

CHAPTER 24
JESUS IN THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS



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CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jesus in the World's Religions

Gregory A. Barker

In the Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel, *The Accidental Tourist*, we meet a middle-aged travel writer who hates to travel. Interestingly he capitalises on his dislike by writing travel guides for reluctant travellers who long to feel at home in strange places. These guides help businessmen and women locate a McDonald's in France, a Taco Bell in Mexico and canned spaghetti in Italy. These books, with their elaborate systems designed to help people feel that they've never left home, reflect the main character's struggle as he realises that he is becoming 'a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates'.

One of the most fascinating journeys for a traveller in the field of theology or religious studies is to investigate how the central figure of one religious tradition is viewed by another tradition. This journey can lead to startling discoveries which challenge theological, political, and social assumptions, causing the traveller to re-evaluate cherished notions and reach an enhanced sense of belief and identity. In the history of the Christian Church, however, exploration into how Jesus has been viewed by the world's religions has

often resembled journeys described by the ‘Accidental Tourist’, where one looks only for the familiar, seldom the new and challenging. Too many explorations on the subject of Jesus in the world’s religions have merely helped travellers feel that they have never left home.

Christian theology has generated several systems through which truths proclaimed by the world’s religions may be viewed.⁷⁶ As important as these approaches are, we must recognise that they are systematic positions that channel data into existing categories of thought. In other words, one works from a general position when accounting for particular points of view. This has the advantage of giving the theologian or religious believer a firm identity in the face of claims that may be at odds with his or her commitments.

One might legitimately ask if this approach needs to be complemented by a temporary suspension of a general framework, a working from the particulars to the general. After all, we are often changed through personal encounters rather than abstract principles; if the abstract has an ironclad grip on the data, we may miss a chance to discover new insights that might enhance or change our point of view. When it comes to views of Jesus from the world’s religions, a theological system can make it possible to miss challenging and intriguing viewpoints that could lead to rich new insights. There can be real discomfort in temporarily setting a system aside, but then there is also the reward of

⁷⁶ Alan Race has helpfully outlined three such systems in *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd edn. (London: SCM, 1993). See also Alan Race and Paul Hedges (eds), *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM, 2008).

travelling on new roads and returning 'home' with added depth and understanding.

This chapter, then, is an invitation for Christians to examine some verdicts on Jesus from those with no commitments to the classic creeds of the Christian Church.

A thoroughly Jewish Jesus?

Perhaps the most distorted portraits ever produced are mediaeval works of a gentle and fragile-looking Jesus surrounded by grotesque and twisted faces representing European Christian perceptions of Jews.⁷⁷ These works deny the truth that Jesus himself was a Jew among Jews; they also reflect Christian hatred of Jews and Christian denigration of Jewish traditions, demonstrating Rosemary Radford Ruether's thesis that anti-Semitism is indeed the 'left hand' of Christology.⁷⁸ Much scholarly and ecclesiastical work has challenged the prejudices conveyed by these portrayals, demonstrating Jesus to be firmly rooted in his Jewish setting. Indeed, to divorce Jesus from this setting is to miss keys to the meaning of his message and constitutes a denial of the Christian insistence upon his full humanity.

What do Jews think of Jesus? This question has to be handled with care, as for centuries it was used not as an invitation to genuine discussion but as a cloak to deny the

⁷⁷ For instance *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Hieronymus Bosch (01490). See Mitchell B. Merback (ed.), *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁷⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Wipf and Stock, 1996 [1975]).

validity of Jewish traditions and as a mask for a converting and persecuting agenda. In light of centuries of persecution in 'Christian' countries, Jews have had their own questions for Christians: when will you stop killing us, declaring that we are 'God killers' (deicide), burning our sacred texts, denying our humanitarian rights, and declaring our faith to be nothing more than dead legalism? Many Jews found Christian devotion to Jesus to be the reason why these questions needed to be asked, so one should not be surprised that Christian questions to Jews about Jesus have often been met by silence. Added to this is the fact that Judaism developed its rich and nuanced traditions without reference to someone who is, for Jews, a relatively minor figure from the late Second Temple period.

Yet this silence is not the only story; there are significant reactions to Jesus in Jewish traditions that can inform and deepen Christian approaches.

Initially, Jesus was perceived as a threat to Judaism. As the early Christian movement denied key Jewish approaches to Messiahship and divinity, and appeared to transgress monotheism, Jews charged Jesus with having denied the faith in the manner described in Deuteronomy 13—teaching heresy about his identity. As Christianity emerged as a power within Graeco-Roman culture, Jewish resistance to less than benign policies was sometimes channelled into pictures of Jesus as a supernatural arch-deceiver who spurned authority, was sexually promiscuous and performed

magic for self-aggrandisement. These approaches can be seen as reactions from a religion under threat.⁷⁹

Some Jewish leaders and scholars in the mediaeval era asked a question that would lead to an entirely different set of perceptions about Jesus: what if it was the Church and not Jesus that was responsible for transgressing key Jewish tenets about the Messiah, divinity, and law? In other words, what if Jesus had been a Jewish Rabbi who was turned into a god after his death? Asking this question led to insights which anticipated Enlightenment-inspired views of Jesus by several centuries:

*The more clearly we examine into the purport of the New Testament, the more clearly we perceive its general intent is not to deify Jesus; and that the doctrines which assign to him the title of God, have arisen from want of due investigation and are not upheld by the force of sound argument. (Isaac of Troki, 1533–1594)*⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Recent work by Peter Schafer yields important insights concerning perceptions of Jesus by the Jewish community behind the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. See *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007). For Jewish views on Christian violence see the perceptive reflection of Rabbi Nachmanides (Rabbi Mosche ben Nachman [by acronym, Ramban], 1194–01270) Hyam Maccoby (ed. and trans.), *Judaism on Trial: Jeunsh- Christian Dispuations in the Middle Ages* (Oxford and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1982), pp. 121-2.

⁸⁰ Isaac ben Abraham Troki, *Faith Strengthened*, trans. Moses Mocatta [from the Hebrew] (London: n.p., 1851). For a more recent source see Isaac of Troki, *Faith Strengethend*, trans. Moses Mocatta (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), pp. 87-93, 264. See World Karaite Movement <<http://faithstrengthened.org/index.html>> (accessed 26 February 2010).

This approach to Jesus was soon to be developed in significant directions by the Jewish Reform movement. Reform thinkers claimed that prophetic traditions formed a bridge between Enlightenment philosophy and a distinctive Jewish identity. In other words, one could realise the heights of Jewish identity not through strict adherence to the law but through an enlightened ethic, informed by the prophetic tradition as well as by philosophical and historical approaches then current in Europe. Many innovations lay ahead for Reform Jews: modernisation in worship and synagogue architecture as well as extensive re-interpretation of theological concepts. Reform Jews, however, faced criticism from Orthodox Jews for the abandonment of a strict adherence to the law and Christians wondered why reform-minded Jews did not go further and simply convert to Christianity.

In answering their Christian critics, Reform Jews noted that Jesus wasn't so much a 'Christian' as he was a charismatic Rabbi shaped by prophetic traditions and principles. In fact, if one studied Jesus in his context, one would conclude that he had more affinity with the Pharisees than with subsequent generations of his self-professed followers. Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) noted that anti-Jewish sentiments had blinded New Testament explorations from seeing Jesus' relationship with Judaism:

He was a Jew, a Pharisean Jew with Galilean colouring—a man who joined in the hopes of his time and who believed that those hopes were fulfilled in him. He did not utter a new thought, nor did he break down the barriers of nationality. When a foreign woman came to him with a request to heal her, he said, 'It is not meet to take the

children's bread and cast it to the dogs.' He did not abolish any part of Judaism; he was a Pharisee who walked in the way of Hillel, did not set the most decided value upon every single external form, yet proclaimed 'that not the least tittle should be taken from the Law;' 'The Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, and whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do.' It is true that, if the accounts are faithful, he allowed himself to be carried away to trifling depreciatory expressions concerning one subject or another, when he was opposed; but he never faltered in his original convictions.⁸¹

Certainly there was polemic built into early Reform arguments about Jesus: Jesus uttered nothing new; his teaching was simply a reworking of aspects of Jewish traditions. It should be noted, however, that many of Geiger's insights remain at the heart of Jewish and Christian scholarly approaches to New Testament studies today.

In fact, one of the most lively areas of New Testament study is now occurring among Jewish and Christian biblical scholars who have renewed the quest for the historical Jesus by examining his place in the shifting sands of first-century Judaism.⁸² The best way to understand Jesus, these scholars maintain, is not to contrast him with his surroundings as

⁸¹ Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History in Two Parts*, trans. Charles Newburgh (New York: Bloch, 1911), pp. 130-1.

⁸² This is sometimes referred to as the 'third quest' (after the initial Enlightenment-inspired explorations ending with Schweitzer, the 'no quest' period of form criticism, and the renewed quest of the 1950s-shaped by concerns raised by Ernst Kasemann). Prominent 'third quest' scholars include Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Paula Frericksen, Gerd Thiessen, E.P. Sanders, Geza Vermes, and N. T. Wright.

had been done in earlier historical explorations. Rather, it is to understand how Jesus lived in both affinity and tension with various Jewish tendencies and groups of his time. Sources such as Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a plethora of Rabbinic writings, as well as the New Testament, are used to understand Jesus the Jew. Geza Vermes, for example, has received much attention for his view that the ministry of Jesus resembles that of other charismatic miracle-working Hasids from Galilee in the same period.⁸³ Furthermore, Vermes argues, many of the New Testament titles for Jesus (such as ‘Lord’ and ‘Prophet’) would have been applied to other Jewish figures of Jesus’ day and not understood as a departure from Judaism.

Recent Jewish assessments of Jesus have followed both the more resistant approaches outlined earlier and the Reform pictures. However, there is an outstanding Jewish scholar who has done much to build a positive relationship between Jews and Christians when it comes to interpreting the meaning of Jesus: David Flusser (1917–2000). Flusser’s work on Jesus is notable not only because it has been praised by key Christian scholars and leaders, nor because his work on Jesus has been the recipient of two of the highest literary awards in Israel, but because Flusser is the

⁸³ See works by Geza Vermes including his seminal study, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels*, 3rd edn (London: SCM, 2001 [1973]).

author of the article on Jesus in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, a resource used across Jewish traditions.⁸⁴

Before one can appreciate the originality of Jesus, Flusser insisted, one must first appreciate the ways in which he was not original. Echoing earlier Jewish works, Flusser demonstrated how the miracles, the embracing of poverty, the teaching of love of God and neighbour, and the ‘but I say unto you’ sayings of Matthew 5 had their foundations and parallels in the Jewish teaching and spirituality of Jesus’ day.⁸⁵ Furthermore, a detailed study of Gospel passages confirmed for Flusser that nowhere did Jesus transgress any of the Mosaic laws. When Jesus appears in the Gospels to be at variance with the practice of the Pharisees, this represents an intra-mural debate about non-binding applications of the Law rather than a transgression of Jewish legal codes. Thus it was only a fringe group of Pharisees who viewed Jesus as breaking laws; the wider Jewish community accepted variations in the application of traditions. It is also misleading to say, as Christians have insisted, that Jesus held the moral to be higher than the ritual—since Jesus sought faithfulness to the Mosaic code. Jesus’ uniqueness, rather, is to be found in specific revolutionary points of his

⁸⁴ David Flusser, ‘Jesus’, in Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder (eds) *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 10 (Jerusalem: Peter Publishing House, Ltd, 1971), pp. 10-18. This article has been reprinted without change in the 2007 edition Fred Skolnik (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol.n (New York and London: Thomsen Gale, 2007), pp. 246- 51.

⁸⁵ David Flusser, *Jesus*, trans. Robert Walls (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 2nd. edn (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997). See especially his chapter ‘The Law’ pp. 44-64. Those interested in reading more of Flusser are directed to the newly revised edition of this work: David Flusser with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage of Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

life and teaching, including the radical commitment to love one's enemy.

In other words, the teaching of Jesus may be viewed as difficult for Jews in the same way as it is difficult for Christians: it is never easy to love one's enemies. By embracing this challenge, Jews and Christians can truly find common ground.

Jesus: a prophet of Islam?

Islam is the only religion other than Christianity that requires its adherents to hold Jesus in reverence. As a result, there is a rich history of reflections, poetry, and accounts of Jesus across Muslim traditions. At the very centre of Islamic interpretations of Jesus is the Quranic testimony of Jesus as a prophet—quite a contrast from the world of Judaism where the prophet-hood of Jesus remains at the edge of interpretive possibilities. But has this reverence for Jesus in Islam been a source of peace between Muslims and Christians? The answer to this question lies in understanding the Islamic view of a prophet.

According to Islam, during troubled times when humans have forsaken the path of God, a prophet appears. The circumstances each prophet addresses are unique to that prophet's era; however all prophets issue a judgment on idolatry and ungodly behaviour as well as a challenge to submit to the one true God. When Muslims call Jesus a 'prophet of Islam' they are referring to the centrality of this prophetic mission. In fact, 'Islam', related to the Hebrew 'shalom', has an intriguing double meaning: 'submission'

and ‘peace’; the teaching of the Quran is that humans will find peace as they submit the entirety of their lives to God.

As a result of this prophetic model, the unique teachings of Jesus are not a central concern in the Quran. The Quran, however, does extol Jesus as unique in the sense that God granted a special confirmation of his prophetic work through his miraculous birth (similar to Adam’s) and numerous miracles performed during his life. In fact, Jesus is known by several beautiful titles including ‘spirit of God’ and ‘word of God’; however, these titles are not signs of divinity but of the divine hand of a sovereign God working through his life. This explains why the Quran clearly rejects the Christian conviction of Jesus partaking in God’s nature:

*People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a ‘Trinity’—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son, everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him and He is the best one to trust. The Messiah would never disdain to be a servant of God, nor would the angels who are close to Him.*⁸⁶

As Muslims and Christians interacted through the centuries, the Quranic viewpoint became a source for sharp polemic

⁸⁶ Q 4: 171-72a. Quotations from the Quran are from M. A. S. Abdul Haleem (trans.), *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). From *The Qur’an* trans. by Abdul Haleem (2004). By permission of Oxford University Press.

and even violence between these religions. Yet is this an inevitable outcome of the Quranic understanding of Jesus?

In the unprecedented consensus statement among Muslims, *A Common Word*, the Muslim community identifies a teaching of Jesus in the New Testament which it believes to be consistent with a prophetic challenge and which holds the possibility of inter-religious peace: the dual commandment to love God and neighbour.⁸⁷ This document, which has received much attention in interfaith circles, elicited a positive response by Christian leaders and church bodies. Whether or not this approach can transcend tensions between Muslim and Christian interpretations of Jesus remains to be seen; yet it is noteworthy that such a strong and positive declaration was made.

For Christians, it is tempting to compare the Quran to the Bible as both are the central sacred texts in these traditions. Yet it may actually be more accurate to compare the Quran to the Incarnation of Jesus as, for Muslims, the Quran is a revelatory event, the incarnation of God's way into the world.⁸⁸ It is the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, which may be more equivalent to the Bible, for the Hadith points Muslims to the Quran as the Bible points Christians to the Incarnation. Hadith literature is an unparalleled source of guidance for Muslims as they seek to practise a life that honours God's ways.

⁸⁷ *A Common Word between Us and You* (Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan, ce 2007, ah 1428.) See <www.acommonword.org> or <www.acommonword.com>

⁸⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith was responsible for this and many other groundbreaking inter-religious insights. See his *Islam in Modern History* (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 26.

It is in the Hadith that we meet images of Jesus as an end-time figure. These images arise from a suggestive passage in the Quran. In speaking of the persecution of Jesus, the Quran declares:

*[They] said, 'We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God.' (They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him—God raised him up to Himself God is almighty and wise.)*⁸⁹

The plain sense of this passage is that Jesus did not die on the cross and was taken up to heaven. This difference in crucifixion narratives between Muslims and Christians is perhaps as significant as the disagreement over Jesus' divinity. It is unthinkable, for Muslims, that prophets should meet an ignominious end. Jesus is, accordingly, viewed as awaiting the end of time when he will return to fight the antichrist and proclaim again the truth of Islam prior to the community of believers being united with Mohammed. Hadith literature paints many striking pictures of the return of Jesus at the end of time.

No reference to Jesus in Muslim traditions would be complete without mention of the rich images of Jesus in

⁸⁹ Q 4:157-58. From *The Qur'an* trans. Abdul Haleem (2004). By permission of Oxford University Press. The use of parentheses here does not indicate that this sentence is a departure from the literal text of the Quran but is simply a convention to indicate an explanatory statement following a main thought.

Sufism. Rather than being seen as a ‘school’ or ‘denomination’ within Islam, Sufism is best viewed as a tendency across all Muslim traditions to realise more fully union with God in this life. Sufism has taken on a variety of forms through the centuries, though the earliest Sufis were ascetics concerned that Muslim wealth and prosperity in the expanding empire would lead to a corruption of the simple and pious lifestyle of the prophet Mohammed and his companions.

These early Sufis believed that Jesus spoke for their cause, especially in his conflict with the Pharisees and in the radical lifestyle he advocated in the Sermon on the Mount. Sufi traditions, accordingly, preserved many sayings of Jesus which relate Jesus to ascetic themes. In addition to sayings that are more or less direct quotations from the Gospels, there are many which highlight Jesus as an ascetic figure and seek, by implication, to chasten Muslims for diluting the powerful message of the Quran by too close an association with the rich and powerful.

Jesus said, ‘There are four [qualities] which are not found in one person without causing wonder: silence, which is the beginning of worship; humility before God; an ascetic attitude toward the world; and poverty.’⁹⁰

John, son of Zachariah, met Jesus and said, ‘Tell me what it is that draws one near to God’s favour and distances one from God’s wrath.’

⁹⁰ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), ‘Abdallah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181/797).

*Jesus said, 'Avoid feeling anger.' John asked, 'What arouses anger and what makes it recur?' Jesus replied, 'Pride, fanaticism, haughtiness, and magnificence.' John said, 'Let me ask you another.' 'Ask what you will,' replied Jesus. 'Adultery— what creates it and what makes it recur?' 'A glance,' said Jesus, 'which implants in the heart something that makes it veer excessively toward amusement and self-indulgence, thus increasing heedlessness and sin. Do not stare at what does not belong to you, for what you have not seen will not make you wiser and what you do not hear will not trouble you.'*⁹¹

As Sufism grew and developed, so too did the image of Jesus as a prophet of the heart or conscience who called people to a radical break from egoistic living. Moving reflections of Jesus, containing rich imagery, can be found also in the works of Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240), and Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273).⁹²

Because of the Muslim commitment to the Quran and to the prophetic model, Jesus will never eclipse Mohammed in importance for Muslims, yet Islamic traditions will continue to inspire Muslims with Jesus as a miracle worker, end-time figure and prophet of the heart.

Threads in the Hindu tapestry of Jesus

⁹¹ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, saying no. 18, 'Abdallah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181/797).

⁹² For an anthology of relevant writings by these and other Muslim authors, see Gregory A. Barker and Stephen E. Gregg, *Jesus Beyond Christianity: The Classic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 83-149.

“Westerners have long been fascinated with India, its exotic tastes, vivid colours, and striking images of gods and goddesses. India, for many, has become a destination for religious quests; its traditions appear to offer radical alternatives to monotheistic approaches. For those with a Christian heritage, these spiritual journeys to India have sometimes resulted in dramatic re-interpretations of Christian doctrine, the establishment of Christian ashrams, intriguing fusions of Eastern philosophies with Christian thought, and, of course, new interpretations of Jesus. But can one easily say what ‘Hinduism’ really is?

Scholars of the past century have become suspicious of simplistic definitions of the world’s religions, especially of Hindu traditions. After all, Hinduism has no single historical founder, no central authoritative structure, no central religious text (though many appeal to the Vedas in this regard), nor a single approach to key questions of how best to manifest religious truth and achieve ultimate liberation. It is better to view the many approaches on the Indian subcontinent as a rich tapestry of traditions offering various ways to discover the Sanatana Dharma, or ‘the eternal truth law’ which lays claim to all dimensions of human life.

Just as there is no single approach which can be called ‘Hindu’, there is no single Hindu interpretation of Jesus. There are, however, several threads in the tapestry of Hindu interpretations that emerge as prominent. Some of these may be unexpected or surprising to Christians. There certainly is admiration for Jesus in Hindu traditions; and there is a wealth of Christian literature that speaks approvingly of such admiration. However examining the

many threads of these interpretations reveals that this admiration is frequently accompanied by both a robust critique of Christian doctrine and a well-developed world view that sees itself in tension with Western interpretations.

When did Hindus first hear about Jesus? It is possible that some Hindus heard of Jesus in the first centuries of the Common Era, as we know of trade routes that existed between the Roman Empire and some areas of the Indian subcontinent.⁹³ In addition to this, there are unsubstantiated accounts of the Apostle Thomas travelling to India as well as evidence (substantiated) of Syrian-speaking Christian churches perhaps composed of traders and their families.

However if there were any Hindu reactions to Jesus in this early period, they no longer exist. One has to wait for the arrival of the European traders and colonisers of the sixteenth century onwards and, especially, to the interactions between Hindus and Christians in the context of British rule before one has access to a diversity of Hindu viewpoints on Jesus.

The most popular thread in the tapestry of Hindu approaches to Jesus is the Bhakti thread. Bhakti is the Sanskrit term that can be interpreted as ‘devotion’ and signifies the path of active worship of the divinities of one’s spiritual heritage as the way to a right relation with the world. Perhaps one of the most tangible signs of the

⁹³ Stephen Neill’s exhaustive study, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginning to AD 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), provides a reliable guide to the historical interactions between Christianity and Hinduism.

popularity of Jesus as an object of devotion is his appearance in 'bazaar art', where he is featured alongside Gandhi, Krishna, and other avatars which lead devotees to a closer relationship to Brahman, the divine ground of all being. Many Hindus accept Jesus as an avatar (lit. 'a descent' of Brahman), a spiritual being who comes during a time of trouble to assist in the restoration of divine order in the world.

Perhaps the great Hindu mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) best exemplifies this approach. Though Ramakrishna was devoted to the goddess Kali, he had mystical experiences of other divine figures, including Jesus whom he described as 'Master Yogi' and 'Love Incarnate', a being who is in eternal communion with God.⁹⁴

Hindus following the path of devotion, however, are often perplexed by the Christian insistence upon the exclusivity of Christ's divinity. Deeply ingrained in Hindu traditions is the belief in multiple manifestations of divinity, though one may legitimately choose to focus upon specific divine figures emphasised in one's tradition. In addition to this reservation, there are some aspects of Jesus' life that appear to fall short of glorious aspects from the narratives of popular avatars: Jesus' humble birth, his lowly status, and his ignominious end on the cross. This may be the reason why Jesus is not destined to play a more central role in Hindu devotion.

⁹⁴ Nikhilananda (ed. and trans.), *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Translated into English with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1984 [1942]), p.34.

A very different approach to Jesus is found in the Advaitic (lit. 'non-dual') thread; this is the approach which stresses the inter-relatedness of all reality. Those on this path do not reject worship, but believe that the highest spiritual expression is the realisation of one's soul as identical to Brahman. This is not a glorified egoism: as one realises that one's fears, jealousies, greed, and various indulgences of the physical senses are not essential characteristics, one begins to discover unity with the divine. There is, for advaitins, a hierarchy of spiritual evolution: from animism and polytheism and other forms in which one is aware of being separate from divine reality through to the realisation of the essential unity of the soul with the divine.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a disciple of Rama-krishna, identified this hierarchy of spiritual approaches in Jesus' life:

You will find that these three stages are taught by the great Teacher in the New Testament. Note the Common Prayer He taught: 'Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name,' and so on; a simple prayer; mark you, a child's prayer; it is indeed the 'Common Prayer', because it is intended for the uneducated masses. To a higher circle, to those who had advanced a little more, He gave a more elevated teaching: 'I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.' Do you remember that? And then, when the Jews asked Him who He was, He declared that He and His Father were one; and the Jews thought that that was blasphemy. What did He mean by that? The same thing has been told also by our prophets: 'You are gods and all ye are Children of the Most High.' Mark the same three stages;

*you will find that it is easier for you to begin with the first and end with the last.*⁹⁵

Accordingly when giving an account of the crucifixion, Hindu philosophers view it not as an exclusivist moment of reconciliation between humanity and the divine realm, but as a metaphor both for the egoistic behaviours which inevitably assault a spiritual quest and for the attitude of forgiveness which must meet such opposition in order finally to overcome it.

One must not overlook the thread of resistance to Jesus that weaves itself through many Hindu traditions. Given that social and religious oppression accompanied the colonial enterprise, and that Jesus was the religious figure of the colonisers, many thinkers and leaders in India have felt that the best strategy for independence would be either to criticise or completely to ignore the question of the meaning of Jesus. This approach actually intensified with the growing support for the specific version of Hindu nationalism represented by the BJP, the RSS, and other groups. Many within this thread consider Jesus to be nothing more than a Western 'export', one who threatens the quest for meaning and identity which can best be found on Indian soil.

The final thread we will consider is a Hindu tradition which can be seen as presenting a challenge to popular Western interpretations: the Sannyasin Jesus. Many Hindus consider it ideal to pass through several distinct stages prior to realising full liberation. One begins as a student of Vedic

⁹⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *Christ the Messenger* (Calcutta: Udbonhan Office, 1984 [1900]), pp.19-10.

traditions and moves on to the responsibilities of the householder stage. At the conclusion of these duties, one then begins deliberately to relinquish one's hold on the world. At the end of one's life, there is a complete dedication to the life of the spirit; this is accompanied by disciplines of poverty, celibacy, meditation, devotion, etc. This final stage is called the Sannyasin Asharama, literally, 'renouncer stage'. Although few Hindus today strictly follow this pattern, when Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels is under discussion, he appears, for them, as a Sannyasin whose life resembles more the Eastern holy quest than it does the Western preoccupations with wealth, comfort, and scientific progress.

Vivekananda's earliest response to Jesus is, interestingly, found in the Bengali translation of *The Imitation of Christ*, where he makes the case that Jesus' complete surrender to God is evidenced in his renunciate lifestyle. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), renowned for his policy of non-violent active resistance, urged Christians to manifest the life embraced by Jesus rather than seeking Hindu converts through an egoistic show of intellectual prowess. An aspect of Gandhi's rich and nuanced interpretation of the Gospels stressed that to ignore the poverty of Jesus is to negate his spirituality. The renouncing of material possessions as the path to peace is always, according to Gandhi, an aspect of the larger spiritual vision embraced by all great religious leaders: Mohammed, Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, Shankara, etc:

... the New Testament produced a different impression [from the Old Testament], especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with

the Gita. The verses—‘But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also;’ and, ‘If any man take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak too’— delighted me beyond measure and put me in mind of Shamal Bhatt’s ‘For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal’, etc. My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, The Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly.⁹⁶

Indian Christians, reflecting on these approaches, have challenged the wider Christian Church both to embrace a Christology which stresses the voluntary poverty of Jesus and to embrace philosophical traditions of the Indian subcontinent as a valid vehicle for Christology, just as the Church has been open to Graeco-Roman traditions in the formulation of historic creeds.

Buddhists and the awareness of Jesus

Buddhism enjoys widespread interest in the West. Its popular spiritual teachers, well-developed approaches to meditation, and nuanced philosophical concepts have helped Buddhism to become the religion of choice for those disenchanted by Christianity but who wish to find a ‘religious’ rather than a ‘secular’ path through life. Meditation classes, the appearances of popular Buddhist teachers, and Buddhist retreat centres are now features across Western countries. Christians from Thomas Merton (1915–1968) to Roger Corless (1938–2007) have discovered

⁹⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p.4.

important fusions between Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation. But what do Buddhists make of Jesus?

The answer to this question may be more difficult to discover than at first appears. In Western countries where Buddhism has been chosen as an alternative to Christianity there has been much discussion of Jesus and Christianity—usually highly critical of Christian doctrine and approving of Jesus as a proto-Buddhist. But what do Buddhists outside of these culture wars make of Jesus?

Lands which have long been centres of Buddhist practice have not had much opportunity to interact with Christianity until more recent times. When the barriers of politics and geography were overcome, additional barriers were found, including one of attitude which has hindered Buddhist reflection on the central figure of Christianity. Because Buddhism grew out of a Hindu religious context, it is Hindu traditions rather than Christianity that have been viewed as the primary area for interfaith reflection. Under the umbrella of Hindu devotionalism, there are non-dual views which, in their distance from a personalistic theism, may provide the basis for philosophical overtures with Buddhism. However Christianity, at first glance, may appear to Buddhists as a degraded form of Hindu devotional tendencies and therefore not worthy of concern. Add to this the fact that Buddhists have had to relate their traditions to Confucian, Shinto, and other Asian traditions and one has

an explanation for the dearth of reflection by Buddhists on Christianity's central figure.⁹⁷

When Buddhists have considered Jesus, there are some common themes that emerge across many different Buddhist traditions. First, there is an allergy to Jesus' belief in the personal God of the Hebrew Scriptures. This deity, complete with a full range of emotions, appears to be far from the ideal of non-attachment prized by Buddhists. Buddhist traditions do embrace a wide range of supernatural beings, but these beings are frequently bound to unhelpful cycles which prevent liberation; the Hebrew God appears to be one of these. In the struggle for identity in the face of Christian missionaries who could only see darkness in Buddhism, Buddhist leaders frequently seized upon conceptual differences between the religions to establish Buddhist conceptual superiority, the chief one being personalistic conceptions of God, versus non-personal approaches to reality. Other differences have included creation versus co-dependent origination, sin versus karma and heaven versus nirvana. Jesus is often viewed as tainted by association with a Christian cosmology.

Few Buddhists would object, however, to the radical approach of Jesus embodied in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus is viewed as having transcended the narrow confines of his own traditions and having articulated a universalistic ethic which, if followed, could help the entire world to be freed from unhealthy attachments. Furthermore,

⁹⁷ For an overview of Jesus in Buddhist traditions see Jose Ignacio Cabezon, Buddhist Views of Jesus' in Gregory A. Barker (ed.), *Jesus in the World's Faiths: Leading Thinkers From Five Religions Reflect on His Meaning* (New York: Orbis, 2008), pp. 15-24.

the teachings of the Sermon appear to grasp the key principles of the interconnection between all things as well as the need for compassion to prevail. The Dalai Lama, reflecting on Christianity, has said,

These Gospel passages also remind me of reflections in another Mahayana text called A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, in which Shantideva states that it is very important to develop the right attitude toward your enemy. If you can cultivate the right attitude, your enemies are your best spiritual teachers because their presence provides you with the opportunity to enhance and develop tolerance, patience, and understanding.

By developing greater tolerance and patience, it will be easier for you to develop your capacity for compassion and, through that, altruism. So even for the practice of your own spiritual path, the presence of an enemy is crucial. The analogy drawn in the Gospel as to how 'the sun makes no discrimination where it shines' is very significant. The sun shines for all and makes no discrimination. This is a wonderful metaphor for compassion. It gives you the sense of its impartiality and all-embracing nature.⁹⁸

There is one additional area of Jesus' life that is met with admiration when considered by Buddhists: the crucifixion. What is important for Buddhists is not concepts of atonement or sacrifice that have been a part of the fabric of Christian theological development through the centuries. Rather it is the attitude of Jesus on the cross that speaks to Buddhists of an enlightened figure who was not attached to

⁹⁸ Robert Keily (ed.), *The Good Heart: His Holiness the Dalai Lama Explores the Heart of Christianity and Humanity* (London: Rider, 2002), pp.47ff.

revenge, fear, hatred, or envy. For Buddhists the words of the Gospel of Luke point to this truth: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23: 34, NRSV). A Buddhist might paraphrase this verse using the term 'aware': 'Father, they are not aware of what they are doing'. To display such a compassionate awareness while at the same time experiencing physical pain is a sign of having reached a highly evolved spiritual state.

In addition to these general themes, there are certain 'inclinations' of interpretations of Jesus which are characteristic of Theravada and Mahayana paths.

Theravada Buddhism (lit. 'the way of the elders') has over 100 million adherents, most of whom live in southeast Asia. This school claims to have preserved the original teachings and practices of the historical Buddha as followed by the first sangha ('community'). Here, the accent is on the need to redeem oneself in the context of a commitment to the three jewels (the Buddha's example, the path of the Dharma, and the discipline of the sangha). Theravada Buddhists are proud of the rich legacy of teaching of their founder over a forty-five-year period. Jesus, in contrast, taught for only three years (at most) and his teachings appear to be sporadically delivered, unorganised, and incomplete. There is a sense that there are nuggets to be found, though one has to sift through much that is culturally and spiritually limited. Perhaps the most influential exponent of Theravada traditions to the West was Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933); one can see in his writings both admiration and reservation toward Jesus:

I compare the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of the Buddha, his parables with the Buddhist parables, his ethical and psychological teachings with the ethics and psychology of Buddhism. Thereby I have been greatly benefited in the intuitional acceptance of Truth. Sometimes I identify myself with Christian teachings so much so that I desire to make an effort to reform Christianity just as Paul did, who had not seen Jesus physically, but had the boldness to challenge and crush Cephas, the personal disciple of Jesus. I ... would suggest to ignore the stories of the O. T. as divine scriptures. As folklore stories of a nomadic people we should treat the Old Testament. The pure teachings of the gentle Nazarene we have to sift from the later theological accretions, and then we can make Jesus a central figure in the universal church of truth. Science is progressive, while theology belongs to a decadent age. Buddhism is progressive because it did not touch on theological dogmatics, neither was it agnostic. It taught a discipline and enunciated generalized cosmic truths.⁹⁹

Mahayana traditions have emphasised three themes which have led to much dialogue between Buddhists and Christians: a cosmology of the Buddha as a transcendent being with three 'bodies' (the Trikaya), radical perspectives on the nature of emptiness of all concepts, and an emphasis on the Bodhisattva path for all Buddhists. Accordingly, comparisons between the Trinity and Trikaya as well as Christian mysticism and Buddhist emptiness have become hallmarks in Buddhist—Christian conversations. It is the

⁹⁹ From Anagarika Dharmapala, 'An Appreciation of Christianity', *Mali a Bhodi Journal*, vol. 35 (December 1927), lecture delivered in the Temple at the City in London, 3 October, 1927.

Bodhisattva theme, however, which has been at the forefront of Mahayana assessments of Jesus.

A Bodhisattva (lit. 'wisdom being') is one who has reached enlightenment but, instead of departing from the cycle of rebirth and entering nirvana, has committed to the path of the welfare of all sentient beings. As Buddhism spread to lands with other religious figures, these often came to be viewed as Bodhisattvas existing in various regions of the universe to whom one could appeal for help on the path to enlightenment. In this understanding, Jesus can be viewed as a Bodhisattva for Christians, one who has taken a vow to give his life so that all may come to enlightenment. The theism which accompanies traditional Christianity can be viewed by Buddhists as the raft in the famous parable attributed to the Buddha: when one has crossed rivers on one's journey to liberation, the raft of theological doctrine (in this case, theism) may then be left aside and the journey continued.

One final approach within Mahayana traditions stands out for its ability to view many of Jesus' teachings in a positive manner. Zen Buddhism should be understood as an intuitive path to the realisation of oneself as a spiritual unity rather than as a systematic philosophy. One does not reach enlightenment by reason but by insights that cannot be confined to a single spiritual tradition or thought process—though training and discipline are certainly necessary. For some Zen figures, Jesus' teaching can be seen as consistently

confounding traditional ways of seeing things and thus helping one to let go of rigid ways of viewing reality.¹⁰⁰

Though Jesus is far from a central figure in Buddhist traditions, Buddhism is providing fresh religious approaches for many who are attempting to re-interpret the meaning of Jesus.

A verdict on Jesus in the world's religions

It is fascinating to see the ways in which Jesus has become a subject of reflection across the spectrum of religious traditions. Predictably, there is resistance to Jesus when he has been closely identified with oppressive colonial efforts. In fact, the criticism of Jesus and his teachings, at times, can be both comprehensive and sharp. Even here these criticisms can be instructive for Christians; it is undeniable that power and status can privilege certain Christian interpretations which may not be consonant with the intentions of this God-centred first-century figure. On the other hand, there are a great number of positive responses to Jesus' teachings, especially to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is recognised by many from diverse traditions as having grasped the depth of our alienation from Ultimate Reality and from one another as well as having identified that nothing other than a radical change is needed in order to find a way ahead. Yet, even here we must be careful not to ignore dissonant voices. There are many religious traditions which value the positive role that tradition-specific regulations, laws, and rituals can play in sustaining a community amid oppression and the challenge of larger,

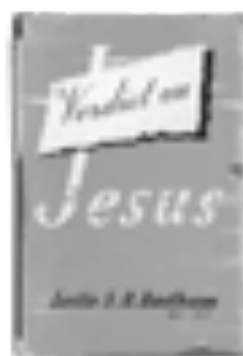
¹⁰⁰ For a popular treatment of this approach, see Kenneth Leong, *The Zen Teachings of Jesus*, 2nd revised edn (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

more aggressive or popular approaches. These voices wonder if Jesus' radical message, though inspiring for certain individuals, may, in fact, harm culture and community.

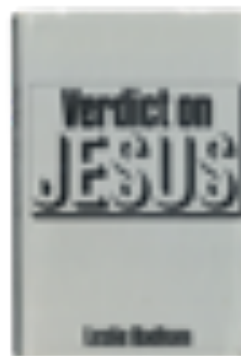
Many of the views emerging from this introductory examination of Jesus in the world's religions are not convenient to traditional Christian interpretations. The variety of thought is, in fact, staggering and prevents one from making even the most general statements about the position of Jesus across the world. But isn't facing a lack of convenience a part of any enthralling journey into the unknown? The traveller may not know exactly how to value what she or he has encountered until long after a return home and a time of reflection. As one takes this time to reflect, one is no longer an 'Accidental Tourist', but an informed traveller.

7 Decades

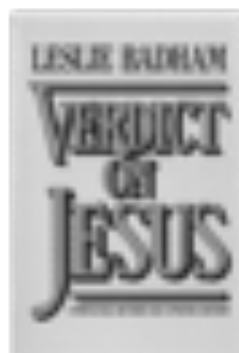
Verdict on Jesus through the years



1906



1912



1963



1965



2000



2009

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus



Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the UMI in 1915.

Top right: Leslie and Effie Badham with their children David, Christine, Clare and Paul in 1963.

Middle: Leslie Badham with Queen Elizabeth at Windsor Parish Church in 1965.

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-47.



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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