

Jesus *in the* ***World's Faiths***

**Leading Thinkers
from Five Religions
Reflect on His Meaning**

Edited by Gregory A. Barker

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Chapter 1

Buddhist Views of Jesus

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Christian missionaries have been traveling the globe for centuries, but this does not mean that they were successful in spreading knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings equally in all parts of the world. In some countries, like Tibet, where Christian missionaries were active from the fourteenth century, Christianity never gained a religious foothold. In other countries, what successes missionaries *did* have were often limited to elite circles (as in the Meiji era in Japan), and knowledge of the Christian faith did not easily trickle down to the man and woman on the street.

This was so, at least, until the efforts of missionaries began to be supported by the military and financial power of European colonialist regimes, which often used Christianity to further their own political and economic ends. When Buddhists, especially in South and Southeast Asia, truly began to learn about Christianity (and about Jesus), this knowledge was in many instances mediated by the fact of colonialism. Jesus was in these cases seen by the Buddhists of these countries as the god of a foreign culture, and not just any culture, but a culture that was in the throes of subjugating their own.¹ Little wonder, then, that Buddhists living under European colonial rule should have perceived Jesus to be a camouflage for an “old war God . . . a pretender who came into the world with a view of casting men into perdition.”²

1. See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus: Introductory Remarks,” in *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus: Papers of the Third Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel et al. (St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2001).

2. The words of the late-nineteenth-century Ceylonese monk Dharmapala, cited in Heinz Muermel, “Ceylonese Buddhist Modernism on Jesus and Christianity,” in *ibid.*, 69, 76–77.

Over the last half-century things have changed. As the wounds caused by colonialism started to heal, Buddhist thinkers began to engage Christianity with a more open attitude, and to offer assessments of Jesus that were more nuanced and even positive. Among the Zen-inspired philosophers of the Kyoto school in Japan, for example, Jesus came to be seen as “the person who lives out perfectly the link of ‘into-nothingness-and-out-of-nothingness’”³ that they believed was the essence of Zen. For the Theravada Buddhist monk Ajarn Buddhadasa, Jesus was an apostle or prophet of the truth who was on a par with the Buddha. Jesus’ message, he believed, was sufficient for salvation. The Vietnamese Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh has stated that “we are all of the same nature as Jesus,” but that this nature must be made manifest by studying the life of Jesus and by living the kind of life that he lived.⁴

These more positive interpretations and assessments of Jesus are not unqualified endorsements of Christianity. Each of these thinkers takes issue with the way that the person and message of Jesus have been appropriated in Christian teachings. For example, almost all of them consider the Christian stress on Jesus’ uniqueness as a savior to be a theological error. But overall the assessment is positive. Of course, the perspectives of these various thinkers could be unpacked in great detail, but instead of doing this, I propose to turn to my main task: that of giving you some of *my own* perspectives on Jesus.

Let me begin by telling you a bit about my own background so as to help you situate the remarks that follow. I was born in Cuba and raised as a Roman Catholic. When I was still a teenager I left Christianity, largely because of philosophical/theological disagreements. Several years later I found Buddhism, but I continue to this day to cherish many aspects of Latino-Catholic culture. When I was nineteen I became a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition.⁵ I was a monk for about ten years, and during that time I lived and studied at the monastery of Sera in south India, one of the great centers for

3. Shizuteru Ueda, “Jesus in Contemporary Japanese Zen with Special Regard to Keiji Nishitani,” in *ibid.*, 48.

4. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Putnam, 1995).

5. The Buddhist tradition today is subdivided into Theravada Buddhism (practiced principally in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka) and Mahayana Buddhism (practiced principally in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam). The Mahayana form of Buddhism is itself divided into two: exoteric Mahayana and esoteric Mahayana (also known as Vajrayana, “The Diamond Vehicle”). Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, is the chief form of Buddhist practice in Tibet.

the study of the classical Indo-Tibetan tradition. The tradition that I follow is a scholastic tradition. It considers the critical study of texts important, and it values reasoning. You will see these values reflected in my approach, but obviously mine is just one approach. You have the opportunity to see other Buddhists' approaches in their responses to this essay.

If the identification of my location is important, so too is the location of the object to which I am responding: Jesus. More so now than at any other point in history, the location of Jesus is something that cannot be taken for granted. As a well-known Christian theologian states:

Not only is historical material difficult to come by in relation to Jesus but . . . what material we have represents value-laden interpretations yielding different and even contradictory portrayals of Jesus. From the beginning . . . the historical Jesus is available to us only within and through those theological portrayals.⁶

Although I believe myself to be responding to a fairly classical conception of Jesus — one that I think many Christians will find familiar — it will be up to Christians to decide whether that Jesus bears any resemblance to the object of their own faith.

Jesus as Social Activist and Critic

This aspect of Jesus' identity has of course been emphasized by many New Testament scholars, and has been the basis for entire movements, like liberation theology. It is said to be exemplified in Jesus' espousal of a radical egalitarianism: in the words of one contemporary Christian theologian, "something infinitely more terrifying than (contemporary democracy)"⁷ in its repudiation of class boundaries and hierarchies; in its skepticism about institutions; and in its empathy with, and prioritizing of, the cause of the poor and downtrodden of society.

6. Sheila Greeve Davaney, "A Historicist Model for Theology," in *Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan, Author of "The Historical Jesus,"* ed. Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 50.

7. John Dominic Crossan, "The Historical Jesus in Early Christianity," in *ibid.*, 3.

Like Christianity, Buddhism also began as a reformist movement, but of a very different kind. Unlike Jesus, the Buddha's criticisms were primarily directed at the Indian religious beliefs and practices prevalent in his day, not at the social structures that marginalized and oppressed men and women in ancient India. This is not to say that the Buddha was unconcerned with social issues, that his teachings do not have social implications, or that they have not been successfully used in modern times to socially reconstructive ends,⁸ but it is clear that his goal clearly was not so much to transform the existing social order as it was to work within social norms to bring about the radical transformation of individuals: from the inside out, so to speak.

This being said, there are clear parallels between the Buddha and Jesus as regards their reformist tendencies, and this certainly gives Buddhists a vehicle and framework for appreciating Jesus. The Buddha opened up the religious life (and therefore the possibility of salvation) to members of society who had hitherto been denied it: members of the lowest castes, and women especially. The Buddha and Jesus were also exponents of a kind of theological reform that emphasized the interior life over external ritual action. Nonetheless, as a program of social reform, Jesus' must be recognized as the more radical and far-reaching, and this no doubt is why the Christian tradition to this day, even when impeded by its own institutional forms, has been at the forefront of social transformation.

This aspect is for me one of the most appealing of the legacy of Jesus. I consider my Christian brothers and sisters fortunate in having at the very core of their tradition — in the very life of their founder — such a clear and superb model for what it means to be a just and socially responsible person, a person of integrity, in the world. We Buddhists have a great deal to learn from this aspect of the life of Jesus.

Jesus as Magician

Jesus is said to have performed miracles and exorcisms; he was a healer; he is said to have risen from the dead. As regards these

8. Especially on the latter point, see Christopher S. Queen and Sally B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

events, there are for the Buddhist tradition, as there have been in the West, two possible types of response. One response is to simply deny that these events ever took place. I opt for another alternative: to take these events as historically factual. While doing so, however, I beg to differ with those Christians who consider these events as proving the validity of the Christian faith in its entirety. That Jesus had these powers — that he could cure the sick, manipulate matter, cast out demons, raise others (and himself be raised) from the dead — most certainly points to the fact that he was an extraordinary individual. None of these events are for Buddhists outside of the realm of possibility, but neither are they unique in history. More important, they do not prove that the person who does them is divine, enlightened, or worthy of worship.

Magic as such is theologically neutral for Buddhists. Most, and perhaps all, of the extraordinary feats performed by Jesus would be classified by Buddhists as “common accomplishments”: “common” because they are feats that can be accomplished by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, requiring a certain degree of meditative competence, but no necessary degree of permanent spiritual maturity. This being said, the fact that Jesus performed these various actions for the benefit of others *does* point to an important fact: that he was operating from an altruistic motivation. This perhaps is the more important point for Buddhists: not that Jesus had extraordinary powers, but that he had the welfare of others in mind.

Jesus as Teacher

I would venture to guess that of all of the aspects of the persona of Jesus that I deal with in this essay, none is more appealing to me than that of Jesus *magister*. This may say more about me than it does about Jesus, however, for Indian and Tibetan Buddhists have always seen the teachings of their master (as embodied in the concept called *dharma*) as constituting the core of their tradition. For example, of the three refuges — Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha* (community) — the *dharma* is considered the real (*dngos*) refuge, the real antidote to suffering.

Of course, a thorough Buddhist response to Jesus as teacher requires nothing less than a full assessment of Jesus’ teachings. This is, of course, impossible here. Such an assessment is made all the

more difficult by the fact that what constitutes the authentic teachings of Jesus is highly contested, having become for New Testament scholars a source of almost obsessive preoccupation. This being said, there are certain portions of Jesus' teachings — portions on which there seems to be (at least partial) consensus concerning authenticity⁹ — that I believe resonate well with Buddhist doctrine. These include (at least portions of) the “beatitudes,”¹⁰ his teachings concerning love of the enemy, his admonition to repay evil with kindness, and his advocacy of charity and equanimity. All of these resonate well with the Mahayana Buddhist teachings on the virtues of universal and impartial compassion, and with the perfections (*paramita*) of patience and giving. Mention should also be made of Jesus' emphasis on the importance of renouncing a life dedicated to the pursuit of wealth in favor of a simple itinerant's life dedicated to the pursuit of virtue through humility, which resonates well with the Buddhist monastic ideal.

While I find much that is appealing in what Jesus taught, gaps also appear to me. For example, there is an apparent lack of concern for the welfare of living beings *other* than human beings (e.g., animals). There is a lack of a systematic path to salvation, and there is little or no mention of one's own attainment of personal wisdom (or gnosis) as a spiritual praxis, which for many Buddhists is the very heart of the spiritual path. Of course, perhaps many of Jesus' teachings have been lost. And Gnostic teachings *are* of course found among the New Testament apocryphal texts. Still, it is surprising to me that Christians should have so marginalized the idea of wisdom or gnosis.

In addition to what, from a Buddhist perspective, appear to be lacunae in the canonical teachings of Jesus, some material that *is* found in the Christian canonical sources seems quite foreign to Buddhists, perhaps the best example of which is the apparently authentic material concerning the kingdom or imperial rule of God.

9. I base the fact that there is relative Christian consensus on the points that follow on the results of the work of the Jesus Seminar; see Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

10. Space does not permit me to go into any detail concerning why this portion of the Gospel of Matthew appeals so to Buddhists. Instead I refer the reader to the Dalai Lama's recent commentary on this (and other) portions of the New Testament; see his *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996).

I find this material problematic in part because of the deity whose kingdom is being prophesied (see below). Aside from this, however, I also find the particular brand of Christian apocalypticism to be problematic. This is not to say that quasi-apocalyptic doctrines are unknown to Buddhism.¹¹ Still, I find disturbing the *utter finality* of the Christian apocalypse: that there can exist a time after which the fate of human beings is forever sealed, after which there is no longer any possibility for salvation. From a Buddhist perspective, history as we know it simply cannot come to an end until *all* beings have been liberated.¹²

Of course, a great deal more could be said about which portions of the teachings of Jesus do and do not resonate with Buddhist doctrine in my tradition. But perhaps this impressionistic treatment of the subject is sufficient to allow the reader at least a glimpse of the complexity of some of the issues.

Jesus as God

While this does not seem to be a problem for many of my Buddhist brothers and sisters, for me the single most problematic aspect of Jesus' identity is his portrayal by Christians as God. The problem lies not in the claim that Jesus is the incarnation or manifestation of a deity. What I find objectionable is (a) the Christian characterization of the deity whose incarnation Jesus is said to be, and (b) the claim that Jesus is unique in being an incarnation.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that the universe is populated by enlightened beings. Such beings — beings who have attained the state of buddhahood — have the ability to incarnate throughout the universe in different forms for the welfare of others. Tibetan Buddhists

11. In the Indo-Tibetan tradition, for example, the Kalacakra Tantra espouses a kind of apocalypticism when it speaks of a great war giving way to an eight-hundred-year period during which the teachings of Buddhism will flourish. See Helmut Hoffmann, *The Religions of Tibet*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), 125–26; and Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Kalacakra Tantra: Rite of Initiation* (London: Wisdom Publications, 2nd ed. 1989), 65.

12. I am not unaware of the fact that recent scholarship on Jesus has brought about what Borg calls “the collapse of the eschatological Jesus.” Nonetheless, it can hardly be denied that the end-of-time interpretation of Jesus’ “kingdom of God” teachings has been at the very least central to Christianity. What is more, it remains unclear to me how those teachings *are* to be explained if not in an eschatological fashion.

find little that is objectionable in the notion that Jesus is the manifestation of a deity, or the embodiment of a particular quality or attribute of a deity — like wisdom (*sophia*) or “the word” (*logos*). Not all Mahayana Buddhists may individually consider Jesus to be such a manifestation, of course, but many will accede to the possibility. In any case, that Jesus could, at least in theory, have emanated from a divine source is within the realm of possibility for those who share the Mahayana worldview. Certainly, the events in the life of Jesus point to the fact that he was an extraordinary individual, and the claim that Jesus is a divine incarnation is as good an explanation as any for his exceptional qualities.

While all buddhas manifest in the world for the benefit of others, it is not the case that all incarnations are incarnations of enlightened beings. Like the ability to perform miracles or magic, the ability to manifest in different forms is a feat that can be cultivated as one of the “common accomplishments.” So the fact that Jesus was an incarnation may imply that he was extraordinary, but it does not guarantee that he possessed the quality of maximal greatness (enlightenment), that is, that he was a buddha. That of course depends on the nature of the being that is his source. To identify that source as the God of the Hebrew Bible, as Christians are wont to do, does not, it seems to me, strengthen the case for Jesus, because the God of the Hebrew Bible seems by all accounts to be far from perfected. That God is a jealous God who demands morally questionable forms of tribute, including blood sacrifice. That God is partial, and capable of seemingly malevolent actions, to the point of engaging in violent reprisals against those who refuse to obey God’s will. Of course, many Christians see Jesus’ appearance in the world as ushering in a new age, one that reveals a kinder, gentler, more universalistic side to the God of the Hebrew Bible. But the slate of history cannot so easily be wiped clean. Those who would identify Jesus with the God of the Hebrew Bible make him heir to a divine legacy that is, from a Buddhist viewpoint, highly problematic.

If the association of Jesus with the historical God of the Hebrew Bible represents a *moral* stumbling block, the association of Jesus with the God of later Christian theology represents an impediment of a different kind: a philosophical one. Without attempting to give the reasons behind the Buddhist objections, let me simply list here the points of contention. (1) Buddhists repudiate the notion of a creator God, since they maintain that the universe is beginningless.

(2) They reject the idea of a being who is pure from beginningless time. (3) They claim that, because of the pervasiveness of suffering in the world, it is impossible for an omnipotent being to also be compassionate (the problem of evil). (4) They also balk at the idea that any deity is capable of granting salvation to others simply through an act of will. Given Buddhists' metaphysical commitments, then, there can be no God who is the creator of the universe, who is originally pure and primordially perfected, who is omnipotent and who can will the salvation of beings. Jesus, therefore, *cannot be* the incarnation of such a God.

This leaves the Buddhist asking: of what deity is Jesus then an incarnation? That, of course, is ultimately a question that Christians will have to answer. Still, this has not stopped Buddhists from offering their own interpretation. For example, H.H. the Dalai Lama has stated that he believes Jesus to have been either a fully enlightened being or a Bodhisattva with a very high degree of spiritual realization.

Jesus as Messiah

About twelve years ago I translated for a Christian colleague who was visiting the monastery in South India where I was living. He was there working on a translation of a Buddhist text, and I volunteered my services as interpreter. One day, in the course of his conversations with one of the senior scholars of the monastery, it came up that he was a Christian, and my teacher asked him to share some of his beliefs. My friend chose to focus on Jesus' identity as messiah. A heated debate followed, but when all was said and done, my teacher's basic question was this: how can the death of one individual act as the direct and substantive cause for the salvation for others?

Behind this interreligious impasse there are operative several Buddhist doctrinal presuppositions that are in marked contrast (at times even in opposition) to those of traditional Christianity: (1) Each of us is responsible for our own lot in life. We each cause our own suffering, and each of us is ultimately responsible for his or her own liberation. (2) Our salvation/damnation is not dependent on any one historical event. Specifically, our salvation is not dependent upon the appearance of any one figure in history, or upon our "accepting" that person as our savior. (3) There is no end to time,

no time after which sentient beings cease to have the possibility of liberation. So long as there exist sentient beings who suffer, so long will there be the possibility of their liberation. (4) No being has the capacity to decide whether or not we will be saved. Salvation is not granted to us, or withheld from us, by some external force. It is self-earned. (5) No single action on our part can instantaneously cause our liberation. What brings about salvation is not mere belief or faith. Certainly, it is not the instantaneous *belief in* something (e.g., the belief that Jesus is Lord) that brings about salvation, but the long and arduous process of radical mental transformation, which requires more than simply belief, or even faith.¹³

Together these various tenets make it impossible for Buddhists to accept a messianic creed of the traditional Christian sort. Jesus may have been an extraordinary human being, a sage, an effective and charismatic teacher, and even the manifestation of a deity, but he cannot have been the messiah that most Christians believe him to have been.¹⁴

Concluding Note

The appraisal of Jesus that I have offered here will be seen by some as overly rationalistic: a response that emerges more from the head rather than from the heart. I admit to this. Every Buddhist's response to Jesus will be different — invoking and evoking their own training, the commitments of their tradition, and the idiosyncrasies of their personality. Being committed to texts, to history, and to reasoning, I have offered here a textually informed, historicist, theological response to Jesus. In its defense I can perhaps only say that from my vantage point this kind of engagement with the Christian tradition is the highest homage that I can pay its founder, for it is only when a tradition is taken seriously that it is seen as worthy of an intellectual response. If nothing else, I hope it is clear from this essay that I take the Christian teachings on Jesus seriously.

13. I am not unaware of the fact that in the history of Buddhism there have been movements that challenge this notion of the nature and path to salvation. Especially important to mention in this regard are certain schools of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. But again, I remind my readers that I am speaking here principally from an Indo-Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal perspective.

14. Of course, if the Jesus Seminar is right, then Jesus did not make this claim of himself. See Funk et al., *The Five Gospels*, 32–34.