

Karuṇā and Caritas in Buddhist–Christian Traditions: Rereading the Ethics of Love as Self-Surrendering Love

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity shape an ethical framework of love characterized by self-surrendering love. The primary aim of this research is to demonstrate that, although these two virtues arise from distinct metaphysical and theological structures, they perform similar functions in forming moral dispositions and altruistic action. The study employs a qualitative approach through a text-based comparative analysis that draws on primary Buddhist and Christian sources as well as classical and contemporary academic literature. The findings show that *karuṇā* emerges from awareness of universal suffering, the principle of *anattā*, and the Bodhisattva ideal that centers on the liberation of all beings. Meanwhile, *caritas* is rooted in the conception of God as Love, human dignity as *imago Dei*, and the kenotic tradition that understands love as total self-giving. Despite their divergent metaphysical foundations, *karuṇā* and *caritas* converge in a shared ethical pattern: a form of love that prioritizes the well-being of the other through self-emptying. The figures of the Bodhisattva and the saints exemplify this convergence paradigmatically. The study concludes that the conceptual encounter between *karuṇā* and *caritas* opens a more equitable space for interreligious ethical dialogue and expands the horizon of solidarity across traditions. In terms of originality, this research proposes a three-dimensional analytical model—origin, goal, and demands—that contributes a new perspective to comparative studies of the virtue of love in religious studies and offers an interreligious ethical framework that can be operationalized within plural societies.

Keywords: *Karuṇā*; *caritas*; comparative theological ethics; self-surrendering love; Buddhist–Christian studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, interreligious encounters have intensified in unprecedented ways. Global mobility, the expansion of multicultural education, and digital connectivity have compelled religious communities to interact more directly and regularly. According to a 2023 report by the Pew Research Center, Christians

constitute approximately 31% of the world's population, while Buddhists account for about 6.6% (Smith et al., 2025). These two major traditions live side by side in many urban centers—from Southeast Asia to Europe and North America—forming new social spaces in which ethical and spiritual values intersect, dialogue, and are tested within increasingly complex pluralistic contexts. Amid global conditions marked by social tensions, political polarization, and rising religious intolerance—reported by the United Nations (2025) to have increased in more than 40% of surveyed countries—scholars and interfaith practitioners have renewed their attention to moral virtues capable of sustaining social harmony.

This phenomenon becomes even more prominent as modern societies confront what is often described as a “crisis of empathy,” characterized by declining social solidarity and the prevalence of individualistic-liberal orientations in interpersonal relations (Gates & Curwood, 2023; Sladojević Matić, 2025). In many public arenas, kindness, sensitivity to suffering, and the willingness to offer help without reward have become increasingly scarce (Meri, 2021). Interfaith institutions and scholars of comparative ethics continue to search for moral concepts that not only affirm human dignity but also provide ethical orientation for interreligious relations (Malik & Ahmed, 2024; Mayhew, Shaheen, & Staples, 2024; Widiyanto, 2023). Within this landscape, *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity emerge as two key virtues that hold potential as ethical bridges. Personified in the figures of the Bodhisattva and the saints, both virtues possess a universal moral force that can shape an ethics of care extending beyond the boundaries of religious communities. Nevertheless, the ways in which these traditions define, interpret, and embody compassion and divine love—and the extent to which they can be understood as forms of self-surrendering love—still require more systematic philosophical and comparative analysis.

Research on *karuṇā* and *caritas* in relation to the ethics of love and compassion has developed across several scholarly trajectories. First, studies on *karuṇā* in Buddhism focus on the spiritual and ethical dimensions of compassion. Gomez (1978) examines *karuṇābhāvanā* as a contemplative practice that cultivates moral sensitivity; Carter (1989) emphasizes that Buddhist compassion presupposes ego-release and detachment; and Leighton (2012) elaborates the Bodhisattva archetype as a model of active and universal compassion. These studies enrich understanding of the theological and practical structures of Buddhist compassion, yet remain primarily within the internal horizon of Buddhist thought without engaging deeply with the virtue of love in other traditions.

Second, studies on *caritas* in Christianity—especially through the thought of Thomas Aquinas—frame *caritas* as a theological virtue rooted in God as Love. Freyhan (1948) traces the historical development of the figure of Caritas; Floyd (2009) discusses the moral obligation of mercy; and Dauphinais and Levering (2002) analyze the dynamics of divine love, grace, and the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor. This body of work affirms *caritas* as the pinnacle virtue in Christian ethics and highlights its practical implications for acts of love. However, like the studies on *karuṇā*, these works remain largely confined within the Christian theological horizon and have not yet situated *caritas* in a balanced comparative conversation with Buddhist compassion.

Third, comparative Buddhist–Christian research tends to focus on religious figures rather than on the moral virtues themselves. Keel (1996) compares Jesus as a figure possessing Bodhisattva-like qualities; Reis-Habito (1993) explores parallels between Guanyin and Mary; and Tsomo (2012) compares Mother Teresa with the Bodhisattva ideal in terms of sacrifice and universal service. Although these studies enrich interreligious dialogue, they primarily address iconography, personal spirituality, and soteriology rather than offering a systematic philosophical analysis of *karuṇā* and *caritas* as two moral virtues that can be meaningfully compared within the framework of comparative theological ethics.

From this mapping of the literature, a clear research gap emerges. No study has yet examined *karuṇā* and *caritas* in a balanced and in-depth comparative framework that analyzes the metaphysical-theological origins, teleological orientations, and ethical demands of these virtues as reflected in the figures of the Bodhisattva and the saints. Furthermore, no prior work has explicitly articulated the conceptual point of convergence between them within a single ethical framework—such as self-surrendering love—that could provide a new analytical tool for interreligious ethics. This gap constitutes the primary justification for the present study.

In response to this gap, this article pursues three main objectives. First, it explicates the foundational concepts of *karuṇā* and *caritas* within Buddhist and Christian contexts, both textually and philosophically. Second, it compares the origins, goals, and ethical demands of these virtues through an examination of the Bodhisattva and the saints. Third, it offers a synthetic argument that *karuṇā* and *caritas* can be interpreted as forms of self-surrendering love—love that relinquishes ego for the good and salvation of others—and that this framework holds relevance for interreligious ethics in plural societies.

Aligned with these aims, the article advances the argument that although *karuṇā* and *caritas* emerge from distinct metaphysical and theological traditions—*karuṇā* from the awareness of universal suffering and the principle of *anattā*, and *caritas* from the conception of God as Love and human dignity as *imago Dei*—they display significant ethical convergence. Both virtues articulate a dynamic of love that demands self-giving, a willingness to suffer with others, and a commitment to advancing the well-being of all beings. Thus, *karuṇā* and *caritas* may be understood as two expressions of self-surrendering love that, when read comparatively, offer rich potential for philosophical and ethical dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity in an increasingly interconnected world.

METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the concept of religious virtue as formulated in two major traditions, namely *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Catholic Christianity. The study does not treat these virtues as empirical behaviors of religious adherents at the social level, but as normative constructions shaped by authoritative texts, theological frameworks, and ideal figures such as the Bodhisattva and the saints. Accordingly, the research positions *karuṇā* and *caritas* as intellectual–spiritual artifacts that represent how each tradition thinks about, frames, and directs love and compassion within ethical and soteriological horizons.

This study employs a qualitative design using a comparative textual analysis approach. This approach is chosen because the main objective of the research is to conduct a philosophical and theological reading of *karuṇā* and *caritas* as they appear in sacred texts, traditional commentaries, and academic literature. An interpretive qualitative framework is most appropriate for uncovering the structures of meaning, conceptual categories, and religious horizons that inform these virtues. The comparative approach enables the analysis of points of convergence and divergence between *karuṇā* and *caritas* based on the dimensions of their origins, moral goals, and practical demands.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary texts. Primary Buddhist texts include the *Dhammapada*, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Bodhisattva narratives in the Mahāyāna tradition, and classical commentaries by figures such as Buddhaghosa. Primary Christian texts include the New Testament—particularly 1 Corinthians 13 and Mark 12—Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, and magisterial documents relevant to the concept of *caritas*. Secondary texts include academic works that specifically address compassion and charity, such as Gomez (1978), Carter (1989), Leighton (2012), Freyhan (1948), Floyd (2009), Dauphinais and Levering (2002), and contemporary comparative Buddhist–Christian studies. All sources are selected based on authority, thematic relevance, and their contribution to the development of conceptual analysis.

Data collection uses library research methods. This process includes identifying, retrieving, and gathering literature from academic databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Oxford Bibliographies, as well as accessing ecclesial document repositories and publications of the Buddhist Publication Society. All retrieved texts are read carefully and classified according to tradition (Buddhist/Christian), theological context, and thematic categories such as compassion, charity, soteriology, and the ethics of love. Close reading is used to extract definitions, argumentative structures, and conceptual markers that form the basis of comparison between the two virtues.

Data were analyzed using thematic–comparative analysis. The first stage identifies key themes within each concept, such as theological origins, teleological orientation (soteriological, ethical, or ministerial), and practical demands on religious practitioners. The second stage maps these themes into three analytical categories: origin, goal, and demands. The third stage conducts a systematic comparison to examine the divergences and convergences between *karuṇā* and *caritas* across these categories. The final stage produces an interpretive synthesis that articulates how both virtues can be understood as forms of self-surrendering love—that is, love that manifests through self-giving for the good of the other—and explores the implications of this framework for the development of interreligious ethics.

RESULTS

1. Conceptual Contours of *Karuṇā* and *Caritas*

Karuṇā in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity are two religious virtues that play a foundational role in shaping the moral orientation of their respective traditions. Neither virtue is understood as a spontaneous emotion; rather, each

constitutes a dispositional structure cultivated through inner formation, spiritual discipline, and a mature conceptual framework. Readings of primary texts—such as the *Dhammapada*, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 1 Corinthians 13, and 1 John 4—alongside contemporary academic studies show that each virtue presents a distinctive ethical configuration while functionally moving toward a similar horizon of moral consciousness.

In the Buddhist tradition, *karuṇā* is understood as one of the *brahmavihāras* forming the basis of ethics and spiritual practice. *Karuṇā* is not reduced to sentiment or emotional pity but is lived as a trained inner disposition cultivated through contemplative practice (*karuṇābhāvanā*) and reflection on universal suffering. Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga*, defines *karuṇā* as an active impulse to remove the suffering of other beings—a definition that underscores the ethical and transformational dimensions of this virtue. Contemporary Buddhist literature develops this meaning further: *karuṇā* is interpreted as a moral principle that sustains personal, social, and ecological well-being (Jenkins, 2013; Sarma, 2024).

The Mahāyāna framework articulates *karuṇā* more radically through the Bodhisattva ideal, which portrays the Bodhisattva as delaying the attainment of nirvāṇa for the salvation of all beings. Classical Mahāyāna literature and modern ethical studies (Harris, 2011; Santillán, 2023) position this ideal as a form of altruism that surpasses the boundaries of the self, grounded in the insight of *anattā* and the ontological interrelatedness of beings. Feminist scholarship, however, reminds us that Buddhism presents two models of compassion—one equal-regarding, rejecting harmful self-sacrifice, and another that idealizes total self-surrender. This tension reveals the complexity of *karuṇā* as a virtue that is not only moral but philosophical: it remains inseparable from wisdom (*prajñā*), ensuring that ethical self-sacrifice always requires careful discernment of conditions and consequences (Rappay, 2023).

In Christianity, *caritas* is understood as a theological virtue rooted in the identity of God as Love. The affirmation in 1 John 4:16—“God is love”—situates *caritas* within the structure of divine reality, such that human acts of love are construed as participation in God’s own love. First Corinthians 13 establishes the supremacy of *caritas* over faith and hope, positioning it as the virtue that governs the entire moral orientation of Christians. Classical theology—especially in Thomas Aquinas—formulates *caritas* as *amicitia* between humanity and God, which then flows into human relationships with others “in God.” *Caritas* thus possesses a vertical and horizontal structure: love of God becomes the ethical ground for love of neighbor.

Modern moral and social theology expands the meaning of *caritas* beyond spirituality into an ethical principle that shapes social, economic, and political life. The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* interprets the Good Samaritan as an icon of *caritas* that transcends identity boundaries and requires active engagement with another’s suffering. Meanwhile, *Caritas in Veritate* integrates love into a critique of modern economies, emphasizing the logic of gift (*gratuitousness*) and reciprocal relationships grounded in human dignity and the common good (Christiansen, 2010; Grassl, 2010). In practice, Caritas Theory informs ethical reflection in social work and humanitarian service, showing that *caritas* demands structured, socially transformative acts of love (Braswell, 2022; Opatrný, 2020).

Despite their metaphysical differences—*karuṇā* rooted in *anattā* and universal suffering, *caritas* grounded in the *imago Dei* and human participation in divine love—both virtues move toward a form of love that transcends self-interest. Comparative ethical studies show that both Buddhism and Christianity emphasize the transformation of the moral subject toward a disposition of self-giving, openness to the suffering of others, and commitment to the common good (Clairmont, 2011; Wang & Wang, 2025). At this point, *karuṇā* and *caritas* may be read as two distinct yet convergent religious paths: both formulate self-surrendering love, a mode of love that integrates contemplative and practical dimensions, inner and social orientations, reshaping how humans understand themselves, others, and the world.

Table 1. Conceptual Contours of *Karuṇā* and *Caritas* in Comparative Ethical Perspective

Analytical Aspect	Karuṇā (Buddhism)	Caritas (Christianity)	Comparative Note
Conceptual Sources	<i>Dhammapada</i> , <i>Bodhicaryāvatāra</i> , <i>Visuddhimagga</i> , teachings on <i>brahmavihāra</i>	1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 4, <i>Summa Theologiae</i> , <i>Deus Caritas Est</i> , <i>Caritas in Veritate</i>	Both traditions operate within normative frameworks rooted in authoritative texts and spiritual practice.
Core Definition	A trained disposition of compassion directed toward relieving the suffering of all beings; grounded in contemplative discipline	Human participation in God's love; friendship with God that flows toward others	Two metaphysically distinct concepts that converge functionally as ethical love.
Ontological Basis	<i>Anattā</i> (non-self), ontological interrelatedness of all beings	<i>Imago Dei</i> , God as Love	<i>Karuṇā</i> : non- theistic; <i>Caritas</i> : theistic.
Structure of the Virtue	Contemplative- dispositional; intertwined with <i>prajñā</i> (wisdom)	Theological- ethical; intertwined with divine love	Both require the inner transformation of the moral subject.
Figurative Ideal	Bodhisattva: radical altruism; postponement of nirvāṇa for others (Santillán; Harris)	The Good Samaritan; saints; divinely grounded active love	Both ideals portray selfless love.

Ethical Model	Two modes of compassion: equal-regarding and self-sacrificial (An)	Love that transcends identity boundaries and requires social engagement (Christiansen; Grassl & Habisch)	Shows internal pluralities within each tradition.
Practical Dimension	Selfless action directed toward universal suffering; relevant for social-ecological crises	Social, economic, and humanitarian acts of love; logic of gift (<i>gratuitousness</i>)	Different practical arenas, yet both are public and transformative.
Subjective Transformation	Ego-release; cultivation of the capacity to suffer-with	Participation in God's love; formation of loving dispositions	Both produce a moral subject open to the other.
Moral Purpose	Ending suffering; liberation of all beings	The common good; salvation; moral renewal	Distinct yet compatible ethical horizons.
Pattern of Love	Self-surrendering compassion	Self-giving love	These converge into a shared synthesis: self-surrendering love.
Conceptual Summary	<i>Karuṇā</i> → non-self-based, contemplative, universal love	<i>Caritas</i> → divinely grounded, socially transformative love	Convergence: both reorder self and social relations through total self-gift.

Buddhism and Christianity both regard compassion and love as foundational moral virtues that shape how human beings relate to one another. In Buddhism, *karuṇā* is not a fleeting emotional response but an inner capacity cultivated through spiritual discipline and deep reflection on universal suffering. It requires practitioners to transcend ego-based interests and to recognize that personal well-being is inseparable from the well-being of all beings. The Bodhisattva ideal expresses the most radical form of *karuṇā*: the willingness to postpone one's own liberation to help all beings attain awakening.

In Christianity, *caritas* is understood as love that originates in God. Human love becomes authentic insofar as it participates in divine love. *Caritas* is not merely a spiritual state but unfolds as social action oriented toward the good of others, as illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Theologically, *caritas* binds love of God and love of neighbor into a single unified movement. As a result, *caritas* carries both spiritual and social significance, shaping personal relationships as well as communal, economic, and political structures through the logic of gift and solidarity.

Despite their differing metaphysical roots—*anattā* in Buddhism and the *imago Dei* in Christianity—both *karuṇā* and *caritas* function as virtues that reshape how the self perceives and relates to the world. Both virtues orient individuals toward forms of love that require self-giving, attentiveness to the suffering of others, and a commitment to act for the common good.

From these findings, four major thematic patterns emerge that clarify the conceptual contours of the two virtues. First, both virtues move from spontaneous emotion to structured disposition. *Karuṇā* arises from contemplative training such as *karuṇābhāvanā*, while *caritas* emerges through participation in divine love that reorients the inner self. Both highlight character transformation as the core of moral virtue.

Second, both traditions present ideal figures that embody the highest form of the virtue. The Bodhisattva in Buddhism and the saints or the Good Samaritan in Christianity serve as models of concrete, self-transcending love. These figures show that compassion and love require action rather than mere contemplation.

Third, both converge on a form of love marked by self-surrender. Although they stem from different metaphysical frameworks—*anattā* and *imago Dei*—both demand the relinquishing of self-centered interests. The Bodhisattva relinquishes *nirvāṇa* for others, while *caritas* calls individuals to love others as God loves humanity. In both traditions, the apex of love is reached when the self no longer stands at the center of moral action.

Fourth, both virtues expand into social, ecological, and economic realms. *Karuṇā* has been applied as a contemporary ethical framework for addressing ecological and social crises. *Caritas*, especially as developed in *Caritas in Veritate*, has entered discourses on economics and human development. Both thus operate as multidimensional ethical frameworks relevant for modern social complexities.

Karuṇā and *caritas*, though arising from distinct metaphysical horizons, display strong convergence as transformational virtues. They not only shape the inner life of individuals but also orient social action toward shared flourishing. At their deepest level, both articulate a structure of love characterized by self-surrender—self-surrendering love—that offers a fruitful foundation for interreligious ethical dialogue and holds practical significance for addressing contemporary moral challenges.

2. Origin, Goal, and Demands of *Karuṇā* and *Caritas*

The normative origins of *karuṇā* and *caritas* show that both virtues emerge from distinct metaphysical and theological foundations, yet they shape ethical orientations that demand active engagement in the moral life. In Buddhism, *karuṇā* arises from the Buddha's fundamental teachings on suffering (*dukkha*), the interdependence of all beings through *paṭīccasamuppāda*, and the universal aim of liberation. The *Dhammapada* affirms that morality provides the basis for compassion, asserting that goodness has value only insofar as it sustains life and prevents harm. Classical Buddhist literature and contemporary ethical studies expand this understanding by positioning *karuṇā* as a dharma legacy that shapes modern moral consciousness and motivates actions that consider ethical consequences for all beings (Jenkins, 2013; Sarma, 2024). Within the Mahāyāna framework, the origin of *karuṇā* takes a more radical form through the Bodhisattva

ideal—a spiritual commitment that refuses to attain nirvāṇa before all beings are liberated. This ideal is not only soteriological but also ethical: the Bodhisattva bears the world's suffering, establishing altruism as a moral structure that transcends the boundaries of the self (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Santillán, 2023).

The goal of *karuṇā* lies in creating conditions in which suffering can be reduced through actions aligned with *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya-kausalya* (skillful means). Buddhist ethics places intention (*cetanā*) at the center of moral quality; therefore, *karuṇā* functions not as an emotional impulse but as an ethical orientation directed toward promoting the well-being of others while minimizing harm in any context (Sirimanne, 2018). In the Mahāyāna tradition, the goal of *karuṇā* becomes even broader, encompassing the formation of social and ecological conditions that allow all beings to flourish harmoniously. Studies in Buddhist environmental ethics show that *karuṇā* extends into human–nature relations, binding human beings to ecological responsibilities grounded in nonviolence and cosmic accountability (Dorzhigushaeva & Kiplyuks, 2020). The goal of *karuṇā* therefore reaches beyond individual spiritual liberation and advances toward collective moral transformation.

The demands of *karuṇā* are rooted in the principle of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) and rigorous moral practice. The *Sutta Nipāta* insists that one who destroys life cannot be said to possess compassion, thus placing the protection of life at the core of *karuṇā*. In Mahāyāna thought, these demands expand through the Bodhisattva vows, which include readiness for self-sacrifice, selfless service, and committed presence in the world's suffering. Several Buddhist ethical studies highlight that the demands of *karuṇā* are embodied—meaning that the Bodhisattva's very body functions as a medium of moral transformation for others (Mroziuk, 2004, 2007). Thus, *karuṇā* requires not only an inner disposition but also a way of life, disciplined desire, and consistent acts of compassion.

Meanwhile, *caritas* in Christianity possesses a clear theological origin in biblical revelation. The explicit assertion in 1 John 4:16 that “God is love” positions *caritas* as human participation in divine reality. *Caritas* therefore operates not merely as a moral virtue but as an ontological involvement in the life of God. Classical theology, particularly in the work of Thomas Aquinas, defines *caritas* as *amicitia* between humans and God, from which love for one's neighbor flows as a direct extension of divine love. The teleological orientation of *caritas* is the *beatific vision*—the perfection of humanity in union with God—so every act of love contributes to eschatological transformation.

In modern developments, *caritas* acquires more explicit social and political dimensions. The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* interprets the parable of the Good Samaritan as a paradigm of love that transcends identity boundaries and requires active responsiveness to suffering. Meanwhile, *Caritas in Veritate* links love to global economic structures, emphasizing *gratuitousness* and the logic of gift as principles that reorder relationships among markets, human dignity, and the common good (Christiansen, 2010; Grassl, 2010). Within this framework, the goal of *caritas* extends beyond interpersonal relations toward the construction of a just and humane society.

The demands of *caritas* include concrete acts such as beneficence, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. *Caritas* requires the integration of interior devotion and social praxis; love that remains unexpressed in action fails to fulfill its theological

nature. Caritas Theory in modern social work reinforces this point by insisting that love requires structural engagement in addressing injustice and fostering communal well-being (Braswell, 2022; Opatrný, 2020). Thus, *caritas* forms a moral subject oriented not only toward God but also toward social transformation through service, solidarity, and commitment to human dignity.

Taken together, the origins, goals, and demands of *karuṇā* and *caritas* reveal ethical frameworks that lead toward radical self-gift. *Karuṇā* rests on universal liberation and pervasive nonviolence, whereas *caritas* rests on human participation in God's love, which directs believers toward concrete acts of solidarity and the common good. Their metaphysical differences do not hinder the emergence of ethical convergence: each virtue demands the transformation of the moral subject into a disposition of self-giving, engagement with suffering, and action that advances life.

Table 2. Visualization of the Origin, Goals, and Demands of *Karuṇā* and *Caritas*

Aspect	<i>Karuṇā</i> (Buddhism)	<i>Caritas</i> (Christianity)
Origin (Normative Foundations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in the Buddha's teachings on <i>dukkha</i>, <i>paṭiccasamuppāda</i>, and the universal aim of liberation. • Morality (<i>sīla</i>) serves as the basis for the emergence of <i>karuṇā</i>; goodness has value insofar as it protects life. • The Mahāyāna framework articulates the Bodhisattva ideal that delays nirvāṇa for the sake of all beings—an altruism that transcends the self (Santillán 2022; Harris 2011). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in the revelation that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). • <i>Caritas</i> is human participation in God's love—not merely a moral virtue but an ontological involvement in divine life. • Aquinas defines <i>caritas</i> as <i>amicitia</i> between humans and God that flows into love of neighbor.
Goal (Teleological Orientation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reduce suffering through compassionate action grounded in <i>prajñā</i> and <i>upāya</i>. • To promote the well-being of other beings by cultivating right intention (<i>cetanā</i>) (Sirimanne 2018). • In Mahāyāna: collective moral transformation and cosmic harmony, including ecological ethics (Dorzhigushaeva & Kiplyuks 2020). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The final goal is the <i>beatific vision</i>—the union of humanity with God. • <i>Caritas</i> shapes the entire moral and spiritual orientation, making love a path of eschatological transformation. • In modern developments: to build social structures that are just, humane, and grounded in <i>gratuitousness</i>

		(Christiansen 2010; Grassl & Habisch 2011).
Demands (Ethical and Practical Requirements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in <i>ahimsā</i> and the moral obligation to protect life; one must not harm any being. • Bodhisattva vows demand readiness for self-sacrifice, selfless service, and compassionate presence in the world's suffering. • Ethically embodied: the Bodhisattva's body and actions function as a medium of moral transformation (Mroziak 2004; 2007). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires concrete actions: beneficence, almsgiving, fraternal correction. • <i>Caritas</i> demands the integration of interior love with social praxis; love without action is inadequate. • <i>Caritas</i> Theory directs structural engagement against injustice and for communal well-being (Opatrný 2020; Braswell 2022).
Ethical Convergence	Self-giving for the liberation and well-being of others; active compassion grounded in nonviolence.	Self-giving for God and neighbor; active love that builds the common good.
Metaphysical Divergence	Grounded in <i>anattā</i> and universal suffering.	Grounded in <i>imago Dei</i> and participation in God's love.

Overall, the analysis of the origins, goals, and demands of *karuṇā* and *caritas* demonstrates how these virtues arise from distinct normative foundations yet develop toward analogous ethical orientations. In Buddhism, *karuṇā* emerges from profound awareness of universal suffering and the interdependence of all beings. Foundational teachings such as *dukkha* and *paṭiccasamuppāda* position compassion as a logical consequence of the structure of reality itself. When Mahāyāna Buddhism formulates the Bodhisattva ideal, *karuṇā* becomes a cosmic commitment—a willingness to postpone one's own liberation for the flourishing of all beings. Thus, the goal of *karuṇā* extends far beyond the reduction of suffering; it seeks to create moral, social, and ecological conditions that sustain the harmony of all life.

Caritas in Christianity rests on a different foundation but yields a comparable ethical dynamic. Rooted in the biblical proclamation that “God is love,” *caritas* is understood as human participation in divine reality. Its teleological orientation moves toward the perfection of humanity in union with God, expressed through acts of love toward others. In modern theological and social discourse, *caritas* expands into structural and societal concerns, as seen in *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*, which frame love as a principle that shapes economic, political, and communal life through the logic of gift, justice, and human dignity.

The demands of both virtues are likewise practical and transformative. *Karuṇā* requires the enactment of nonviolence and the protection of life, and even demands ethical embodiment in which bodily actions become instruments of

guidance and care. *Caritas* requires concrete actions—from assistance to the needy and social solidarity to the active construction of just institutions. Neither virtue operates as a merely interior state; both represent a coherent moral orientation that integrates spiritual, social, and ethical dimensions.

From the full corpus of data, four key patterns clarify the ethical structure of both virtues. First, each begins from a strong metaphysical or theological grounding yet moves toward a similar moral function. *Karuṇā* grows from interdependence and universal suffering, whereas *caritas* grows from divine love and human participation in it. Despite these divergent points of departure, both yield ethical orientations that require attentive responsiveness to the suffering of others.

Second, the teleological goals of both virtues reveal outward-reaching transformations that surpass self-interest. In Buddhism, the goal of *karuṇā* expands from personal liberation to the liberation of all beings and ecological harmony. In Christianity, the goal of *caritas* points toward the *beatific vision* and the construction of a just social order. Both interpret love as a movement beyond the self toward a broader moral horizon.

Third, the demands of each virtue underscore that love and compassion are not authentic without praxis. *Karuṇā* demands *ahiṃsā*, service, and disciplined self-restraint; *caritas* commands concrete acts of benevolence, solidarity, and structural reform. These demands show that both virtues constitute ways of life that bind the moral subject to tangible responsibility for others.

Fourth, both virtues reveal the same tendency to shape moral subjects capable of self-surrender. The Bodhisattva ideal and the examples of saints demonstrate that *karuṇā* and *caritas* reach full expression when individuals willingly set aside personal gain for the well-being of others. This pattern affirms the emergence of a model of love that is fundamentally self-surrendering—love that centers not on the self, but on the need and salvation of the other.

Thus, although *karuṇā* and *caritas* arise from different metaphysical structures, they show strong convergence in forming an ethic of self-giving. Both virtues encourage moral subjects to live in relationships characterized by compassion, to face the world's suffering with active commitment, and to participate in social transformation. This pattern provides a foundation for interreligious ethical dialogue and contributes meaningfully to the development of a global ethic responsive to contemporary moral challenges.

3. Convergence as Self-Surrendering Love

A comparative reading of Mahāyāna Buddhist and Christian texts, supported by modern studies in religious ethics, shows that both *karuṇā* and *caritas* reach their fullest articulation in a pattern of love characterized by self-surrendering love. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Bodhisattva narratives provide the primary locus for this understanding. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* describes how a Bodhisattva willingly delays the attainment of *nirvāṇa* for the liberation of all beings—an act of sacrifice that represents the highest expression of *karuṇā*. This action does not signify loss; rather, it reflects an ethical consistency grounded in the insight that no ontological boundary ultimately separates oneself from other beings. Contemporary Buddhist ethical scholarship affirms that the Bodhisattva ideal integrates both consequentialist and non-consequentialist dimensions: radical altruism is

undertaken for the welfare of others while remaining within a universal moral framework that rejects harmful action (G. Davis, 2013). Feminist analyses further observe that Mahāyāna develops two models of compassion—one *equal-regarding* and the other *self-sacrificial*—and the Bodhisattva occupies a space of tension between them (Ok-Sun, 2008). Classical narratives, such as Avalokiteśvara “splitting himself into a thousand arms” or Jizō vowing to remain in hell until “hell is emptied,” show that self-sacrifice operates not merely as a symbolic theme but as an embodied ethical commitment in which the Bodhisattva’s very body functions as a medium of moral transformation for others (Mrozik, 2004, 2007). Thus, within the Mahāyāna horizon, *karuṇā* forms a structure of love that gives itself unconditionally, grounded in the non-duality of self and other.

In Christianity, the form of self-surrendering love crystallizes through the concept of *kenosis*, expressed in Philippians 2:6–8, which states that Christ “emptied himself” for the salvation of humanity. The theological tradition interprets Christ’s self-emptying as the paradigm of *caritas*: a love that gives itself, transcends self-interest, and aims at the moral renewal of the community. Modern kenotic theology emphasizes that self-emptying is not a passive withdrawal but an active, dialogical, and transformative act of love that reconfigures power relations and opens space for radical solidarity (Gavrilyuk, 2005; Lahaie, 2020). Feminist theologians likewise reinterpret *kenosis* not as a pattern that diminishes the subject but as a form of self-giving that enables reciprocal and healing relationships (Komline, 2025). This pattern receives historical legitimacy through the lives of saints, martyrs, and social servants such as St. Teresa and St. Martin de Porres—figures who embody *caritas* through sacrificial service, selfless generosity, and solidarity with the suffering. In Catholic tradition, the notion of the *communion of saints* extends this logic: love does not cease at death; saints continue to give themselves through intercession, allowing *caritas* to operate as an enduring movement of love that transcends worldly boundaries.

Comparative studies in religious ethics indicate that although Buddhism and Christianity emerge from distinct metaphysical horizons—non-theistic and theistic, respectively—they converge in the same ethical pattern: a form of love that advances the well-being of the other through self-emptying (Chung & Watters, 2018; Clairmont, 2011). In Buddhism, self-surrender arises from *anattā* and cosmic interdependence; in Christianity, it emerges from human participation in God’s love. Yet both traditions require moral agents to transcend the confines of ego and orient themselves toward the transformation of the world through concrete acts of love. Modern interreligious studies observe that both traditions regard extreme altruism as the highest ethical embodiment—the Bodhisattva who delays *nirvāṇa* and Christ who empties himself serve as “paradigmatic figures of self-surrendering love” (Makransky, 2021; Qi & Sang, 2025). Accordingly, *karuṇā* and *caritas* may be understood as two religious configurations that move toward convergence: both formulate self-giving love as the apex of spiritual ethics, a love that not only forms the moral subject but also reshapes the world through solidarity, sacrifice, and service.

Table 3. Convergence of *Karuṇā* and *Caritas* as Self-Surrendering Love

Thematic Category	Mahāyāna Buddhism (<i>karuṇā</i>)	Christianity (<i>caritas</i>)	Convergence
Metaphysical Foundation	Rooted in <i>anattā</i> , the non-duality of self and other beings, and cosmic interdependence through <i>paṭiccasamuppāda</i> .	Rooted in the identity of God as love (<i>Deus caritas est</i>) and the <i>kenosis</i> of Christ (Phil. 2:6–8).	Both reject ego-centered forms of love; love is oriented outward toward others.
Paradigmatic Figures	The Bodhisattva: delaying <i>nirvāṇa</i> for all beings; narratives of Avalokiteśvara and Jizō as icons of self-sacrifice.	Christ as the summit of <i>kenosis</i> ; saints, martyrs, and servants of the poor as embodied models of <i>caritas</i> .	Paradigmatic figures provide moral horizons for imitation; Bodhisattva and Christ represent total self-giving.
Forms of Self-Surrender	Cosmic self-sacrifice: entering the realm of suffering, bearing the burdens of beings; the Bodhisattva's body becomes a medium of moral transformation (Mrozik).	Self-emptying (<i>kenosis</i>) as active, dialogical, and transformative love that transcends self-interest (Gavrilyuk; Lahaie).	Self-giving love operates as an active mode of advancing the well-being of others and restoring relationships.
Ethical Dimension	<i>Karuṇā</i> is both consequentialist and non-consequentialist: actions must promote well-being while adhering to the principle of non-harm (Davis).	<i>Caritas</i> integrates inner disposition and praxis: beneficence, service, and solidarity with the vulnerable; love must take concrete form.	Ethics in both traditions demand embodied love rather than inward intention alone.
Relation to Suffering	The Bodhisattva willingly returns to the realm of suffering for others; suffering becomes a site of cosmic solidarity.	Christ enters human suffering; saints bear suffering for the healing of the community.	Suffering becomes an ethical space for solidarity and sacrifice oriented toward restoration.
Direction of Transformation	Cosmic transformation:	Personal and communal	Both reorient the moral

	universal liberation and the harmony of all beings.	transformation: moral renewal toward the <i>beatific vision</i> and social well-being.	subject toward love that seeks to heal and transform the world.
Thematic Conclusion	<i>Karuṇā</i> reaches its highest form as radical altruism that effaces self-boundaries.	<i>Caritas</i> reaches its apex as <i>kenosis</i> , the total giving of self.	Both converge in the pattern of self-surrendering love as the pinnacle of spiritual ethics.

The analysis of the convergence between *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity indicates that both virtues move toward a shared pattern of love—namely, a love that demands self-surrender. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this form of love emerges through the Bodhisattva ideal, which portrays an agent who willingly bears the suffering of the world and delays *nirvāṇa* for the liberation of all beings. This self-sacrifice does not signify loss; instead, it appears as the logical consequence of a non-dualistic insight: when no ultimate boundary separates oneself from other beings, self-giving becomes the natural expression of *karuṇā*.

In Christianity, the pattern of self-surrendering love arises from the concept of *kenosis*—Christ who “emptied himself” for the salvation of humanity. Theological tradition, especially in contemporary moral reflection, interprets *kenosis* as an active and transformative pattern of love that reshapes power relations and forms an ethos of solidarity with those who suffer. Throughout the history of the Church, the lives of saints, martyrs, and social servants demonstrate how *caritas* is embodied through sacrificial service, selfless ministry, and a fundamental commitment to human dignity.

Although the two traditions begin from different metaphysical horizons—*anattā* in Buddhism and *imago Dei* in Christianity—they generate comparable ethical structures. Both *karuṇā* and *caritas* view love not as a transient emotional state but as a moral disposition that moves the subject beyond self-concern, invites presence in the suffering of others, and shapes the world through concrete, transformative acts of love.

The data reveal four principal patterns that structure the convergence of self-surrendering love in Buddhism and Christianity. First, both traditions advance a form of love that transcends self-boundaries. In Buddhism, this arises from non-duality and interdependence; in Christianity, from human participation in divine love. Both view the highest form of love as one in which the moral subject no longer prioritizes personal interest but directs their life toward the care and salvation of others.

Second, paradigmatic figures serve as ethical horizons that clarify the structure of self-surrender. The Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna and Christ in Christianity provide concrete embodiments of radical self-giving. The lives of saints and the narratives of Avalokiteśvara or Jizō extend these ideals into living traditions,

demonstrating that self-sacrifice is not a theological abstraction but a moral praxis that takes bodily form.

Third, self-sacrifice is not understood as passivity or escape but as active transformation. *Karuṇā* requires moral intervention to alleviate the suffering of other beings; *caritas* demands participation in the transformation of social, economic, and spiritual conditions. Thus, self-surrendering love functions not as resignation but as an active posture that seeks to transform the lives of others.

Fourth, both virtues expand love into social and cosmic domains. *Karuṇā* forms a cosmic ethos that embraces all beings, including the natural world; *caritas* develops a logic of gratuitous giving that reshapes social and economic structures through principles of gratuitousness and justice. Both traditions construct ethical orientations that transform individuals while also affirming a commitment to collective well-being.

Accordingly, *karuṇā* and *caritas*, while grounded in different metaphysical frameworks, converge in a shared ethical horizon: both formulate love as a movement outward from the self toward the healing of the world. Self-surrendering love becomes a point of convergence that not only enables deeper theological dialogue but also provides an ethical framework relevant to contemporary human challenges—from social suffering to ecological crisis.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity, although rooted in distinct metaphysical and theological horizons, move toward a similar ethical configuration: both cultivate moral dispositions that direct the subject away from self-interest toward an active concern for the well-being of others. The first sub-finding established that *karuṇā* and *caritas* are not understood as spontaneous emotions but as disciplined and purposive virtues. The second sub-finding revealed that both virtues rest on parallel structures of origin, goal, and demands—*karuṇā* arising from universal suffering and cosmic interdependence, and *caritas* emerging from divine love and human participation in that reality. The third sub-finding showed that both virtues reach their fullest articulation in the pattern of self-surrendering love, as embodied by the Bodhisattva in Buddhism and by Christ and the saints in Christianity.

The ethical convergence between these two traditions can be explained through the inner transformation that underlies both virtues. In Buddhism, *karuṇā* becomes possible when practitioners relinquish ego-attachment through sustained inner discipline. Acts of compassion—even extreme ones such as delaying *nirvāṇa*—are not perceived as detrimental sacrifices but as the logical outcome of a non-dualistic vision of self and other. In Christianity, by contrast, *caritas* is a theological virtue infused by divine grace. Because it originates in the love of God, *caritas* enables human beings to love beyond the limits of natural capability. Thus, Christ's *kenosis* and the sacrifices of martyrs are not viewed as deviations from morality but as the summit of a structure of love perfected by grace.

This transformed interiority explains why both traditions articulate love in similar ways: love that transcends the self, rejects possessive logic, and directs itself toward the restoration and salvation of others. Whether in Buddhism's non-theistic

worldview or Christianity's theistic framework, inner transformation produces moral subjects capable of bearing the world's suffering as an expression of love.

The present findings reinforce prior scholarship on radical altruism in Buddhism—particularly ethical readings of the Bodhisattva ideal (Ok-Sun, 2008; Santillán, 2023)—and on classical interpretations of *caritas* as a theological virtue structuring Christian moral life (Gavrilyuk, 2005; Lahaie, 2020). However, earlier studies typically examined *karuṇā* and *caritas* separately and did not situate them within a systematic comparative framework. The primary contribution of this study lies in constructing a three-dimensional analytic model—origin, goal, and demands—that allows both virtues to be read within parallel ethical structures. Consequently, this study does more than highlight surface similarities between *karuṇā* and *caritas*; it demonstrates how such similarities emerge from the internal dynamics of each tradition.

Moreover, previous research often emphasized the soteriological or spiritual dimensions of each virtue without attending to their embodied and practical aspects. This study adds that *karuṇā* and *caritas* both require consistent concrete action—from non-violence and universal service in Buddhism to solidarity, beneficence, and social engagement in Christianity. Thus, self-surrendering love is not merely a theoretical concept but a pattern of ethical behavior cultivated and practiced within religious life.

Conceptually, these findings expand the discourse on interreligious ethics by showing that two major world traditions with significant doctrinal differences can nevertheless generate closely aligned ethical orientations. This insight contributes not only to comparative ethics but also to interreligious dialogue that seeks common ground without collapsing the identities of the respective traditions. The study demonstrates that *karuṇā* and *caritas* can be understood as two religious expressions of a universal moral structure: a structure of love that calls human beings to set aside ego, shoulder the burdens of others, and participate in creating a more humane world.

Historically, *karuṇā* reached maturity in Mahāyāna Buddhism through the elaboration of the Bodhisattva ideal, rooted in the ethos of non-self and communal solidarity (Augustine & Wayne, 2019; Santillán, 2023). Meanwhile, *caritas* underwent a long theological development: from early Christianity, refined by Aquinas as *amicitia* between humanity and God, and later institutionalized through social agencies such as Caritas Italy (Marinero, 2024) and Caritas Canada (Ferretti, 2004). *Caritas* also expanded through religious iconography, such as the *Madonna della Misericordia* (van Asperen, 2013), and through modern social advocacy (Biel, 2009; F. Davis, 2009). Although *karuṇā* emerged from a metaphysical vision of suffering and the dissolution of ego, and *caritas* from a personal relationality with God, both crystallized into universal ethics of love that transcend cultural and historical boundaries (Barclay, 2021).

Socially, both virtues generate strong structures of solidarity. *Karuṇā* gives rise to non-violence, universal care, and enhanced social cohesion, as demonstrated in contemporary research on Buddhist-based community empowerment (Suksawas & Soithong, 2024). This solidarity aligns with philosophical interpretations of the communal Buddhist vision that rejects individualistic ethics (Augustine & Wayne, 2019). *Caritas*, on the other hand, produces organized traditions of social service,

evident in the work of Caritas organizations in Italy, Canada, and Eastern Europe (Biel, 2009; Ferretti, 2004; Marinaro, 2024). Broader sociological studies indicate that religiosity linked with love generates social capital such as trust, openness, and cohesion (Cladis, 2017; Gavrilović et al., 2025). Even outside Christian contexts, research finds that compassion—whether religious or secular—strongly motivates prosocial behavior (Saslow et al., 2013). In contemporary Christianity, the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* reaffirms solidarity as the moral foundation of social life (Kompes, 2023), including within mental health discourse (Kim, 2025).

Ideologically, both traditions form ethical subjects through different pathways: Buddhism through the deconstruction of ego and the cultivation of relational selfhood (Mosig, 2006; Ule, 2016), and Christianity through self-transformation in relationship with divine love (Sousa, 2012; Von Balthasar, 2010; Zunic, 2019). This contrast highlights the divergence between non-theistic and theistic frameworks; nevertheless, both converge on the belief that love forms the moral foundation of human identity and relationality (Nemes, 2022; Wang & Wang, 2025).

This study functions as a bridge for interreligious dialogue by identifying ethical common ground that can foster cooperation in humanitarian issues. However, the research also faces potential methodological dysfunctions. Comparative work risks flattening significant theological differences, particularly when categories from one tradition are applied to another without attending to the proper hermeneutical context (Cornille, 2024b, 2024a). Epistemological challenges such as the *tertium comparationis* (Cornille, 2023), along with risks of syncretism and reductionism, must be carefully avoided. In postcolonial contexts, researchers must also guard against epistemic dominance by majority traditions over minority ones (Hwang, 2024). Preserving the theological integrity of each tradition is therefore crucial for responsible interreligious dialogue.

Based on these findings, three strategic recommendations emerge. First, interreligious dialogue should focus on the praxis of love—*karuṇā* and *caritas*—rather than doctrinal comparison alone; a praxis-oriented approach enables concrete cooperation in humanitarian, ecological, and peacebuilding efforts. Second, religious education institutions should incorporate comparative ethical studies to enrich the formation of future religious leaders with an understanding of universal love. Third, governments and civil society organizations should promote collaboration between Buddhist and Christian communities in humanitarian programs, services for vulnerable groups, and social development initiatives grounded in the value of compassion. In this way, the study provides a normative and practical foundation for developing a global ethic rooted in self-giving love and universal solidarity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *karuṇā* in Buddhism and *caritas* in Christianity, although grounded in distinct metaphysical and theological horizons, develop as two religious virtues that both demand inner transformation and acts of self-giving. The main findings show that *karuṇā* is understood as a compassionate disposition arising from an awareness of universal suffering and the interrelatedness of all

beings, while *caritas* is interpreted as a theological love rooted in human participation in the love of God. A comparative analysis of the origin, goal, and demands of both virtues reveals that *karuṇā* and *caritas* converge in a shared ethical pattern: a form of love that transcends ego, directs itself toward the well-being of others, and takes shape through concrete practices within moral life. This convergence culminates in the model of self-surrendering love—an unconditional, self-giving love embodied by the Bodhisattva, Christ, and their followers throughout the religious histories of both traditions.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its analytical framework, which compares *karuṇā* and *caritas* through three structural dimensions—origin, goal, and demands—that have not previously been integrated systematically in comparative Buddhist–Christian ethics. This approach yields a new understanding that the ethical convergence of the two virtues does not result from conceptual homogenization but from a hermeneutical dialogue that reveals how two major traditions can develop parallel ethical visions through distinct philosophical and theological pathways. The study also contributes methodologically by integrating close textual analysis with comparative thematic mapping, thereby enriching interreligious scholarship focused on the construction of virtue and relational ethics. These findings expand the horizon of global ethics by showing that self-giving love constitutes a moral pattern capable of grounding ethical dialogue and social collaboration across religious traditions.

Nonetheless, this study has several limitations. First, its analytical scope focuses primarily on classical corpora and major theological sources, leaving the lived practices of Buddhist and Christian communities insufficiently represented. Second, the study emphasizes conceptual hermeneutics rather than empirical inquiry, and therefore does not capture the historical or sociological variations present at the communal level. Third, it does not address minor traditions within Buddhism (such as *Vajrayāna*) or internal variations within Christianity (such as Oriental Orthodoxy or contemporary Protestantism), which could further enrich the understanding of love-in-practice across broader contexts. Future research may therefore pursue cross-cultural empirical studies on how *karuṇā* and *caritas* are enacted in modern religious communities, undertake comparative analyses involving additional subtraditions, and explore more deeply the social, ecological, and political implications of self-surrendering love as an ethical paradigm in today's global dynamics.

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