

Jesus Christ, Zen Buddhist?
Sermon delivered on June 19th, 2005
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Jesus was a unitarian.

In trying out versions of this speech on friends, I was told I should start with the ending, and end with the beginning. So there it is.

Back before the Catholic Church, before the Nicene Creed, before Christian Fundamentalism and Right Wing politics, there were more different types of Christians than the world has today. These different groups had their own sacred books. One group who called themselves Thomas Christians, because they understood the teachings of Jesus through the Apostle Thomas, had their writings rediscovered in buried ceramic pots in Nag Hammadi, Egypt in the 20th century. I want to tell you about the Jesus that Thomas Christians understood.

The Gospel of Thomas begins with - and yes – there were other Gospels besides the four, dozens in fact, began with “Whoever discovers the meaning of these words will not taste death.”

“Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. And when they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel. They will rule over all things, and in ruling, they will rest.” [These words appear in several of the forgotten books.]

The next verse in Thomas describes a state of being that is difficult to translate. I will refer to this state as seeking “the Kingdom of God:”

“If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the Kingdom of God is in the sky,’ then the birds will find it first. If they say ‘it is in the sea,’ then the fish will find it first. Rather, the Kingdom of God is inside you

and all around you. When you know yourself, then you will be known, and understand that you are children of the living father. But if you do not know yourself, you live in poverty. Indeed, you are that poverty.”

Here Jesus explains the way to reach God is through harmony with oneself and nature. God is within you and all around you. The rest of the Gospel of Thomas is filled with parables and riddles to reveal that which cannot be explained so easily.

Doesn't that sound a little like Taoism and Zen Buddhism?

In a similar vein, Lao-tse writes:

“The Tao [*which means ‘the way,’*] is always present within you. [6] The Tao never does anything, The Tao can't be perceived. Smaller than a quark, it contains innumerable galaxies. [32] If powerful men and women could center themselves in it, the whole world would be transformed by itself, in its natural rhythms. People would be content with their simple, everyday lives, in harmony, and free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace. [37]”

The Buddhist tradition closely parallels to the “Kingdom of God” described in Thomas and the synoptic Gospels.

In the introduction to *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, the translator describes Buddhism as “A special teaching without scriptures, beyond words and letters, pointing to the mind-essence of man, seeking directly into one's nature, attaining elightenment.”

At the heart of Zen Buddhism is a personal search for the wonder and greatness of the universe, beginning with what is inside of you. This idea of spiritual power being a spring that flows from within you is the central theme of Thomas, as well as Zen

Buddhism and Taoism. The “Kingdom of God” described in Thomas is the Tao, which is Zen. But bear in mind that all three traditions express the same caveat. They write:

“If it is defined, it is not Zen.” or
“The Tao that can be told, is not the eternal Tao.”

So, the best way I could come up with to illustrate the similarities in these three religions was to simply quote text from each of them, one after the other, on various themes. I will read three passages, one from each religion in varying order, and ask you to decide which passage relates to which religion.

“Look, and it can’t be seen. Listen, and it can’t be heard. Reach, and it can’t be grasped.”

“I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart.”

“You cannot describe it, you cannot picture it. You cannot admire it, you cannot sense it. It is your true self, it has nowhere to hide. When the world is destroyed, it will not be destroyed.”

[Lao-tse 14; Thomas 17; Zen Koan 23]

Getsuan said to his students, “Keichu, the first wheel-maker of [this land], made two wheels of fifty spokes each. Now, suppose you removed the nave uniting the spokes. What would become of the wheel? And had Keichu done this, could he be called the master wheel maker?”

When the hubless wheel turns, Master or no master can stop it.

It turns above heaven and below earth, South, North, East, and West.

“The Master sees things as they are, without trying to control them. She lets them go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle.”

“If they ask you, ‘What is the evidence of your Father in you?’ say to them, ‘It is motion and rest.’”

“The Father’s imperial rule is like a person who had good seed. His enemy came during the night and sowed weeds among the good seed. The person did not let the workers pull up the weeds, but said to them, ‘No, otherwise you might go to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.’ For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be conspicuous, and will be pulled up and burned.”

What holds together the spokeless wheel? Who observes from the center? How does the harvester handle the weeds? These questions relate.

[Zen Koan 8; Lao-tse 29; Thomas 50:3; Thomas 57]

But to you who listen I say, love your enemies, pray for your persecutors. Do favors for those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for your abusers.

When someone strikes your right cheek, offer your left. If someone takes your shirt, offer your coat along with it. When anyone conscripts you for one mile, go along for an extra mile.

“[A man] lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal.

[The man] returned and caught him. ‘You may have come a long way to visit me,’ he told the prowler, ‘and you should not leave empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.’

The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and sank away. [the man] sat naked, watching the moon. ‘Poor fellow,’ he mused, ‘I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.’”

“If you want to be given everything, give everything up.”

“What is a good man, but a bad man’s teacher?
What is a bad man, but a good man’s job?”

“The master is good to people who are good. He is also good to people who are not good. This is true goodness.
He trusts people who are trustworthy. He also trusts those who are not trustworthy. This is true trust.

The Master’s mind is like a space. People don’t understand him. People look to him and wait. He treats them like his own children.”

“If you receive the world, the Tao will never leave you, and you will be like a little child.”

[Luke 6:27-28; Matthew 5:39-41; Lao-tse 22, 27, 49, 28; Zen story 9]

“It is too clear and so it is hard to see. A dunce one searched for a fire with a lighted lantern. Had he known what fire was, he could have cooked his [food] much sooner.”

“Since it is merged with all things and hidden in their hearts, it can be called humble.
Since all things vanish into it and it alone endures, it can be called great.”

His disciples asked him, “When will the Kingdom of God come?”
“It will not come by watching for it,” he said. “It will not be said, ‘look here!’ Or ‘look there!’ Rather, the Kingdom of God is spread out upon the Earth, and people don’t see it.”

[Zen Koan 7; Lao-tse 34; Thomas 113]

Part II: Thomas vs. John

So why, then, do so many Christians have a different image of Jesus as one who requires followers to “believe in him and him alone” for salvation? You have to recall that at the time these Gospels were written, different communities had different interpretations of Jesus’ teachings.

In 313 A.D., the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion, but only one sect of it became the Roman Catholic Church. Many historians believe this was a political move to exploit a version of Christianity that had the greatest potential to keep order in the Empire. Shortly thereafter, those Church leaders who were once persecuted became the persecutors of other Christian groups who resisted giving up heretical beliefs – among those, the Thomas Christians.

By the time the composition of the New Testament was finalized, about 200 years after the first Gospels were written, the ideas of the Thomas Christians had been suppressed, along with dozens of other Gospels of which only references and fragments remain.

A council of church elders decided which Gospels were inspired or heretical. But they left many inconsistencies among the chosen books that Bible scholars have later used to better understand what the original ideas may have been before the great censoring.

The Gospels of John and Thomas are particularly interesting because several copies have been found for both. Both these groups seem to originate from Syria around the same time (90-120ad), yet it is clear from the writings that the two groups held diametrically opposed ideas. In fact, a careful rereading of John will demonstrate that much of it was intended to directly refute the view of Jesus that Thomas Christians believed. If you would like to know more about this, I suggest reading *The Secret Gospel of Thomas* by Elaine Pagels.

John's community believed that Jesus was more than a prophet, that people who did not accept Jesus as something akin to an angel or supreme messenger of God were not God's chosen. Thomas Christians considered Jesus' teachings to be instructions

for a salvation that each person achieved through a personal relationship with God [rather than believing in a specific dogma]. Constantine encouraged the deifying trend in John's community, even pressuring Church elders to create the Nicene creed that adopted a view of Jesus as God's equal, a heretical notion to mainstream Christianity at that time.

The Gospels of Thomas, Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a view of Jesus as one anointed by God to carry a message. They ascribe Jesus titles used to describe Kings and Prophets. Only John's Gospel goes beyond this understanding.

Surviving fragments of some censored books contradict the ideas expressed in John's Gospel, illustrating a pattern whereby John rewords passages to fit his idea of Jesus.

For example, in the Secret Book of James, Jesus said, "Be eager to be saved without being urged. Instead, become zealous on your own and, if possible, surpass even me. For that is how the Father will love you." [Secret James 6:7]

John's rewording reads, "Those who accept my instructions and obey them love me. And those who love me will be loved by my father." [John 14:21-23.]

James emphasizes a personal journey to salvation; John, obedience to the savior.

The Secret book of James also says, "Don't let the Kingdom of Heaven wither away. For it is like a date palm ... whose fruit fell down around it. It put forth buds, and when they blossomed, its productivity caused [the palm] to dry up. So it also is with the fruit that came from this singular root: when it was picked, fruit was gathered by many. Truly, this was good. Isn't it possible to produce new growth now yourselves? Can't you discover how?"

John's rewording reads, "I am the true vine, and my Father does the cultivating. He prunes every cane of mine that does not bear fruit. ... I am the trunk, you are the canes.... You must stay attached to me... as a cane cannot bear fruit if it is detached from the trunk." [John 15:1-5.]

It should be clear to you that several versions of Jesus existed in the world of the early Christians. Whether you believe the "true" Jesus can be found outside the accepted Gospels, in the censored Christian books, is irrelevant. My point is that many Christians once believed in the Jesus of the censored books. Indeed, until John's community and the Roman Emperor Constantine conspired to produce an orthodox monolithic Christianity, complete with creeds and doctrines necessary to control an empire, the Christian seekers of Thomas's tradition *were* mainstream christianity.

The Jesus in Thomas was radical compared to today's orthodox Christianity.

It lacks the words that establish a hierarchy within the church. Without such an authority, Constantine would not be able to use the religion to govern the masses. In contrast, Thomas provides detailed instruction on how each person must learn to understand the mysteries on his own.

The Thomas in Jesus is never described as God, but with God. This was not radical, because the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also never explicitly describe Jesus as God. Instead, they use the terms, Messiah, Son of Adam, Son of Man, Rabbi, Prophet, and healer, all roles that had never been used to describe God in the bible that Jesus read. What makes this radical in today's world is what would happen to our understanding of Jesus if we were to replace the Gospel of John with that of Thomas.

As an example, here is a passage from Thomas:

"Jesus said to his disciples, 'Compare me to something and tell me what I am like.'

Simon Peter said to him, 'You are like a just angel.'

Matthew said to him, 'You are like a wise philosopher.'

Thomas said to him, 'Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like.'

And Jesus said, 'I am not your teacher. ... You have drunk, [and so] You have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.'" [Thomas 13:1-5.]

This Jesus sounds much more like a Zen monk. He uses parables to explain the “kingdom of heaven,” a state of mind that is beyond words but attainable through faith, love, and good works. [the articles of faith in Secret James]

It seems odd to me that so many christian books and fragments have survived, yet so few go into such detail about the divinity of Jesus as John does. Instead, I have found new insights into a better way to love others and additional descriptions of the “kingdom of god” state of mind in the censored books.

So let me return to the beginning. It would seem that the version of Jesus that early Christians recorded in both the Bible and the censored books is a person who would be comfortable in a Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Taoist, and Christian gathering.

But this really isn't the question we should have been asking. More important than what type of religion Jesus would fit into, is the question of 'were Jesus to return today and enter *all* of those churches so freely, which churches would welcome such a man who broke bread with Christians and Buddhists, Muslims and Jews? For those welcoming Churches are the ones that truly follow Jesus.

At least I know he would be welcomed by Unitarians.

This is the beginning that I end with. It is only a beginning because I am no scholar. I am not enlightened. I can only offer you a place to start and recommend some books. If you would like to continue your search for the complete Jesus-Buddha, I have a list of references you can take with you after the service and at our NOPQRST, our non-official pretty quick rehash of the sermon topic.