Christianity Derived from Buddhism:
An Exploration into the Lost Years of Jesus Christ

by

James L. Garrett

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_____
Thesis Supervisor

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Dean

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Member

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Introduction

One of the greatest mysteries of the Bible concerns the "lost years" of Jesus Christ. Though often not remarked upon by Christians, the Bible actually contains no record of at least half of Jesus' life:

> The Biblical silence about Jesus' lost years is one of the strangest hiatuses in history. It is a total silence about one of the greatest moralists in human history, covering seventeen years of Jesus' life between the ages of twelve and twenty-nine. Indeed, except for his birth and a singular account of Jesus as a twelve-year old in Jerusalem, there is silence about all but the last three years of his life. Why? (Hanson 86).

From the Gospels, we are familiar with the events said to have surrounded Jesus' birth and the subsequent flight into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod (Matthew 2:13-23). There is mention of Joseph, Mary, and the young Jesus settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23; Lk. 2:39-40), as well as their visit to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41-50). From that point on, however, there is no further mention of Jesus in the Bible until he is baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan at the age of twenty-nine (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:11). What happened to him in the interim seventeen years?

The traditional explanation is that either we cannot know what happened during Jesus' "lost years" or else he remained in Judea working as a carpenter. The Bible is certainly vague about Jesus' life after the age of twelve: "And the child grew and waxed strong, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). He is said to have left for Jerusalem with his parents and to have "lived there in subjection to them [...] and so Jesus advanced in wisdom with the years" (Luke 2:51). When Jesus emerges from his "lost years" for his baptism, he is thus, to judge by the people's reaction, apparently still a carpenter, only wiser with age: "How did he come by all this? What is

the meaning of this wisdom that has been given him, and of all these wonderful works that are done by his hands? Is this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" (Mark 6:23). Admittedly, with the textual evidence for Jesus' "lost years" being so scant, it is not unreasonable to conclude that we simply cannot know what happened to Jesus during that time. On the other hand, however, we should also recognize that drawing this conclusion effectively serves to close down debate about some glaringly obvious questions: why the Biblical silence about Jesus' lost years, and where did Jesus go during that time?

The conservative explanation outlined above – that Jesus simply stayed put, did as his parents told him, continued working as a carpenter, and became wiser with time – is by no means exhaustive. For one thing, Jesus was no conservative. The majority of his teachings were enormously subversive, and even at the age of twelve he was challenging authority, as when he engages the doctors of Jerusalem, or when he replies curtly to his mother who has been worried about his whereabouts for three days: "Could you not tell that I must be in a place [the temple] which belongs to my father?" (Luke 2:49). Is it really plausible that this independently-minded, rebellious young boy, who would later undermine the authority of the Roman Emperor himself, would have been content to stay at home and lead a humdrum life as a carpenter? Conceivably not: the people's reaction to Jesus' reappearance cited above, for example, can equally be read as an expression of amazement that the person they once knew as Mary's carpenter son has become wise almost beyond recognition in the intervening years. In other words, it is hardly unreasonable to suggest that Jesus left Judea a boy and returned a prophet.

This alternative explanation of Jesus' "lost years" is supported, *prima facie*, by the fact that he would have been more likely to acquire worldly wisdom by traveling, experiencing different cultures, and perhaps undertaking some form of intensive study, than by spending the better part of two decades stuck at home carving wood. It is also

supported by the otherwise peculiar discrepancy between the length of Jesus' ministry and that of the other great prophets:

> The synoptic gospels imply that his ministry lasted only a year, the gospel of John that it lasted three years, or a bit more. Which is correct, we can no longer know, but both agree that it was brief, extraordinarily so. The Buddha taught for forty-five years after his enlightenment, Muhammad for about twenty years. According to Jewish tradition, Moses led his people for forty years. But Jesus' ministry was brief, a light flashing momentarily but brilliantly like a meteor in the night sky. (Borg, "Spirit-Filled Existence," 302)

Again, which is more probable? That Jesus stayed put in Judea and then suddenly, virtually overnight, became wise and started ministering until his crucifixion soon after; or that he left Judea, was exposed to other teachings and ways of life, and ministered elsewhere for years before returning to the land of his birth?

Of course, these are but preliminary remarks rather than a conclusive argument. Their sole purpose is simply to re-open the discursive space that has otherwise been effectively sealed off by mainstream scholarship. Perhaps Jesus never did leave Judea; perhaps the conservative explanation is right after all. But the point is, we cannot know for sure, which is why we should remain open to alternative hypotheses. Unfortunately, however, most scholars remain anything but open. All too often we find such hypotheses dismissed as "esoteric" or "New Age" and as lacking foundation in "serious" modern scholarship. According to John Dominic Crossan and Richard Watts, for example, no theory concerning Jesus' "lost years" is supported by modern scholarship (28-29). In the view of Paula Fredriksen, "no serious scholarly work" places Jesus outside the backdrop of 1st-century Palestinian Judaism (xxvi). Paul R. Eddy and Gregory Boyd argue that not only does no evidence exist for the influence of external sources on the New Testament, but that even if such sources had existed then, first-century Galilean Jews rooted in monotheism would not have accepted them (53-54).

It is important to be clear that all these authors have an ideological axe to grind:

they are all Christian apologists and, as such, are hardly likely to endorse any view that runs contrary to the fundamentals of their faith. On the one hand, their case is helped by the fact that some of the earliest proponents of external influences on Christianity, most notably the late nineteenth-century authors Ernst de Bunsen and Nicholas Notovitch, produced works which are, as we will see, at best fanciful and at worst fraudulent. On the other hand, however, this does not imply that their own scholarship is any more "valid" or "objective" than so-called "esoteric" literature. On the contrary, it is impossible to write impartially about, say, "the historical reliability of the synoptic gospels" (to quote from the title of Eddy and Boyd's book) when one's entire worldview is bound up in those gospels being reliable. Nor does the label "serious modern scholarship" do anything to enhance the idea that Christianity emerged pristine as though hermetically sealed off from outside influences: after all, highly reputable scholars such as James Hanson and Jerry Bentley allow, for instance, "that Buddhism influenced the early development of Christianity" (240).

In what follows, I will take seriously the Buddhist influence on early Christianity. I will chart the similarities between the lives of Jesus and the Buddha as well as the striking similarities between their teachings. I will then consider three conventional explanations of those similarities: 1) that they are mere coincidence; 2) that they derive from the shared capacity of Jesus and Buddha, under very different historical circumstances, to achieve unusual insight into the universal human condition; 3) that both Christianity and Buddhism derive from a common source rooted in the teachings of Solomon; and, 4) that Jesus travelled to India where he was exposed to Buddhism. I will find against all four conventional explanations. In their stead, I will follow Hanson in proposing a fifth explanation: that Jesus did leave Judea during his "lost years" but that he probably never made it as far as India. Rather, Jesus was probably exposed to

Buddhist influences in and around the Middle East that had, over the previous five or so centuries, migrated westwards from India. This will lead to the controversial conclusion that the fundamentals of Pauline Christianity – such as belief in the Virgin Birth, the Trinity, and the Ascension – are in fact third-century inventions based on elements of other religions in order to make Christianity palatable to other peoples and to help its spread. The reason for the strange Biblical silence about Jesus' "lost years," on this reading, is that the early Church, in order to cement its own power, decried all evidence that ran contrary to its own myth-making as "apocrypha" and destroyed it. Jesus was not the son of God, but rather a great prophet influenced by Buddhist teachings.

If one were to speak of an incarnate god born of a virgin mother in what was prophesied and proclaimed as a divine event attended by singing angels and wise men bearing gifts, then virtually every Westerner would recognize this chain of events as the Christian Nativity story. But narrate the same chain of events to a Buddhist and she would instantly identify them as the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, or Buddha. The similarities between the lives of Jesus and Buddha hardly stop there, though. Both were child prodigies who went to their temples at the age of twelve, where they astonished teachers with their knowledge. Both fasted in solitude for an extended period (Jesus for forty days, Buddha for forty-seven days), during which time they were tempted by the devil with the promise of world empire. Both successfully resisted temptation. At the end of their fasts, both wandered to a fig tree, and, after the devil left, supernatural events occurred (in the case of Buddha, the skies rained flowers and delicious odors prevailed in the air; for Jesus, angels came and ministered to him). Both began ministry around thirty years of age, ministered to outcasts (mostly through parables), and attracted large, predominantly lower-class, followings. Both were met with scorn by the religious elite (Pharisees and Brahmans) and ruling aristocracy. Both attracted disciples willing to travel

with them (one of whom proved treacherous), whose names they changed and whom they demanded renounce all worldly possessions and remain celibate. Both gave a major sermon from a mound and made a triumphal entry (into Jerusalem and Rajagripa, respectively). Both their deaths, finally, were accompanied by supernatural events: when Buddha died, "the coverings of [his] body unrolled themselves and the lid of his coffin was opened by supernatural powers"; when Jesus died, "there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it" (Matthew 28:2).

Not only do the lives (and deaths) of Jesus and Buddha display uncanny similarities, but so too do their teachings. In general terms, both advocated universal love, non-violence, and peace. Both sought to help the poor and abolish slavery and caste systems, warning against the corruption of wealth. "Both created religions that minimized class distinctions and eliminated animal sacrifice" (Borg, *Jesus and Buddha* 5). Both issued commandments forbidding murder, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness, and covetousness. Both made extensive use of sight and light metaphors to induce a new way of seeing, or "enlightenment" (Borg, *Jesus and Buddha*, 6). Both sought to induce spiritual transformation by teaching the importance of relinquishing worldly importance: Buddha taught that liberation from suffering comes from letting go of "grasping" (the cause of suffering); the Christian idea of "dying for Christ" conveys a similar idea inasmuch as it requires a renunciation of the ego. In both cases, this results in greater compassion, both for oneself and for others. Principles of non-retaliation and of treating others as you yourself would like to be treated both flow from this idea. Conspicuously, certain key messages in Christianity, such as loving one's enemies or that the meek shall inherit the earth, are also present in Buddhism but *not* in Judaism, as one might have expected given Jesus' Jewish roots.

The specifics of Christ's teachings also bear remarkably close resemblance to those of Buddha. These are dealt with extensively in Marcus Borg's book, *Jesus and Buddha*, from which I now cite just a few examples to give a flavor of the similarities:

JESUS: "A foolish man, which built his house on sand."

BUDDHA: "Perishable is a city built on sand."

JESUS: "Therefore confess your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed."

BUDDHA: "Confess before the world the sins you have committed."

JESUS: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins."

BUDDHA: "Let all sins that were committed in this world fall on me, that the world may be delivered."

JESUS: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

BUDDHA: "Consider others as yourself."

JESUS: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."

BUDDHA: "If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a stick, or with a knife, you should abandon all desires and utter no evil words."

JESUS: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

BUDDHA: "Hatreds do not cease in this world by hating, but by love: this is an eternal truth. Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good."

JESUS: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." BUDDHA: "Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world."

JESUS: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her." BUDDHA: "Do not look at the faults of others or what others have done or not done; observe what you yourself have done and have not done."

The list goes on and on. It is thus clear, given the extensive and remarkably close correlations between the lives of Jesus and Buddha, as well as between their teachings, that we at the very least have a puzzle to solve. What could possibly account for those affinities?

Review of Literature

Probably the least convincing explanation of the numerous similarities between Christianity and Buddhism is that they are mere coincidence. One often hears that anyone can find similarities between A and B if one looks hard enough. In other words, it is possible to argue that the real ideological axe in the whole debate about Jesus' "lost years" is being ground, not by Christians, but by non-Christians intent on trying to undermine the fundamental tenets of Christianity. After all, surely the many glaring *differences* between Christianity and Buddhism are of equal, if not more, importance than the similarities. For example, Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the idea of a Creator deity; Buddhism is not. Christianity is premised on the idea of Original Sin; Buddhism has no such concept. Similarly, the idea of Grace is indispensable to Christianity, whereas in Theravada Buddhism no deity can interfere with *Karma*, making the notion of Grace inapplicable. For Christians, the central event in all human history is the crucifixion of Jesus; for Buddhists, there is no such single central event. Christians believe in an "End of History" that will be announced by the Second Coming; Buddhists envisage a never-ending cycle of birth and death known as *Saṃsāra*. Most Christians interpret Jesus' claim to be "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6) as implying exclusivity, i.e., that there is *only* one way, and that it cannot be Buddhism or anything else non-Christian.

The problem with this way of looking at things is that it does not negate the possibility that Christianity derived, at least in part, from Buddhism. Even if Christianity later evolved into its own, distinctive religion premised on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his ability to take away sin, that position does not mean that Christianity started out that way. Indeed, as we will see in the final section of this essay, there are good reasons to think that many of the transcendental claims made by Christianity, which differentiate it

from the immanentist faith of Buddhism, were the products of a political struggle that antedated the life of Jesus by several centuries. In the final analysis, unless one buries one's head in the sand for ideological reasons, the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism are just too striking to ignore – particularly the textually specific ones, which suggest at least the possibility, if not the likelihood that "but for inevitable differences in translations, what Jesus said may have been identical with what he read and heard of Buddha and Veda texts" (Hanson 82). This is even more the case given that Christians such as Crossan themselves admit that much may have gotten lost during the oral transmission of Jesus' sayings (47-89). The fact that so many similarities with Buddhism survive despite the fact that Buddha's original language Pali was transcribed in Sanskrit, would then have needed to be translated into Greek or Coptic, then again into the Hebrew/Aramaic of Jesus, whose teachings were subsequently passed through decades of unreliable oral transmission only to be translated in various vernaculars centuries later – all of this suggests that the original connection between Jesus' teaching and Buddhism must have been fundamental. The burden of proof, therefore, surely lies with Christians to discredit such a theory, rather than with sceptics to demonstrate its validity beyond all doubt.

It has become fashionable in recent decades –perhaps owing to the intercultural exchanges promoted by globalization –to look for some kind of harmony or mutual accommodation between Christianity and Buddhism (and indeed between all religions and cultures). One good example of this is the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995), in which the author acknowledges "I touch both of them as my spiritual ancestors." A year later, the Dalai Lama himself cited numerous equivalent texts in Christianity and Buddhism when writing *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (1996). Going the other way, Christian monastics

such as Thomas Merton, Wayne Teasdale, David Steindl-Rast, and the former nun Karen Armstrong have all also sought to promote inter-faith dialogue in the attempt to find common ground between the two religions. A typical manifestation of this project is Rita Gross and Terry Much's edited volume, *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about The Buddha* (2000).

For the vast majority of commentators of this persuasion, it is not that either Christianity or Buddhism (or any other religion) constitutes "the one true way," but rather that all the world's great religions speak to the same ultimate wisdom based on the universal condition of humankind and its place in the cosmos. All human beings must endure birth, death, suffering and fear and must find their place in society and in the universe itself. From this perspective, debates about the historical links between Christianity and Buddhism miss the point, since "it is spiritual truth, not historical fact, that matters. As the most recent writings on the parallels indicate, their value may be more in the eternal lessons they contain than in information about who was travelling the Silk Route" (Borg, *Jesus and Buddha*, 9). Jesus and Buddha, on this view, are not contradictory figures at all, but, rather, "spiritual masters inspired by a single, cosmic source, avatars who appeared at different periods in human history bearing the same truth" (Borg 1999, 10). Jesus may conceivably never even have heard of Buddha, but because both were exceptionally gifted prophets, both arrived at the same universal truths and morals that are accessible to fully enlightened human beings.

The universalist hypothesis, whilst noble in intention, suffers from several key problems. First, if it were true that all great prophets accessed timeless and universal truths about the human condition, then why are the close parallels between the lives and teachings of Jesus and Buddha not also reflected in the teachings of Mohammed, Zoroaster, Tao, Lao Tzu, Confucius, or any of the ancient Greek philosophers, to name

but a few? Second, if there were such "universal truths," and if Jesus had deciphered them, why is there such enormous divergence even between Christian denominations and churches? Third, it is one thing to stress the affinities and harmonies between different religions, but the monotheist ones at least do ultimately lay claim to sole and universal validity. Thus, it is one thing for the Dalai Lama to claim in 2001 that "Jesus Christ also lived previous lives" and characterize Jesus as a Bodhisattva, however, no true Christian could accept this. As David Forbes puts it, "To say that Jesus could be Buddhist is to diminish and nullify the true essence of what he came to teach humanity" (61). The Catholic Church is quite clear about the matter: in its "Aspects of Christian Meditation" letter to its bishops in 1989, for instance, it condemned the tendency to "place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory, on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality."

The uncomfortable and disconcerting truth is that even if all human beings do share a "timeless" and "universal" human condition, the ethics and laws devised to deal with that condition vary enormously between (and even within) different cultures. And once those norms and laws become codified and institutionalized by different societies and religious organizations, they become all but impossible to change. Thus, even while Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus may, at their best, practice a spirit of mutual toleration and respect – which is itself more of a Western Enlightenment ideal than a religious one – they will never concede the superior wisdom of any of their counterparts. In that respect, every major religion, like it or not, has an inbuilt intolerance so far as its own worldview is concerned. Christians, for example, may "tolerate" other faiths, but ultimately they think it would be better if everyone "saw the light" and converted to Christianity (how could they, in good conscience, think otherwise given their conviction that Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life"?) The upshot is that there

may as well as be no "universal human condition" given how differently human beings have interpreted it in different times and places – unless, of course, part of that condition involves clinging doggedly, irrationally, and violently if necessary to the beliefs that constitute an integral part of one's own identity.

In some ways, the attempt to infer "universal truths" about human nature is more a product of science than religion. Nature has universal laws; religions, as cultural constructs, do not. This perhaps explains why the work of Carl Jung holds such great appeal to so many people, as it promises to marry science and religion in the forms of universal psychological "archetypes." Migel Serrano, for example, draws on the concept of Jungian archetypes to claim, "All of these stories seem part of a universal myth, and the legends of Osiris and Akhenaton, and those of the Christian Father and Son, and of Krishna and Adonis, have much in common [...] The myth is always the same and revolves timelessly down through the ages" (144). True, certain myths do resonate down the ages, however, this is more the result of historically conditioned intercultural borrowings and exchanges than a timeless expression of an underlying "human condition," which might in any case be written off as essentialist under the aegis of postmodernism.

In sum, the universalist explanation comes to look, at best, like a well-meaning but ultimately implausible explanation of the affinities between Christianity and Buddhism. At worst, it looks like yet another (neo)colonial attempt by educated Westerners to assimilate Eastern practices, or an attempt by educated Buddhists to resist (and maybe even reverse) assimilation (let us not forget the Dalai Lama's political struggle in Tibet: all institutionalized religion has a political dimension). The blunt truth is that the historical affinities between Christianity and Buddhism are unique and culturally specific, not universalist.

One way of explaining the continuities between Christianity and Buddhism without resorting to denial or myth is to posit a common cultural fountainhead for both religions. To my knowledge, only one critic has done this to date, namely R. E. Sherman in his book *Buddha and Jesus: Could Solomon Be the Missing Link?* Sherman to some extent inverts the idea that Christianity had Eastern (as well as Western) origins by arguing that Buddhism had Western (as well as Eastern) roots. Specifically, he claims, "They each had Solomon, and Judaism, as predecessors" (10). Noting that Buddha was, for six years, "part of the predominant resistance movement [Jainism] against the Hinduism of his day" but changed to espouse a "Middle Way" between Hinduism and its opponents, Sherman explains the shift in terms of an encounter with the teachings of Solomon, the King of Israel ca. 970 to 931 B.C.E. "Virtually all of his [Buddha's] ethical teachings are the same as Solomon's," claims Sherman (12), and because Jesus heralds from the Jewish tradition the points of contact between them allegedly begin to fall into clearer relief.

Again, this hypothesis is far from convincing. Sherman himself is the first to recognize, "It is very unlikely we will ever know whether Solomon influenced Buddha" (10) and even if he did then the precise mechanisms by which this transference took place are not made clear. In an era *before* the conquests of Alexander the Great, which served to establish trade routes between India and the Middle East/Europe, it is not obvious how the message of Judaism would have spread as far East as India – and if it had done so, there would be much more historical evidence of it having done so. Textually, the links cited by Sherman between Solomon and Buddha/Jesus are nowhere near as strong as those between Buddhism and Christianity above. Temporally, it seems a leap of the imagination to think that Solomon's influence would still be felt so strongly

almost a millennium after his death given that he himself was not regarded as the "founder" of a great religion like Jesus or Buddha.

Sherman is a Christian living in Israel, arguably the one place on earth where intercultural understanding is most important than any other. One way of looking at his work, therefore, is as that of a peacemaker trying to triangulate between three different religions in order to promote religious toleration. Like the universalist explanation, this makes his work noble in intent. However, noble intentions do not guarantee intellectual rigor, and I can see little reason to accept Sherman's "common origins" hypothesis.

The hypothesis that Jesus was exposed to Buddhism when he travelled to India during his "lost years" dates back to the nineteenth century, a time when Christian missionaries, concurrent with the spread of Western imperialism, took their proselytizing efforts to India and elsewhere in the East and started to send back reports of certain similarities between their own faith and Eastern religions. In 1869, Louis Jacolliot published *La Bible dans l'Inde, Vie de Iezeus Christna* [*The Bible in India, or the Life of Jezeus Christna*]: although not proposing that Jesus travelled to India, Jacolliot did argue that the many similarities between the stories of Krishna and Christ – not to mention their names – could not be accidental. He concluded that the gospels were based on ancient Indian mythology. Though his conclusion may perhaps have had merit, he overstepped the mark by making the false statement that Krishna's disciples gave him the name "Jezeus" and that this supposedly meant "pure essence" in Sanskrit.

The Dutch writer Ernst de Bunsen proceeded from a similar premise in his *The Angel-Messiah of Buddhists, Essenes, and Christians* (1880): "The most ancient of the Buddhist records known to us contain statements about the life and the doctrines of Gautama Buddha which correspond in a remarkable manner, and impossibly by mere chance, with the traditions recorded in the Gospels about the life and doctrines of Jesus

Christ" (de Bunsen 50). However, de Bunsen then went on to argue that the idea of an "Angel-Messiah" had been transported from India to Palestine by exiled Jews, was appropriated by the Essenes (a first-century Jewish sect living in the desert), who then applied it to Jesus, who in turn tried to hide the fact that he was the Messiah. Fanciful by any stretch of the imagination, de Bunsen's hypothesis was finally discredited with the discovery of the first Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947: despite being attributed to the Essenes, not one of the 870 scrolls that have so far been discovered mentions Jesus or an "Angel Messiah."

The idea that Jesus actually visited India can be traced to the Russian writer Nicholas Notovitch and his book *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1894). In it, Notovitch claims to have visited the monastery of Himmis near Leh, Ladakh (Kashmir) in 1887 and to have read manuscripts there telling of the travels of Jesus, known as "Issa," in India, including his teachings, his work with untouchables, and his conflicts with Brahmans and Zoroastrian priests. Notovitch's account was immediately condemned by the Church. The British Church Mission in India hired a professor to locate and bury the documents described by Notovitch. The Anglican Church employed the renowned Oxford don Max Müller –who had found the loophole in Jacolliot's tale –to refute Notovitch's account, which he duly did by challenging its two main sources and by citing the alleged claim of the abbot of Himmis monastery that Notovitch had never visited there (Hassnain and Levi 265).

Müller may have been responsible for seeing off much nineteenth-century myth-making, yet even he had acknowledged in 1873: "Between the language of the Buddha and his disciples, and the language of Christ and his apostles, there are strange coincidences. Even some Buddhist legends and parables sound as if taken from the New Testament, though we know that many of them existed before the beginning of the

Christian era" (Müller 243).

An uncomfortable truth was beginning to dawn on nineteenth-century Christians: although it was preferable to think that Christianity had influenced Eastern thought (Jesus, after all, dispatched Thomas to practice Christianity in India and the descendants of those early Indian Christians have resided in Kashmir and Punjab ever since), the known fact that Buddhism predates Christianity by nearly five centuries meant this was impossible. The mystery of the "lost years" was beginning to take shape.

The twentieth century began with some similarly quackish accounts of the Eastern influence on Christianity – account which are all too easily seized upon and debunked by Christian apologists. Arthur Lillie's *Buddhism in Christianity* and *India in Primitive Christianity* (both ca. 1909), for instance, cite as evidence for that influence various texts written centuries after Jesus's birth! Levi Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1911) obviously draws from Notovitch yet claims to have been derived from so-called "Akashic Records" of the unwritten thoughts existing within the universe, accessible only to psychics such as Dowling himself! (Sadly, the Aquarians still exist, as do authors like J. R. Wright who claims insight into Jesus' "lost years" via psychic processes such as "channeling.") In *Altai-Himalaya: A Travel Diary* (1929), the Russian philosopher Nicolai Roerich claims to have visited the Himis monastery in 1925 and to have seen the same documents as Notovitch bearing witness to the legend of Issa. This contradicted Müller's claim that the abbot of the monastery had denied Notovitch's presence there and implied that the British Church Mission's attempt to destroy the documents must have been unsuccessful. At which point, it becomes impossible to say for sure who was telling the truth, only that either the Russians or the British (with the help of the German Müller) were probably lying through their teeth.

The 1980s witnessed an unexpected revival of the Jesus-in-India hypothesis. In

1986, for example, Elizabeth Clare Prophet mounted a defense of Notovitch's book by pointing not only to Roerich's confirmation of it, but also to other very similar accounts by the Indian Swami Abhedenanda in 1922 and Elizabeth Caspari in 1937. Prophet argued that the inhabitants of Himalayan monasteries are justifiably wary about what they will reveal for fear of Westerners plundering their treasures, and that therefore any denial of the "Issa" manuscripts should not be taken at face value (which is the only way of reconciling the claims of Notovitch and Müller). Holger Kersten, in *Jesus Lived in India: His Unknown Life before and after the Crucifixion* (1983), added an extra twist to this line of reasoning by arguing that Jesus visited India not only during his "lost years" but also after his crucifixion, which he allegedly survived, calling himself Yuz Asaf. To this day, a legend exists that Yuz Asaf survived until the age of 120 and was buried in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, in a tomb aligned East-West in accordance with Jewish tradition. Adding more spice to the tale, supposed casts of the feet of that tomb's inhabitant exist showing what clearly look like crucifixion marks. In *The Fifth Gospel* (1988), Fida Hassnain and Dahan Levi also back Notovitch but add a variety of extra Asian sources that allegedly refer to Jesus' presence in India.

Discussion

It is hard to say for sure what prompted the positive reevaluation of the Jesus-in-India hypothesis in the second half of the twentieth century. In part it may have had to do with decolonization and the advent of world history as a discipline. In part, it may have had to do with globalization and the influx of Eastern influences into Western culture. And in part, it may have had to do with the rise of post-Enlightenment secularism and the decline in popularity of Christianity in Western Europe. Whatever the precise constellation of causes, two things are worth noting about the Jesus-in-India hypothesis. First, it is clearly not the case that modern scholarship has "almost unanimously agreed" that the hypothesis contains "nothing of value" (van Voorst 17) or is entirely "without historical foundation" (Borg, Spirit-Filled Existence, 303). As with the "lost years" thesis as a whole, the Jesus-in-India thesis is not so easily swept under the carpet just because of some early quackery. At the very least, the matter remains open for serious debate.

Second, having said that, we should also acknowledge the limitations of the Jesus-in-India hypothesis. For one thing, until the Himmis manuscripts are put on public display (assuming they even exist), then all we have to deal with are conflicting opinions and claims to historical veracity that cannot be independently verified, meaning that Notovitch's claims remain weak and unsubstantiated. In terms of the additional sources cited by Levi, Hassnain, and other supporters, these "are all dated well after Jesus' life" (Hanson 81), suggesting that the Issa myth may well have been retrospectively cooked up for whatever reason. A good example is the so-called "Gospel of Thomas" – Levi and Hassnain's "fifth gospel" –which is supposedly based on letters written by the apostle Thomas from the Punjab region that place Jesus there at the age of forty-nine. The trouble, as Edgar Goodspeed recognized in 1956, is that this "fifth gospel" was written by Leucius at the start of the second century C.E. – much later than the Synoptic Gospels

and around a century after Jesus theoretically first set foot in India. It is hard, therefore, to give it much credence.

Epistemologically, the Jesus-in-India hypothesis adds unnecessary layers of theoretical complexity to the "lost years" hypothesis, especially when it comes to Kersten's claim that Jesus returned to India after crucifixion. Why go this far? Not only does it extend the number of "lost years" to over a hundred (!), but given the many testimonies that Jesus did, in fact, die on the cross, the theoretically more elegant solution is to believe those testimonies rather than the vague and unsubstantiated references to Jesus' itinerancy in India. Indeed, if we draw on every record that *could* place Jesus in a particular place at a particular time, then we end up with something like Tricia McCannon's recent book *Jesus: The Explosive Story of the 30 Lost Years and the Ancient Mystery Religions* (2010), which paints a picture of Jesus spending seven years in Egypt, a few years in England, then India and Tibet before beginning his ministry in Palestine. If all this were true, then Jesus was probably the most travelled man in all of ancient history! Why not go one step further and place him in America, too, as the Mormons do? Clearly, one has to draw a line between the vogue for placing Jesus outside Judea and the temptation to place him all over Eurasia (and beyond).

So far, I have argued that the continuities between Buddhism and Christianity are too striking to ignore but that no conventional hypothesis can explain those continuities. I have argued against suggestions that those continuities are merely accidental, or that they reflect two enlightened prophets tapping into the same "universal truths," or that they can traced back to a common cultural origin such as the teachings of Solomon, or that they can be explained by Jesus travelling to India. In this section, I will follow James Hanson's sorely neglected 2005 article which suggests that Jesus would not have had to venture too far outside Jerusalem before coming into contact with Buddhist influences,

and that this is what explains the affinities between Christianity and Buddhism.

Max Müller, that conflicted debunker of "heretical" opinions regarding the links between Christianity and Buddhism, once wrote that Buddhist missionaries were sent forth from India as early as 300 B.C.E., comprising "a succession of devoted men who spent their lives in spreading the faith of the Buddha over all parts of Asia" (cited in Remsburg 510). In 1935, Will Durant confirmed Müller's claim by arguing that, in the wake of Alexander's conquests, the great Indian ruler Ashoka "sent Buddhist missionaries to all parts of India and Ceylon, even to Syria, Egypt and Greece, where, perhaps, they helped prepare for the ethics of Christ" (449). Malamed concluded in 1935 that "Palestine, together with many other parts of Asia Minor, was inundated with Buddhist propaganda for two centuries before Christ." According to Yvette Rosser, "Records from Alexandria indicate a steady stream of Buddhist monks and philosophers who, living in that area, which was at the crossroads of commerce and ideas, influenced the philosophical currents of the time" (cited in Hanson 76-77).

Sceptics argue that "not one of these researchers bothers to explain why the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus, all of whom discuss Jesus, fail in their voluminous writings to once mention Buddhism" (Borg 1999, 8-9). Perhaps they do not, but Philo notes the presence of Buddhists in Alexandria and Egypt (Melamed 312-13). And even if they do not mention Buddhism by name, it still possible that Buddhism filtered through to the West by way of other religious groups such as the Zoroastrians (who settled alongside the Buddhists in northern Arabia, including Judea), the Essenes, the Mandeans, the Mithraites, and the Gnostics, as Elaine Pagels argued in a 1979 book that has still not received the attention it deserves.

Now couple the westward migration of Buddhism with the fact that Judea was not only an important shipping hub for trade between India and Europe, it was also the

military gateway to invade Egypt by land. Contrary to the bucolic image of the peasant Jesus never leaving Jerusalem, or of technologically "backward" ancient civilizations unable to travel afar, Jerusalem had been a key nodal point for land and sea trade routes ever since the conquests of Alexander the Great some 360 years previously. Those trade routes brought with them not only exotic spices and other commodities, but also new cultural values and ideas. It thus seems reasonable to argue, as Hanson does, that "If Jesus lived his life only in Judea, then his exposure [to Buddhism] was minimal. If he traveled outside Judea, especially to Mesopotamia, then his exposure to Buddhist-influenced groups was increased" (Hanson 77). Given what we now know about the powerful continuities between Buddhism and Christianity, it is likely, therefore, that Jesus left Judea during his "lost years." He need not have gone as far east as India, since the westward migration of Buddhism effectively brought India to him. Hanson's conclusion is thus perfectly justifiable: "The real historical question is not if he [Jesus] studied Buddhism, but where and how much he studied Buddhism, especially during his so-called "lost years" (Hanson 75).

Conclusion

If one accepts the above argument concerning Jesus' "lost years," then we are forced to come full circle and confront the question posed at the very start of this essay: why the Biblical silence about those "lost years"? The only conclusion we can logically draw is that the Church branded as apocryphal or heretical any information that contradicted its own myth-making and sought to destroy it. After all, what else could possibly explain the absence of over half the life of the main protagonist in what Christians themselves like to call the greatest story ever told?

As noted above, institutional religion is never purely a private matter; it always bears a political significance. In the case of early Christianity, that political significance was that Christianity offered a cultural means of challenging the otherwise insuperable power of the Roman Empire. After all, the Emperor himself claimed to be a god on earth –what could possibly challenge that apart from belief in the promise of being able to transcend death itself? The early Christian martyrs became famous in their day because they believed that no amount of imperial punishment could deprive them of their place in heaven. This is what made Christianity such a potent force and what helped it to spread clandestinely despite strict efforts to clamp down on it. Eventually, of course, the Roman Emperor Constantine himself converted to Christianity in 325 C.E. after believing himself to have been miraculously cured of leprosy, and Christianity was officially sanctioned as the state religion of the Empire by Theodosius I in 380 A.D.

This thoroughgoing institutionalization of Christianity dramatically changed its character. Whatever message Jesus may or may not have preached during his lifetime, the religion that was subsequently practiced in his name quickly became a tool of social and political control –a universal belief system to match the universal jurisdiction of the Empire. The concept of "heresy," for example, was invented during the Patristic period as

a means of distinguishing “heretics” from “true believers” –and punishing them. Christianity accordingly became codified in the Nicene Creed, which is to say, the living teachings of Jesus became ossified in dead, unthinking adherence to a set of supposedly factual propositions. And the thousands upon thousands of pieces of written evidence that contradicted that new politico-religious code – the Apocrypha – consequently had to be destroyed.

If Jesus really were a great prophet heavily indebted to Buddhist teachings (or other non-Christian sects) –a mortal man rather than the son of God –then all record of this would have had to be expunged or rewritten. From the point of view of the Empire, the beauty of casting Jesus as the one true way, the son of a single, universal God, was that the Jesus myth became unchallengeable. Instead of posing a threat to the Empire, it was harnessed to cement its authority. Indeed, unlike the previous deification of mortal emperors, it provided power over both life and death insofar Jesus was said to judge both the living and dead at Judgment Day.

Accordingly, the question of who spoke for Jesus acquired extreme political importance. It is common knowledge that the passages dealing with the Resurrection and Ascension were probably added to the Gospels a long time after the original texts were written. The reason for this is not metaphysical but political: for if Jesus is thought to embody the unchallengeable Truth, then the person who speaks most closely on his behalf cannot be challenged; he has illimitable power on earth. To this day, of course, the Roman Catholic church claims an unbroken line of popes going all the way back to Peter, one of the last figures in the New Testament to whom Jesus appears.

The very last figure to whom Jesus appears is Paul, on the Road to Damascus. Having previously been a zealous persecutor of Christians, Paul’s sudden volte face – usually described as a “dramatic conversion” –in many ways prefigures the fate of the

Roman Empire itself. At a stroke, Paul realizes the seemingly limitless potential of Christianity and sets out trying to spread it far and wide. He himself admits to being "all things to all people" (1 Cor. 19) in order to spread the Word, which is to say that he and presumably other Christian missionaries were willing to dress their religion in the cultural clothing of whatever societies they encountered in order to make it more palatable. As a result, Christianity was a demonstrable hybrid of all kinds of different cultures long before it was appropriated by the Roman Empire. We have already seen the similarities to Buddhism and alluded to the links to Hinduism via Krishna (upon which Serrano elaborates), but one could just as easily point to the similarities with the Mithras cult in ancient England and the Egyptian sun god, Ra (as Beckford does), or the fact that early images of the adult Jesus portray him much like the Greek god Apollo, or the fact that many Christian rituals, and Christmas in particular, draw heavily on ancient pagan rituals.

Thus, whilst Christianity likes to see itself as pristine, like the immaculate conception, springing uncontaminated into history with the birth of Jesus, it was only ever the product of intercultural borrowings and cross-fertilization. Chief among those borrowings is Christianity's massive, though massively repressed, debt to Buddhism – a debt that was almost certainly incurred during Jesus' "lost years."

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