

Jesus in North America (10) **The Oriental Jesus**

The *Christian Post* reports that young Americans today are more skeptical and resistant to Christianity than people of the same age just a decade ago. More younger Americans associate with a faith outside Christianity. We should not be surprised. What you sow, you will reap. The 1960s were times of discontent with many of the values of the West, especially spiritual values. At the same time, there was an increased interest in the religious and spiritual values of the East. Courses in world religions and Eastern religions became popular on college campuses. Religion became privatized. A sizable body of Americans adheres to privatized faiths of one form or another. Self-fulfillment became the primary goal of religious activity; the major concerns were obtaining spiritual enlightenment and how a particular technique or discipline can lead to a greater self-realization. For many, concern for experiential religion and cultivation of the inner life are now a high priority. They may still have room for Jesus, but He is not the Jesus of the Gospels.

New Age Movement (NAM)

The New Age Movement is a prominent anti-Christian manifestation of the privatizing of faith. It is difficult to pin down, because it is not a specific group but a very loose network of groups, organizations, and individuals with a common sense of concerns. It is strongly influenced by Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In NAM thought, Jesus is the historical figure, and Christ is the universal consciousness or truth or being. During His so-called "lost years," Jesus supposedly travelled to India, where He studied under gurus before returning to Palestine. He is similar to a type-like Buddha or other manifestations of various sages who demonstrate for their age, a type of pure consciousness or unity with being. Individuals can learn from Jesus, can be enlightened to their own divinity or Christ consciousness, to attain what Jesus had.

Hinduism

According to Hinduism, the divine can be seen and known in everything that is, and everything that is can be seen as a part of the divine. This means there can be no sharp separation between things – between the divine and human, or between people and all other beings. The human problem is not sin and disobedience, but ignorance and illusion. Christians say that the Creator and the Creation are separate; Hindus say they are in essence one. The study and contemplation of sacred texts are accompanied by yoga, a discipline that works through the body and the mind to realize the sought-for unity. The goal of human life is escape from the cycle of death and rebirth. Furthermore, there is more than one way to the divine. As there are any number of ways to climb a mountain, say most Hindus, so there are many paths to reunion with the divine.

1. The Vedanta Society

The Vedanta Society was founded in New York City in 1894 by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). He was the first Hindu missionary to United States. In 1893 he spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago. His Hindu message seemed to have nothing to do with the horrors of widow burning and idol worship. He argued that Christian missions in India are foolish since all religions are manifestations of the same reality. The Vedanta Society was

the first major Hindu organization in the United States. Although it is neither the largest nor the best known, it is arguably the most influential on the intellectual level. Each Vedanta Society is a branch of the Ramakrishna Order, the monastic organization that Vivekananda founded in India. The organization also operates the Vedanta Press, a source for Hindu literature and other relevant books.

American Vedantists produced hundreds of books, lectures, and articles about Jesus during the twentieth century. The most popular view of Jesus was his divine incarnation. But the Vedanta view of the incarnation does not have the same meaning as in Christian faith. The Sanskrit word for incarnation is *avatar*, literally a "descent" of divinity to earth, and according to Hindus this is a recurring rather than a unique role. So while Jesus is an avatar, he is not to be mistaken as the only one. The Indian god, Krishna, too, is a divine descent, as is the Buddha. Vivekananda said, "Let us therefore find God not only in Jesus of Nazareth but in all the great Ones that have preceded him, in all that came after him, and in all that are yet to come." He had an utter lack of interest in the historical Jesus. He also declared, "That which was crucified was only a semblance, a mirage." A Vedantist wrote, "Even if the Man of Nazareth were to be a myth, Christ would yet live!" In Vedanta's belief, Jesus is more a principle than a person, an eternal ideal rather than a historical reality.

Vedanta societies celebrate Christmas by reading the story of the Nativity, contemplating on the Sermon on the Mount, listening to lectures on the life of Jesus, singing Christmas carols, and doing *darshan* (sacred seeing) of *Christ the Yogi*. "Meditate on the Christ within," worshippers were told, "and feel his living presence." The role of Christ is not to save from sin. In fact, Vedantists emphatically reject original sin. According to them, all human beings are "inherently perfect." For the Vedantists "religion in the East is not a matter of belief in doctrine, dogma, or creed; it is being and becoming; it is actual realization." Jesus inspires us to achieve perfection – the "direct realization of God" that he enjoyed. We are then able to say, as Jesus said (in one of the Vedantist's favourite proof texts), "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

The Vedanta Society of New York summarizes Vedanta this way: "Vedanta is a way of living and realizing. It gives full freedom to each individual to evolve morally and spiritually according to his or her own faith and conviction. It includes various truths found in all religions of the world, including the teachings of the world's great saints and sages." The American Vedantist, the San Francisco Vedanta Society leader, Trigunatti, wrote that "Unless you realize yourself, no Bible, no doctrine, no amount of baptism can ever save you." . . . "So long as you are a sincere seeker after truth, you belong to Hinduism." . . . "Hinduism is your religion."

2. Swami Yoganda (1893-1952)

Swami Yoganda came to the United States to attend the International Congress of Religious Liberals, held in Boston in 1920. He stayed in the US and became an American citizen. He adapted his message to the therapeutic concerns of America's new culture of personality. In addition to lecturing on the cultivation of "Christ Consciousness", he spoke on "The Divine Art of Making Friends" and "How to Be More Likeable". His *Autobiography of a Yogi* outlines his distinctive form of Hindu practice, called Kriya Yoga. He said that his system of yoga is "the scientific technique of God-realization" and claimed it had been utilized by "St. John, St. Paul, and other disciples." He blurred the distinctive between Christianity and Hinduism. He quoted

repeatedly from the New Testament. On his home altar he kept pictures of five avatars, with Jesus in the centre. He believed Jesus was a secret practitioner of Kriya Yoga – a "spiritual giant" who demonstrated his mastery over matter by, among other things, rising from the dead. He called Jesus "a divine colossus standing between Orient and Occident", who embodies their union through his birth in Asia and his acceptance as a guru in America. He loved Jesus without accepting Christianity. He looked carefully in the mirror and then created Jesus in his own likeness. He died in 1952, but his mission continues to expand in various centres.

The Buddhist Jesus

The American version of Buddhism is also gaining influence. In *Mexico City Blues* (1959), Beat Generation writer, Jack Kerouac, professed his belief in Jesus and Buddhism. The demand for a Buddhist interpretation of Jesus was particularly strong in the 1990s. In *Stealing Jesus*, Episcopalian author, Bruce Bawer describes his experience of seeing the film, *Little Buddha*. He says the film can be seen on one level as narrowly sectarian, supporting a Buddhist worldview, including a belief in reincarnation. But according to him, it can also be experienced as a beautifully spiritual vision of life that transcends "a narrow sectarianism." He says that, in fact, it resonates with Christian allusions. "The many parallels between Jesus and Buddha are everywhere apparent if nowhere explicitly insisted upon."

Conclusion

Christians must be clear that the Jesus of the New Age and Eastern Religions flat out contradicts the Gospels. It has been observed that "To classify Jesus as a guru is as accurate as classifying Marx as a capitalist." To have a clear view of Jesus is vital, not simply for the sake of making an academic distinction. It is only by clearly seeing Christ – who is both our Creator and Brother – that true fellowship with God can be appreciated and enjoyed. In John's words, "[T]he Word [Jesus Christ] was God...Through Him all things were made...The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (1:1, 3, 14). Through faith in Jesus, we "become children of God" (John 1:12). Jesus was both God and man. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said about Jesus:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

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