

JESUS, BUDDHISM, AND CHRISTIANITY:  
SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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My family has been Presbyterian, going back to our roots in Scotland. In our small church in North Carolina, I was so inspired by the story of Jesus that at age ten I had decided to become a preacher. But during my teenage years I became disillusioned by my close reading of the Bible. The Bible has many beautiful and moving thoughts, but just like any piece of literature it has weaknesses and flaws. Far from being the infallible word of God, there are numerous contradictions and mistakes in the Bible that are obvious to any objective reader. More than that, over the last two thousand years statements in the Bible have been repeatedly used to justify horrible tortures, wars and oppressions that have been inflicted on people all over the world. Though these atrocities were done in Jesus' name, by people who called themselves Christians, war and oppression was not the message of the teachings of Jesus. The more I read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the more I decided that the Christian Church as it has evolved during the last two thousand years has perverted the major teachings of Jesus. The problem is that many of the values of those who call themselves Christians are shaped not by the ideas of Jesus, but by the ideas of Paul, who was a vengeful narrow-minded person with many insecurities.

By combining the writings of Paul with the vengeful texts of the Old Testament, Christians have emphasized a wrathful God rather than a loving heavenly Father that Jesus spoke of. Jesus' message of love, peace and happiness has been ignored, in favor of a guilt-inducing conformist religion that remained mired in values more appropriate to the times of the Roman

Empire than to the twenty-first century. Christianity became corrupted when it became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The aptly-named Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Protestant Churches that revolted against it, justified torture of those who disagreed with the patriarchs of their demonination.

Issues that humanity faces today, such as the related problems growing from the threats of nuclear war, intolerance, environmental pollution, extinction of other species, overpopulation, unwanted children, and the sexual revolution, are unique to our time. These issues must be effectively addressed as central concerns by any religion that wants to keep itself focused on the spiritual concerns of people who are alive today.

When I was a teenager, growing up in Atlanta, I was repulsed by the racial hatred and the many kinds of prejudice that permeated the White Christian Churches of the Southern United States. In reaction, during the 1960s I became active as a civil rights worker and started attending African-American Christian churches, in hopes that this would provide me a more loving spiritual home. I was inspired on those occasions when I heard Dr. Martin Luther King preach, and I resonated to the theme of justice and freedom that was so strongly emphasized in African-American religion. However, while doing research for a book I wrote about African-American Christian Churches, Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, I came to the realization that the Black Christians were little better than the White Christians when dealing with non-Western cultures. Eventually I realized that Black Christianity shared many of the ethnocentric attitudes, as well as some of the most oppressive prejudices toward women and sexual minorities, that I had seen in the White churches.

As I researched the history of Christianity in Europe and the Americas, and especially the prominent role of Christianity in the oppression of peoples as diverse as Jews and Native Americans, I left the Christian religion altogether.

In disgust, I went in search of spiritual truth elsewhere. This spiritual journey eventually took me to South Dakota, where in 1982 I was introduced to the healing shamanistic religion of the Lakota people. American Indian religions, I learned, shared much of the emphasis on healing of body and mind that Jesus emphasized. But the values of Lakota religion, with its appreciation for the reality of diversity and the complementarity of all things, contrasted sharply with the stifling conformity of Christianity. Lakota traditionalists were the most spiritual people I had ever met in my whole life, and in comparison Christian devotion seemed superficial. I participated in ceremonies that were more spiritually moving than anything I had ever experienced in any Christian Church. Native American values of respect for Mother Earth were foreign both to patriarchal and to ecological ways of thinking.

My next unexpected move into spirituality occurred when I was introduced to feminist spirituality, goddess worship, and Buddhism. In 1984 I was appointed to teach in the Gender Studies Program at the University of Southern California, and I became exposed to many aspects of feminist spirituality. Two years later, after going with friends to Buddhist temples, I became active in the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Association. I was immediately attracted to the soothing cadences of Buddhist chanting and singing. This organization's emphasis on human rights, equality, personal happiness and fulfillment was exactly what I needed at that stage of my life. Buddhists say there are no accidents, and that everything that happens is for some larger purpose.

This certainly seemed to be the case in 1987, when I won a Fulbright Scholar Award from the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars. The Council sent me to do research in Indonesia. Once I arrived there, the Soka Gakkai put me in touch with their organization's branch in Indonesia, and they provided me with many beneficial contacts. While living for over a year on the fascinating island of Java, I became heavily involved in Buddhism. I cannot imagine anywhere in the world that was more perfect for me at that time than the pleasant life I experienced in Indonesia. I was moved to tears as I did Buddhist chants from atop the world famous ancient temple at Borobudur, and regularly hosted Buddhist meetings in my house in Yogyakarta.

When I returned from Indonesia, I started reading the work of various Biblical scholars who have suggested that Jesus was heavily influenced by Buddhist ideas. This made me start wondering how Jesus might have been exposed to the teachings of the Buddha. After all, Buddhist missionaries were at the time spreading the dharma message widely from India all the way to East Asia, down to Southeast Asia, and over to Southwest Asia where Jesus lived. At the time of Jesus, there were over five hundred Buddhist monks residing in Alexandria, on the coast of Egypt. Besides these monks, merchants and other travelers were moving back and forth from the eastern Mediterranean to the Kushan Empire of India, and along the Silk Road from Mesopotamia to China.

The Bible says nothing about the two decades of Jesus' adolescence and young adulthood. I started wondering if Jesus could have left home to become a pupil of a Buddhist monk during these "missing years." A sojourn to India might be the most logical explanation for Jesus' disappearance during those two decades.

Meanwhile, at the University of Southern California I developed a new class on “Overcoming Prejudice.” In this class a major focus was on the role of religion in both causing and reducing prejudice. Teaching and writing on these subjects got me thinking about Christianity again, from perspectives ranging from liberation theology to fundamentalist theology. I eventually decided that the fundamentalists are correct, that the biblical quotes they cite do in fact reflect the sentiments of at least some writers of the Bible. But they do not reflect the major ideas of Jesus. I began to think about the necessity of separating the teachings of Jesus from the Bible.

By this twisting path of spiritual enlightenment, from Christian Churches, to Native American religion, feminist spirituality, and Buddhism, I have come to a new respect for the teachings of Jesus. In doing so, I explicitly reject other parts of the Bible, and focus solely on the teachings of Jesus. This contrasts with Christians who seem to pay more attention to the words of Paul than of Jesus. My focus on Jesus is on his teachings, rather than on his death which is so emphasized by the Christians. Ironically, the Christians have put so much emphasis on Jesus’ death and resurrection, that they have ignored his life.

In other words, I have not returned to the Bible to become a Christian, but to extract the gospels of Jesus. I do not wear a cross on a necklace, but instead favor a medallion showing Jesus with his arms outstretched in a loving embrace. I see Buddha and Jesus as two of the most important and inspiring thinkers of human history, and their teachings are much more compatible than the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Though the Pharisees of our time may condemn me as a blasphemer, I am comforted by the fact that the Pharisees condemned Jesus as a blasphemer as well. I am, therefore, not a Christian or a Bible fundamentalist, but a follower of Jesus. I call on other thinking spiritual people to declare their independence from the Christian Churches,

whether they be Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, as hopeless relics that are chained to the Bible. It is time to build a new spirituality for a new millennium, addressing current world problems from a perspective of the two thousand year old gospel of Jesus: love, peace, personal fulfillment, and happiness.