, and a tradition of natural law

also exists within the historical context of China. Certain elements align with the Five Precepts in Buddhism and the Ten Commandments in the Bible, highlighting a shared foundation of natural law among humanity. However, unlike religious ethics or precepts, Chinese natural law is expressed through the framework of state law, a characteristic more closely aligned with the traditions of Roman civilization. By comparing the texts of the Ten Commandments in the Bible and the Five Precepts in Buddhism, the above passage reveals their shared origin in natural law and their distinct characteristics as national laws and ethical guidelines for spiritual practice. I hope that through comparative studies across religions, a deeper understanding of the origins and features of general religious ethics can be achieved, providing valuable insights into the formation of religious ethics and their relationship with the societies in which they exist.