

A NIP HERE, A TUCK THERE

Religion is the path to God, but a path is not a house.

Ramakrishna
(from the book The Life of Ramakrishna
by Romain Rolland—1947)

A chapter of preliminaries:

Why are the Eastern philosophies so different from Western religion? That is, if the Buddha really saw to the heart of reality, why was his message so different from the teachings of Christ—another individual who is believed to have seen to the heart of reality.

Aside from the possibility that one or both were wrong, there are some interesting possible answers to that query. The following stories will highlight a few of those possibilities:

I met a fellow in the mid-seventies who had spent two years of his earlier life doing missionary work in India. He knew I was interested in Eastern philosophy and we talked about it occasionally. Fairly early on, I found he had an absolutely terrible dislike for the Hindu faith. In pressing him on the matter he told me the following story.

It seems that while in India he acquired the habit of taking early morning walks. One day he came over the crest of a small hill just in time to see a child

being swept down river in the Ganges below. There was an apparent holy man sitting on the edge of the river. The old man had come out of his reverie to notice the flailing child, but as the young girl washed passed he made no move to help. Appalled, the missionary raced down the hill, dove into the water, and saved the child.

Having returned the youngster to her village upstream, the missionary went looking for the mendicant. Finding the man still sitting in the same spot, the missionary angrily inquired, "How can you just sit there while that poor child was screaming for help, and don't say you didn't see her. You were going to let her drown . . . WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?"

The mendicant seemed unmoved. He simply replied, "It was the child's karma to be in the situation she was in. It was not my right to interfere with her karma."¹

From that single incident, my missionary friend's perceptions of India and its people were completely blackened. He came away believing that Hindus were cold and unfeeling, that they had no respect for life, and that they adhered to a truly barbaric concept—the Law of Karma.

It was obvious at the time that my friend didn't really understand the ideas behind karma. Even more unfortunate, the old fellow sitting on the bank evidently didn't understand them either.

In its original form, karma was never meant to be used a rationale for doing nothing in the face of another's distress. In ancient times, it was called *the teaching law*—a universal mechanism devised by the Divine Mind (God) to insure that evolving consciousnesses like your self and my self might be afforded the possibility of experiencing and choosing and, from the consequences of those choices, might learn and grow in a spiritual sense. The old man was right (at least from an Eastern perspective); it was karmically appropriate for the child to be in the situation in which she found herself. But it was also karmically appropriate for

¹ Briefly, the Law of Karma states that one's actions will always elicit from the universe a response that is appropriate, given the motives that animated those actions. In the case of our story, the fellow on the bank was essentially saying that the child must have made choices and taken actions at some earlier time the consequences of which put her in the situation in which she found herself that day.

the old man to be in a situation in which he could help. That fact he chose to ignore.

There *are* modern-day Indians who teach their children the *ancient* beliefs concerning karma. The problem? That isn't the norm. Most contemporary Hindus view karma as did the old man.

Why are we discussing this? Because it is an excellent example of a situation in which a perfectly sensible doctrine has, over time, been *unintentionally changed* from its original form as followers have attempted to deal with the doctrine while additionally dealing with the vagaries of life. It's an example of *doctrinal change* over centuries due to emotional and psychological attrition.

Doctrines change in other ways. Consider, for example, the history of the practice of *suttee*.

Suttee was the practice of burning the widow of a deceased Hindu man on the man's funeral pyre. It was a tradition that had been in India for centuries before the English arrived, being honored as a religious rite by the freely accepting participants.² The British were scandalized over the practice, concluding that it was just one more barbaric ritual performed by the Hindus, and they set about to stop it. In her book, *Caves and Jungles of Hindustan*, a Russian noblewoman traveling in India just before the turn of the century commented on the problem and the British solution. The woman, H.P. Blavasky (an interesting character who has been much maligned for all sorts of reasons), said this (pg. 260):

The story of how Professor Horace H. Wilson caught the Brahmanas distorting the text of the *Vedas* and practicing deception is most curious. For long centuries they cruelly burned the wretched widows, appealing for justification to a certain *hymn* of the *Rigveda*, and claiming to be rigidly fulfilling the institutes of Manu, the interpreter of their revelation. When the British government first declared its intention to suppress the burning of

² You might think it hard to believe that women would willingly follow such a practice, but it is not at all unusual for people under societal pressure and religious fundamentalism to be maneuvered into doing things that would seem from a distant observer unthinkable. Example: There is no way you would have gotten me up in a kamikaze plane during World War II, but Japanese pilots did it willingly.

widows, the whole country, from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, rose in protest under the influence of the Brahmanas. "The English promised to uphold the policy of non-interference in our religious affairs, and they must keep their word," was the general outcry. Never was India so near revolution as in those days. The English, seeing that things were bad, did nothing. But Wilson, the best Sanskritist of the day (the *Vedas* were written in Sanskrit), did not consider the battle lost. He searched the most ancient manuscripts (manuscripts that until the arrival of the British were only accessible to the Brahmanas), until he became convinced that the alleged precept did not exist anywhere in the *Vedas*, though in the *Laws of Manu*, the infallible interpreter of the "revelation," it seemed to stand out clearly as translated accordingly by H. T. Colebrooke and other Orientalists. The affair was becoming embarrassing. An effort to prove that Manu's interpretation was wrong would have been tantamount, in view of popular fanaticism, to attempting to reduce water to powder. So Wilson set himself to study *Manu*, comparing the text of the *Vedas* with the text of the lawgiver. And this was the result of his labor: the *Rigveda* orders the Brahmana to place the widow side by side with the corpse, *before* the pyre is lighted, and then, after certain rites have been performed, *to lead her down from the funeral pyre* and loudly to sing to her the following verse from the *Rigveda* (X, 18,8):

Rise up, woman, come to the world of living beings, thou sleepest nigh unto the lifeless. Come; thou hast been associated with maternity through the husband by whom thy hand was formerly taken.

Then the women present at the burning rubbed their eyes with collyrium, and the Brahmana addressed to them the following verse (*Rigveda*, X, 18,7):

May these women (the widows), who are not widows, who have good husbands, who are mothers, enter with unguents and clarified butter: without tears, without sorrow, let them first go up into the dwelling.

It was precisely the last few words that were distorted by the Brahmanas in the most cunning and subtle manner. The original reads thus:

arohantu janayo yonimanger

which literally means: "first let the mothers enter into the womb of the altar" (*yonim agre*—within the altar). Changing one letter of the last word "*agre*," which they altered to "*agneh*" (fire), the Brahmanas acquired the right for centuries on end to send the hapless Malabar widows into the *yonim agneh*—the "womb of fire".

Not only did the *Vedas* never permit the burning of widows, but there is even a passage in the *Taittiriya-Aranyaka* (VI, 10, 2) of the *Yajur-Veda* where the younger brother of the deceased, or his disciple, or even a trusted friend in case no other relative existed, addresses the widow in the following terms: "Arise, Oh woman! do not any longer lie beside the lifeless corpse; return to the world of the living, far from the deceased husband, and become the wife of the one who holds you by the hand . . . "

If Blavasky's account was accurate, the Brahmanas had altered the doctrine *intentionally*. Why would they do such a thing? According to Blavasky, it was a clever way of eliminating two thorny problems (problems, at least, in the eyes of the Brahmanas) that arose upon a man's death. Specifically, a widow was a societal inconvenience³ and, more important, a considerable portion of a family's wealth went to the temples only after the widow herself died.

In short, *suttee* provided the priests with a mechanism to separate a widow from her wealth and, secondarily, to eliminate an individual who was deemed socially untouchable. In solving *the problem*, they managed to make Hinduism look completely inhuman.

Peripheral observation: One really does have to be careful not to make judgments about a philosophy or religion by looking at the way followers follow that belief system. If you look at *suttee*, or if you look at the way the fellow at the river's edge wielded the idea of *karma*, in both cases you get the feeling that Hinduism is barbarous. The problem in both cases is that doctrines have been either intentionally or inadvertently twisted to such a degree that their altered form in no way reflects the attitudes and motives behind the original beliefs.

³ An unmarried woman was considered as useful as a two-wheeled bullock cart with only one wheel. A *widow*, deemed unmarriageable and without any social standing whatsoever, was considered *beyond* useless.

Shoe on the other foot: What would you conclude about Christ if all you had to go on was the way Christians followed Christ's teachings. You may come to conclude that Christ was a very benevolent individual after learning about Mother Teresa and her administering to the sick and dying in Calcutta. On the other hand, you could conclude that Christ thought killing and warring was OK as long as the cause was righteous. Look at *the Spanish Inquisition*—Christians killing other Christians over doctrine; *the Crusades*—Christians warring on and killing Moslems over real estate; the *Salem witch trials*—Christians killing just-plain-folk for believing in ways that didn't follow the standard Christian line; and the twentieth century fiasco in *Northern Ireland*—Christians of one sect killing Christians of another sect for political reasons.

Killing in the name of Christ is a complete denial of the teachings of the Prince of Peace, yet people who believe themselves "good Christians" have been doing it for over sixteen-hundred years.⁴

This is not to single out Christians. The problem is universal. You simply need to be aware that the problem exists.

So back to our original question. Does it seem strange that the Buddha's teachings and Christ's teachings seem so different, given the fact that both are credited with seeing to the heart of reality?

The answer to that is *no*. In fact, the teachings of Christ and the Buddha may have been closer to one another than you have ever dreamed.

These are obviously fighting words for many Christians, but consider the thinking before taking a stand:

Each of the ancient traditions were tailored to the people they served. The Buddha, for instance, dealt with a people who already revered the idea of *mankind*

⁴ I remember going to church when I was young, listening to the sermon entitled *Love Your Neighbor*, then leaving the church only to find that a fight had broken out between two of the parishioners in the parking lot because the owner of one car had parked in such a way as to partially block the other's car. These two muscle-heads had listened attentively for an hour to nice church talk about compassion and love and peace, and thirty seconds after stepping out the door were ready to kill one another.

The way one animates one's *philosophy of life or religion* in everyday life is not necessarily indicative of the way the philosophy was originally intended to be followed.

treading a spiritual path. As a consequence, they had a deeply meditative tradition. Certainly, India had its warriors, but by-and-large the people the Buddha worked with were quietly peaceful.

Christ dealt with a people who certainly had a tradition of wisdom, but who were not at all happy about the situation in which they found themselves. The Jews of Christ's time were angry and frustrated, having for hundreds of years endured internal strife and the bondage that comes with being a conquered people. Pontius Pilate was, if you will remember, a Roman *military* governor.

The tone of the Buddha's teachings, given the philosophic predisposition of his audience, would hardly have been appropriate for the fiery, intellectual Jews that Christ inherited. But does that mean that the two Teachers necessarily saw different truths?

Absolutely not. It means the Hindus the Buddha came to serve were not the Jews for whom Christ came.

Of course, people still look at the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism and say, "No way close!"

Why? For one reason, even if Christ had *not* been the *only son of God* but rather *one of the many* world teachers that have come to serve mankind, such a highly evolved Being would certainly have had *something* to say about *reincarnation* if it had been a reality. But he didn't.

. . . Or did he?

What do you know about Jesus Christ?

If you are a Christian you probably learned about your religion in the same way I did, from attending that most dreaded of institutions . . . Sunday school. I remember the experience well: every Sunday morning I'd grudgingly drag myself out of bed at the crack of dawn, put on my best suit and trundle off to religion class.

What I learned there was relatively straightforward: the *Bible* is the word of God, having been written by divinely inspired men; Jesus Christ is the only son of God; only through Christ can anyone enter the kingdom of heaven; He (Christ) was born of virgin birth, did miracles to manifest his divinity, and died on the cross for you and me (having come to *take away the sins of the world*).

The information was all nicely presented over the years by a number of kindly old gentlemen, complete with prayer and hymn. They gave the best they knew, and due to their deep beliefs and convictions we students accepted the teachings as . . . well, gospel truth. Unfortunately, what they never bothered to give us was any sense of church history—I had to dig that out later.

When I finally did, I was amazed. In a doctrinal sense, all hell was breaking loose within the church during its formative years between 200 and 500 AD, and one of the many free-for-alls had to do with whether Christ taught about *after-death states* and *reincarnation*.

Case in point: In Head and Cranston's Reincarnation, the Phoenix Fire Mystery, the following was said about one of the early church fathers, a man named Origen:

Origen was "the most distinguished and most influential of all the theologians of the ancient church, with the possible exception of Augustine," writes the noted German theologian Adolf Harnack in his article on Origen in the Britannica. "He is the father of the church's science; he is the founder of a theology which was brought to perfection in the fourth and fifth centuries, and which still retained the stamp of his genius when in the sixth century (the church) disowned its author." At one time Saint Jerome considered Origen "the greatest teacher of the Church after the apostles," while Saint Gregory of Nyssa called him "the prince of Christian learning in the third century."

Why was this "prince of Church learning" excommunicated two hundred years after his death? Among other reasons, because he taught that *reincarnation* was a part of Christ's teachings.

"But that's ridiculous," most would say. "Nowhere in the Bible does Christ say anything *about* reincarnation."

Surprisingly, that is not surprising. The Bible was originally nothing more than a set of manuscripts written about Christ anywhere from fifty to two-hundred years after His death. They recounted His teachings and His life, and they were written by people who never knew Christ personally.

The church, governed by a priesthood that didn't at all like the idea of reincarnation, was the keeper of all those manuscripts. In a number of instances between 400 and 600 AD, it is known that they removed and destroyed all of what were called "heretical writings"—which is to say any text that did not conform to the church's version of the gospel.⁵ It is quite conceivable that if there *had* been writings connecting Christ and reincarnation in the Bible, they would have been removed at that time.

Yet even with all the church's efforts at editing, there still seem to be echoes of the idea of reincarnation in today's *Bible*. The most often quoted verse comes from John, IX: 1,2:

As he (Christ) passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked Christ, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

If the man was blind at birth and the blindness was due to his own sins, then the man had to have had a previous life in which to have committed that sin. Christ's disciples were clearly alluding to reincarnation, yet Christ did not squash the idea with his reply⁶—something you might have expected if the possibility had been totally out of the question.

There are a few other quotes to be found: books like Manly Hall's Reincarnation, and Head and Cranston's Reincarnation, the Phoenix Fire Mystery, do an excellent job of quoting and discussing them.

But where you really find the teachings of Christ associated with reincarnation is in the writings of the Gnostics. They were said to be in possession of the mysteries of Christianity, alluded to in Mark IV: 11, where it says:

Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parable.

⁵ See Head and Cranston's Reincarnation, The Phoenix Fire Mystery.

⁶ If you read on: . . . *before Christ gave the blind man his sight back, he said, "It is not that this man has sinned . . . , but that the works of God might be made manifest in him . . . "* That response in no way diminishes the disciple's original allusion to reincarnation.

And in Mark IV: 33,34:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them (the populous), as they were able to hear it; . . . but privately, to his own disciples he explained everything.

As Head and Cranston query, "In the New Testament we have the parables, but what happened to the inner teachings?"

The Gnostics, "possessed of a Gnosis (knowledge) superior to the simple faith of the multitudes," as Smith and Wace put it in their Dictionary of Christian Biographies, are believed by many to have been the guardians of those teachings. Yet where do we find the *Gospel of Thomas*; the *Gospel of Philip*; the *Gospel of Truth*; the *Gospel of Mary*; The *Pistis Sophia*; or the *Apocryphon of John*? These were all Gnostic writings dating from the second century AD, and they all spoke of the teachings of Christ. But with the exception of a few scraps found here and there in history, those texts were not available until the mid 1940's when a large earthen pot containing leather bound Gnostic manuscripts was found near the town of Nag Hamadi in the Egyptian desert. Those manuscripts have considerably changed some scholars' views about the authenticity and role of Gnostic beliefs in early Christianity.

Why weren't these manuscripts available to the world before the twentieth century? Because the early church had labeled Gnostic writings heretical and, as such, had ordered every Gnostic manuscript it could lay its collective hands on burned.

And what have scholars been able to deduce about the Gnostics' view of Christ from the Nag Hamadi scrolls? On November 18, 1989, the Religion section of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper ran an article titled SCHOLARS PUZZLE OVER JESUS THE PROPHET AND JESUS THE SAGE. Excerpts follow:

RESEARCH: Claremont Graduate School professor says that Jesus was originally viewed as a teacher, not as the Messiah. That title, and others equating Jesus with divinity, came later, James M. Robinson says.

A leading biblical scholar says the oldest sources for the Jesus movement in the Holy Land portray Jesus as a teacher of divine

wisdom—not as a foreboding figure with titles of divinity himself . . .

. . . Robinson has emphasized in recent lectures that the New Testament in its final form is a selective collection of Gentile-oriented books and letters written primarily in what is now Turkey and Greece. Relatively little was written in the Holy Land.

'The early Galilean beliefs tend to be lost in the New Testament because they are (obscured by) later apocalyptic views' . . .

. . . A persistent question nagging New Testament scholars is how much the authors and their religious communities cast Jesus according to their own expectations, putting words on his lips and adding titles of deification.

Jesus was "Christ" to the Apostle Paul, an early convert whose letters preserved in the New Testament date from the 50's. But nowhere in Q, written about the same time, does the title "Christ" appear, scholars say. Nor is Christ, or any other honorific name, used in the Gospel of Thomas."⁷

If Christian writers close to the time of Christ attributed to Jesus titles and qualities that he himself did not claim, imagine what the later church fathers

⁷ The following is more from the article: . . . Two sources have been increasingly valued by scholars like Robinson for what Jesus of Nazareth most likely said and how the first generation of believers spoke of him: the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, unearthed in 1945, and a never-found collection of sayings which scholars call "Q" for *quelle*, the German word for source or origin.

The existence of Q has gradually won favor as the most logical explanation for the similar sayings used by the Gospel of Matthew and Luke when writing episodes of a teaching Jesus, such as the "Sermon on the Mount." Otherwise, many scholars say, the two Gospels relied primarily on the Gospel of Mark to tell the story of Jesus' ministry, trials and crucifixion.

The discovery of Thomas, a compendium of sayings without an accompanying story, helped to persuade most scholars that Q is not a theoretical invention. Thomas' earlier version, some analysts say, probably appeared about AD 60, prior to the writings of the New Testament Gospels.

Thomas and Q have many of the same proverbs and parables, and "share the oldest layer of sayings attributed to Jesus," Robinson said.

. . . Contributing to the shifting views of the historical Jesus, the Q seminar (run for the last five years—a 30 member seminar on Q for the Society of Biblical Literature, the worlds largest professional group of biblical scholars) reached a consensus that the sayings source went into at least two editions. In the first, the sage-like Jesus spins out aphorisms, including pithy critiques on conventional society and piety. In the second edition, additional sayings, many thought to have been put on Jesus's lips, portray him as the Son of God who laments unrighteousness in Israel and warns of future calamity. The scholars consider the first version to have a higher percentage of authentic sayings.

might have been willing to do to bolster the church's standing amongst the faithful (read the following footnote *after* finishing this section).⁸

⁸ This doesn't even approach unintentionally introduced but nevertheless faulty beliefs. Case in point: There are a number of Christian sects that ardently believe that the end of the world is at hand (I personally know one young man who quit his aerospace job in the 1970's so that he could devote all his time to saving sinners before the cataclysm occurred). The root of their belief is found in Matthew 24:3-7:

3 And as He sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto Him privately saying, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?"

4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, "Take heed that no man deceive you.

5 For many shall come in my name, saying I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

6 and ye shall hear of wars, and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

7 For nation shall rise before nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilence, and earthquakes in diverse places."

"Right now we are having famines and pestilence, earthquakes and wars," the rationale goes, "therefore the end must be upon us. "

The problem with this, unfortunately, is not in the world's demise but in the *Biblical translation* they have used in coming to their conclusion. According to Biblical scholars—individuals who are thoroughly familiar with the customs and even the Aramaic slang used during the time of Christ—the third stanza from the above texts is a mistranslation. Instead of reading, "the end of the world," it should have read, "the consummation of the age."

Christian groups with much invested in the old translation are quick to point out that the *consummation of the age*—the end of the age—could indeed mean the end of the world. But with the re-translation, another possibility arises.

Many of the Eastern views believe that the spiritual evolution of man is something that will take an enormous amount of time. As such, this evolution is often framed in terms of *ages*—great periods of time during which the tone of man's spiritual progress is modulated in esoteric ways. If Jesus was speaking from that point of view, the *consummation of the age* would mean exactly what it implies—the end of an old age from which will grow a new age.

Whether you agree or disagree with this "heresy" is unimportant. The point is that there is a segment of the American public that is absolutely sure that the end of the world is coming. In fact, their belief is so firmly rooted that one of their number, former Secretary of Interior (under Reagan) James Watt, was willing to instigate national policies that would recklessly squander America's national resources without any thought of conservation for future generations. After all, he seemed to rationalize, why conserve when the end is imminent?

What is sad, and a wee bit frightening, is that the belief in question is based on a Biblical account that seems airtight but that is in fact an inaccurate rendering of the original text. How could this be? The quote I've used above came from the King James version of the Bible which was translated between 1604 and 1611. The work was done by a committee of fifty or so men of letters—deacons, Bishops, priests, and scholars. There was nothing malicious in their efforts. In fact, many of the Biblical passages were translated by a number of different members. Each wrote his

A shocking thought? Not really, especially when it comes to the idea of reincarnation. In fact, it is easy to empathize with the distress the church fathers felt over the Gnostic beliefs along those lines.

"Only through Christ can man reach God." That was a not-yet established but definitely desired early church doctrine. Why? Because if the church was accepted as "the skin of Christ"—the intermediary between Christ and God's children—anyone wanting to approach God would have to do so *through the church*. Things were bad enough, given the fact that God had not seen fit to inform three-quarters of the world's population that the Christian church existed at all. How could the church possibly support its claim to the exclusive access to God if it admitted that a *Christian today* could be born a *Buddhist tomorrow*? Such a revelation would considerably diminish its influence over the acts of its flock, and that was a totally unacceptable scenario. And what of salvation and eternal heaven or hell?

In short, the church fathers weren't stupid. They could see the danger of reincarnation, and they fought it successfully during the formative years of Christian doctrine. But it is interesting to imagine what Christianity would be like today if the Gnostic belief had won out. In that case, you and I would live in a society where Christians accepted the concept of reincarnation as readily as they do the idea of the virgin birth. It would simply be an article of faith.

Did Christ so teach? Who knows? What is interesting is that if He did, one of the great stumbling blocks that currently lies between Christianity and the East would in reality be nothing more than an illusion contrived by early Christian leaders to solidify their claim that "only through Christ (and the Christian church) can one get to God."

best translation; the most apparently accurate and poetic was chosen by the committee for entry. They may have been moved by preconceived notions accumulated from their own particular religious training, but it is more likely that their errors, which were many, came as a consequence of their unfamiliarity with the colloquial and regional terminology of the first and second centuries AD—the period during which the Bible was written.

Whatever the case, it is interesting and important to note how profoundly their unintentional inaccuracies have affected the thinking of at least some modern-day Christians.

