

The Yoga of Jesus

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

The Church of the East, which has an elaborate Web site (<http://church-of-the-east.org>), seeks to promote the "Yoga of Jesus." The church traces itself back to the year 52 A.D., when St. Thomas supposedly founded a branch of the early Christian community on the West coast of India. We are told that the Yoga of Jesus "is the lifestyle and mysticism of Jesus' message to the East." The essence of that message, we are told, is freedom from "conditioned thinking."

Jesus, in what is called the "great commission," charged his twelve apostles with spreading the good news (*evangelion*) throughout the world. If we can believe the writer (or editors) of the *Gospel of John*, Thomas (subsequently St. Thomas) was slow in recognizing Jesus' spiritual stature as the resurrected or "risen" Christ—hence the term "doubting Thomas." Yet historically, the early Christians appear to have looked upon St. Thomas as a great leader and even accorded him a status superior to that of the apostle Peter in Rome.

In this connection, we must bear in mind that the New Testament as we have it is a heavily edited document. After the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., the Church commissioned scholars (known as *correctores*) to align the gospels with current dogma. A major figure in attacking paganism and bolstering Church orthodoxy—especially the notion of the Holy Trinity—was the Spanish-born Roman emperor Flavius Theodosius. He was a fanatical Christian, under whose direction the First Council of Constantinople was convened in 381 A.D. over a period of two months. He was also directly responsible for burning the famous Alexandrian Library to the ground in 389 A.D. As the more than 400,000 volumes went up in flames, inestimable knowledge inherited from ancient times was lost forever.

After slaughtering 7,000 Thessalonians, the pious emperor received a letter of censure from a horrified St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, which contained the following lines: "Listen, august Emperor. I cannot deny that you have a zeal for the faith; I do confess that you have the fear of God. But you have a natural vehemence [read: aggression], which, if any one endeavors to soothe, you quickly turn to mercy; if any one stirs it up, you rouse it so much more that you can scarcely restrain it" (translated by Paul Halsall). In fact, St. Ambrose excommunicated the emperor, who was restored to the fold only after humbly doing penance for eight months. The excommunication illustrates well the enormous power the Church was by then wielding over secular and even political life—a power that proved a double-edged sword in the historical unfolding of Christendom.

When St. Thomas was still alive, the Christian community was in the formative stage of its development. Thomas "the Twin" was a fisherman by trade and was born in Galilee; it is not clear whose twin he was, though Gnostic tradition thought of him as the twin of Jesus himself. The three earlier gospels merely mention St. Thomas's name and only the *Gospel of John* pays somewhat more attention to him. It is in the *Acts of the Apostles* that we can learn more about him. His voyage to India, however, is described in some

detail in the apocryphal *Acts of Judas Thomas (Acta Thomae)*, which was first composed in Syriac and then rendered into Greek and appears to date back to the third century A.D. This text, which was rejected by the Church as inauthentic, portrays the apostle Thomas as a skilled carpenter, as was his brother Jesus. In the same work, Jesus is curiously described as having sold Thomas for twenty pieces of silver to the merchant Abbanes, who was an emissary of the Indo-Parthian King Gundaphorus. Abbanes had been looking for a skilled carpenter for his master to design and construct a palace for him.

According to legend, as recorded in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, the king provided St. Thomas with a large sum of money to construct the palace, but the apostle liberally distributed the wealth among the poor. When after some time the ruler inquired about the project's status, St. Thomas told him that it was finished but that he would not see it until after his death, for he had built him a beautiful palace in heaven. The irate king condemned the apostle to death. Before the execution, however, the ruler's brother Gad died. Angels showed him the palace that St. Thomas had built, and Gad was eager to return to Earth to tell his royal brother about it. Miraculously he came back to life to report his discovery in heaven, and as a result Gundaphorus set St. Thomas free and converted to Christianity. The historicity of the king is beyond doubt, and local traditions insist on the veracity of the rest of the story.

To this day, there is a strong Christian community in Kerala (formerly Malabar) tracing its history back to St. Thomas. There are some 20 million Christians in India as a whole, nearly half of which live in Kerala. We may safely assume that for many centuries there was a lively connection between the early Christian diaspora in India and the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean churches. In due course, however, the Kerala Christians became more and more independent, and in the end appear to even have become oblivious to the existence of the Papacy in Rome.

In the process of crystallizing into Catholicism, early Christendom vigorously rejected Gnostic teachings like those contained in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*. These, however, continued underground as a constant creative "irritant" to the Christian Church. In rejecting the Gnostic heritage, the Church Fathers would seem to have discarded a portion of Jesus' own teachings. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumram and the Nag Hammadi Library, New Testament scholars and Christian theologians have had to rethink somewhat the spiritual legacy left by Jesus of Nazareth. There is now sufficient evidence to show that the Jesus remembered in mainstream Christianity is not quite the same as the historical Jesus.

Let us recall here that it took several centuries for the Church fathers to define the Christian canon and, based on current doctrine, to exclude certain texts as apocryphal or heretical. Moreover, the canonical gospels, as mentioned earlier, are all more or less heavily edited documents, which most likely do not faithfully reflect the teachings of Jesus or even the apostles.

The Nag Hammadi Library, consisting of more than 50 texts, was discovered in upper Egypt in 1945. This collection includes Gnostic scriptures such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth*, which previously had been regarded as lost. The Gnostics were a prominent, if unorthodox, section within the early Christian community of the first century A.D. Even in the middle of the second century, the eminent Gnostic teacher Valentinus could still gather enough support to be

considered for election as the bishop of Rome. Twenty years later, however, he was branded a heretic. Thereafter Gnostic teachings were systematically repressed and with them very likely a potent spiritual aspect of Jesus' legacy.

The fact that the early Christian community included Gnostic followers suggests that they found in Jesus' teaching sufficient support for a Gnostic interpretation. In other words, the notion that there is a spiritual side to his message—over and above any religious doctrines—is not as farfetched as it sounds. Morton Smith, in his important book *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark*, has made a strong argument for the hidden magical side of Jesus (the miracle worker). In 1958 Smith, a professor at Columbia University, discovered a letter supposedly authored by St. Clement of Alexandria (second century A.D.) in which the bishop talks about a deleted portion of the *Gospel of Mark*.

That Judaism itself included an esoteric dimension is borne out by the existence of the Essenes, who have received scholarly attention since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947, make up a precious library of Jewish knowledge dating from the third century B.C. to 68 A.D. Apart from the 600 or so intact scrolls there also are tens of thousands of scroll fragments, which will keep scholars busy for years to come. An important part of the scrolls are documents thought to belong to the monastic sect of the Essenes, one of three leading Jewish sects, the others being the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Hebrews called the Essene sect the "School of Prophets" and the Egyptians named it "Healers, Physicians." They called themselves "Sons of Light."

The origin of this sect is obscure, and some writers have placed it in Parseeism, Pythagoreanism, and even Buddhism. Some of the elements in common with Christianity include the overall apocalyptic mood, the idea of a Messiah and a new covenant, opposition to temple priesthood, cultivation of the virtue of nonharming, the practice of baptism, and communal living. Despite the many similarities between the Essenes and the original Christian community, they represent distinct strands within Judaism. Most significantly, Jesus' plea for universal love differs strikingly from the Essene creed that demands loving the "Sons of Light" but hating the "Sons of Darkness." Even though some researchers have found it tempting to liken Jesus with the Essenes' "Teacher of Righteousness," there is little doubt today that he was not the leader or even a member of the Essenes and may even have warned against some of their practices (see the *Gospel of Luke* 16:8).

The discovery of the Essene writings, however, have opened the doors to inquiring into the historical-cultural influences upon their peculiar teachings, which, like Jesus' *evangelion*, are radically different from mainstream Judaism. They support the view that at the time of Jesus innovative teachings were promulgated, which possibly derived key elements from cultures farther east, notably India.

Obviously, Thomas's missionary work in India was no accident. Ever since establishing merchant ties with Sumer, India had been a great and steady influence on the Middle East and Northern Africa. We know from the Mitanni kingdom that this influence even assumed political proportions. If the Pharaonic Egyptians thought of the Greeks as children, they valued India as the home of sages. For whatever reason, Western scholars have almost systematically ignored India's contribution to the ancient world and the development of Western civilization—a most regrettable neglect that is only slowly

being corrected.

This brings us to the figure of Jesus himself. The question presenting itself is: What was Jesus' relationship to India? Since he appears to have sent St. Thomas there, he was obviously aware of this looming Eastern giant. From everything we know about India's westerly tentacles, it would have been surprising if Jesus had been ignorant of it. But can we assume more? Can we, for instance, assume that he had specialized knowledge of India's spirituality or even that he visited India at some point in his life, as some writers have claimed?

As is well known, Jesus was the son of a carpenter and learned his father's respected trade. But there is this awkward and mystifying gap in his life history, the so-called "missing years" extending from age 12 (his charismatic appearance at the Temple) to 30 (his baptism by John). When he finally resurfaces, he is fully equipped with wisdom and knowledge. How and where did he acquire both?

According to the *Gospel of Luke* (2:51-52), Jesus went with his parents to live in Nazareth; hence his name "the Nazarene." The same is referred to in the *Gospel of Matthew* (2:23). It was customary for boys to study first the written *Torah*, then the oral *Torah*. A precocious and intelligent child, which Jesus seems to have been, could demonstrate considerable religious learning at a young age. We know from the *Gospel of Luke* (2:46) that at the age of twelve, Jesus was discussing religious matters in the temple, astonishing his elders by his learning and wisdom. In modern India, for instance, Swami Veda Bharati had memorized the *Vedas* (over 1,000 hymns!) by age seven and gave public discourses on them at the age of eleven. Thus while Jesus was certainly unusual, there is absolutely no reason to assume he acquired his knowledge outside of Judaism and in some remote land.

Even though Jesus' teaching contains innovative aspects, in many ways it is derived from and suffused with traditional Judaism. According to the testimony of the *Gospel of Matthew* (5:17), Jesus himself said: "Do not think I have come to destroy the Law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy but to fulfill." That is to say, he did not see his task as carving out a completely new path, as did Gautama the Buddha, but as one of completing the work of Moses and the other prophets.

What, then, are we to make of stories that place Jesus in India, Kashmir, and Tibet during the so-called "missing years"? I believe we need to treat them in the same way we would treat a claim that Jesus visited Mexico, Brazil, the Andes, Japan, and Polynesia. All these regions remember a visiting "white" culture hero who is identified with Jesus. There is not a trace in the gospels of Jesus having traveled around the globe to spread his teaching; rather he commissioned the apostles to do so, and their reach seems to have stretched from Kerala to Rome.

According to the *Gospel of Matthew* (2:13-15), the only foreign country Jesus ever visited was Egypt. He was an infant then, and his parents fled Nazareth in order to escape the murderous plot of Herod, whom Rome had appointed as tetrarch of Galilee. If the journey to Egypt is historical, Joseph and his family returned to Galilee right after Herod's death, which occurred very probably in 1 A.D. (and not as widely assumed 4 B.C., based on one of several lunar eclipses in that period), thus placing Jesus' birth somewhat earlier than this date. As the *Gospel of Matthew* (2:19) would have it, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him of the ruler's demise and ordered him to take his family back to Israel.

The various stories that place Jesus in other parts of the world are most likely pious fabrications, perhaps based on vague recollections of an early Christian missionary mixed with memories of a local culture hero. None of these stories have proven verifiable, but there is plenty of evidence for Jesus' honoring and promoting his own Jewish heritage.

Some scholars have clearly overemphasized the innovativeness of Jesus' teaching, arguing that his teaching is really irreconcilable with Judaism. But this seems to be an extremist position. There are many core aspects to Jesus' teaching that are irrevocably integral to Judaism: First, Jesus had the highest regard for the authority of the *Torah*, which he had no intention to undermine. Second, he fully accepted the Jewish doctrine of the Kingdom of God. Third, he engaged in miraculous and occult activities, as did the earlier prophets. Fourth, he understood himself to be the long-awaited messiah. We need not assume, with Morton Smith, that Jesus' magical acts were derived from Roman popular culture, for they fit in well with what we know of the magical practices and miracle working of contemporaneous Judaism. These activities were in fact closely tied to the demonstration of the coming of the Kingdom of God—an eschatological idea fundamental to Judaism. For Jesus, however, the Kingdom of God was imminent, and he presented his teaching as a key to the heavenly realm.

The rejection of both Jesus as the anticipated messiah and his claim of the imminence of the Kingdom of God crystallize the axiomatic difference between Judaism and Christianity. But this rejection does not deny the Jewish ancestry of either Jesus or his teaching. Let us not forget that after Herod's death and until the beginning of the Jewish War in 66 A.D. leading to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem four years later, several Jews claimed to be the messiah; only Jesus is still remembered today.

One more point remains to be examined, and this is the nature of the Jewish faith at the time of Herod. Clearly, Judaism at that time was no longer the Judaism of Moses, who lived 1300-1500 B.C. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, had dealt a blow to the heart of the Jews by razing the first temple in Jerusalem, where King David had brought the Ark of the Covenant in 1004 B.C. During the Babylonian exile, synagogues, where prayers rather than rituals were offered to God, came to replace the temple and transformed Judaism in a significant way.

Under the hegemony of the Seleucids, a Macedonian dynasty founded by Seleucus, a general in the army of Alexander the Great, Hellenism increasingly affected Jewish culture in Palestine. Antiochus IV (175-163 B.C.) even went so far as to declare Jerusalem a Greek city. It was during the oppressive reign of the Seleucids that apocalyptic teachings gained in prominence. The *Book of Daniel*, composed c. 160 B.C., is characteristic of the spirit of that time. The Jewish community split itself into three factions—the Essenes (who were the most conservative faction opting for an ascetical messianic lifestyle), the Pharisees (who were religious liberals but fomented against Hellenism), and the Sadducees (who were religious conservatives believing only in the written *Torah* but who favored Hellenism).

Hellenism was the sophisticated world of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Phidias, Praxiteles, and Sophocles enriched by countless contacts with other cultures. Favoring such ideals as individualism, personal freedom, tolerance, recognition of the female gender, philosophical syncretism, and not least rationality, Hellenism was

attractive to all but the most insensitive. Yet it also opened wide the doors to skepticism, indiscriminate irreverence, intellectual snobbery, social fragmentation, and ruthless egocentrism. Nevertheless, it proved foundational to the evolution of Judaism and, via Christianity, Western civilization.

Hellenism must not be regarded as solely the product of native Greek culture. It is rather an assemblage of many cultural influences, which all were distilled by the adventurous Greek spirit. In the pre-Hellenic period, the cultures of Assyria and Persia exercised a great influence on ancient Greece, and the Greek mystery cults of Orpheus and Dionysus as well as Pythagoreanism (based on Orphism), can be seen as direct results of that influence. The Mitanni had kings with Indo-Iranian names (i.e., Sutarna, Tushratta) and very likely also an Indian heritage, while the Persians were linked to India via the Zoroastrians, who have a strong connection to the Vedic tradition.

Thus behind Hellenism can be said to loom the cultural giant of India—a barely appreciated historical fact because India's greatness in antiquity has still not been properly appreciated despite recent archaeological and historical discoveries. India's cultural complex is now dated back to the town of Mehrgarh whose beginnings lie in the seventh millennium B.C. The Indian culture peaked with the Indus-Sarasvati civilization (3000-1900 B.C.) whose sheer geographical size of c. 250,000 square miles bespeaks of a large population that eclipsed the population of other Neolithic cultures, notably Sumer and Egypt. The cultural achievements of ancient India are only gradually being recognized, and a thorough reappraisal of India's contribution to the development of human civilization is long overdue.

To summarize, St. Thomas's mission to India suggests that the ties between India and the Middle East were perhaps closer than hitherto thought. If Jesus himself visited India, as some local Indian traditions claim, then both the early orthodox and heterodox (Gnostic) Christian authorities are curiously silent about it. The authenticity of those local Indian traditions is definitely questionable. The "missing" years in Jesus' life, moreover, are not at all mysterious given the socioreligious context of Judaism. According to the gospels, Jesus grew up in keeping with the social mores of his culture. At the same time, long-established trade routes (such as the many-threaded Silk Road) running from India and still farther east all the way to the Mediterranean, unquestionably promoted the flux of ideas between cultures. The influence of Persia—via Zoroastrianism and Mithraism—on Judaism is a well-established fact. The "Yoga" of Jesus is best understood as a product of Judaism during the so-called "Intertestamental period" (334 B.C. to the birth of Jesus) and of Jesus' own unique personality as a messiah, miracle-worker, healer, and charismatic rabbi.

We need not assume that he was personally initiated into, or even informed about, any Indian yogic teachings. Even if he was exposed to migrant Indian scholars with some knowledge of Yoga, his teaching and mission can be satisfactorily explained on the basis of Judaism and the syncretistic philosophical movements at work during his era. In other words, it was home grown. The New Age notion of Jesus as a full-fledged *yogin* trained in the Himalayas appears to be due to historical myopia. Therefore we may speak about his teaching as a form of Yoga only by way of comparison. Also, whatever influence Jesus may have had in India, it apparently was solely due to the missionary activities of his followers, starting with St. Thomas.

See also [Is Yoga a Religion?](#)

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