

# ***Parallel Teachings in Hinduism and Christianity***

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A belief central to Christianity is that the gospel message is unique and the historical fulfillment of Judaic lessons and prophecy. Research into early Christian history has shown this belief to be an oversimplification. Images from Greek gnosticism and Zoroastrian dualism are found throughout the Christian scriptures, particularly in John's gospel and the epistles of Paul. In addition, many early Christian doctrines were influenced by stoicism. These non-Judaic influences are well-documented by theological scholars and verify that Christianity did not arise solely within an isolated Hebraic religious context (see Davies, 1957:125, 129, 136, 148, 149; Pagels, 1981, xxiii; Staniforth, 1964:23-27). Further research has revealed that the five great world religions share numerous themes and symbols which, when viewed cross-culturally, demonstrate that the world religions are much more closely allied than orthodox or fundamentalist Christian views would have us believe <sup>1</sup> (Wolfe, 1994:1-14).

The influences from gnosticism and Zoroastrian dualism are understandable given the close geographical proximity of Greece and Persia to the region in which Christianity arose. Connections with Hinduism and Buddhism, however, have seemed less plausible particularly since the rituals and meditative practices within Hinduism and Buddhism differ so from orthodox Christianity today. Moreover, historically the Church has tried to distance itself from mystical theologies similar to those found in Eastern religions (Pagels, 1981:xxii).

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<sup>1</sup> Some prominent themes common to the five great world religions include creation as emerging from the primal waters, water as purification, speech as the means through which creation was brought forth, spiritual enlightenment, sacrifice, the practice of penance, and the eventual union of heaven and earth.

A. Powell Davies, in his book, *The First Christian: A Study of St. Paul and Christian Origins*, captures in his opening historical overview the dynamic spirit that characterized the transitional world of the first century A.D. Rather than a single “Judeo-Christian” stream of spiritual truth winding its way through history, there were many streams of theological and philosophical knowledge throughout the Mediterranean region which interacted and flowed together.

. . . in the true story of Christian origins, the events chronicled in the New Testament form only one such stream. Indeed, it would scarcely overstate the matter were we to say that in every city and village in the Roman Empire there were activities at this time ! customs, rituals, cultists practices ! that would have an eventual part in the molding of Christianity (Davies, 1957:23).

In addition, Elaine Pagels, in her work on the gnostic gospels, points out that trade routes linking Greece and Rome to the Far East were opening during the first and second century A.D., and that Indian Brahmins (those of the priestly caste in India) are mentioned in a treatise by the Christian leader Hippolytus who resided in Rome (Pagels, 1981:xxi). Could early Christianity have been influenced by Indian tradition, either directly or secondarily through the spread of gnosticism?

Writing cautiously, Pagels continues:

These hints indicate the possibility [of Indian influence], yet our evidence is not conclusive. Since parallel traditions may emerge in different cultures at different times, such ideas could have developed in both places independently. What we call Eastern and Western religions, and tend to regard as separate streams, were not clearly differentiated 2,000 years ago. . . .we look forward to the work of scholars who can study these traditions comparatively to discover whether they can, in fact, be traced to Indian sources (Pagels, 1981:xxi; brackets mine).

It is in this spirit of comparative study that this booklet was written. In choosing a comparative strategy, I am intentionally separating myself from so-called “new age” writers who speculate that Jesus and some of his apostles journeyed to India or Tibet during the 18 years of his life that are left unaccounted for in the gospels. There is no convincing historical evidence to support this claim. As I shall explain later, it is far more likely the sacred writings of Hinduism disseminated westward. But the place to look for connections between oriental philosophy and Christianity is not in scattered 2000 year old folk legends. Rather we must examine the scriptures themselves.

The sacred texts of Hinduism are the Vedas which express a wide range of religious ideas, from pantheistic mythology to social law to idealist philosophy and the experience of spiritual enlightenment. Of this array of topics, the concept of enlightenment is directly mentioned in the Christian scriptures. John's gospel describes Christ as the "true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9); the second epistle of Peter expresses the hope that "our eyes and hearts may be enlightened." Within the Vedic literature, the scriptures dealing extensively with the subject of enlightenment are known as the Upanishads, the primary texts of which date back to about 500 B.C. Of the entire Vedic literature, the Upanishads are the most accessible to someone from outside Indian culture. One would expect then, that if the early Christian writers borrowed anything from the Vedas, or were influenced by its accompanying literature, the evidence would be found in the Upanishads in the form of *passages utilizing highly similar imagery, metaphors, and analogies.*

This investigation therefore centers on similar, or as I often refer to them, parallel teachings found in the Christian New Testament and the Upanishads. The initial list of teachings quoted in the next section of this booklet are organized into pairs. The first of each pair contains quotations extracted from the Vedic literature, in particular, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita; the second citation consists of highly similar biblical passages. The quotations are then followed by an explanation of additional examples from the Upanishads and the Gita which parallel Christ spending three days in the tomb, His temptation in the wilderness, the parable of the prodigal son, and His interpretation of moral teachings.

In addition, the similarities in the spiritual status of Christ and that of Krishna, the leading Hindu incarnation of God, are explored. I then conclude with a brief historical overview and propose that the intention of the Christian apostles was to portray Jesus as the person in whom the mythologies of the ancient world, both within and *outside* of Judaism, were historically fulfilled.

### **A Listing of Parallel Verses**

When reading the following parallel teachings, one should keep in mind that the Hindu scriptures being cited predate the Christian New Testament by at least 500 years. In addition the term "Brahman," which in Indian philosophy is the unchanging, all-embracing Reality behind the universe, is also referred to in the Upanishads as the "divine Lord, the personal God, endowed with manifold glories," who "holds dominion over all the worlds" and is "one without a second"

(Svetasvatara Upanishad; Prabhavananda, 1948:121). Swami Nikhilananda, a highly respected Hindu commentator, also adds, "endowed with infinite power, Brahman is the lord of lords" (1949:72).<sup>2</sup>

"The whole universe came forth from Brahman and moves in Brahman...In Brahman it lives and has its being" (Katha Upanishad).

"Yet [God] is not far from each of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'..." (Acts 17:27, 28).

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"Living in the abyss of ignorance, yet wise in their own conceit, the deluded go round and round, like the blind led by the blind" (Mundaka Upanishad).

"...they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14).

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"I destroy the darkness born of ignorance with the shining light of wisdom" (Lord Krishna, the leading Hindu incarnation of God; Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 10, vs. 11).

"I am the light of the world: he who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life" (Jesus, the Christian incarnation of God; John, Ch. 8, vs. 12).

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"...I am the origin of the whole world and also its dissolution...I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things" (Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 7 Vs. 6, Ch. 10 vs. 20).

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Jesus in the book of Revelation, ch. 22 vs. 13).

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Buddha taught that Nirvana (the state of enlightenment) is life free from suffering (dukkha) and anxiety. The principle cause of suffering is said to be desire or craving, as designated by the term "tanha" which means "thirst."

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion on Brahman and its relationship to monotheism, see appendix, page 18.

Nirvana is therefore known by the term "tanhakkayha" meaning "extinction of thirst" (Rahula 1959:35-43). The Chandogya Upanishad also speaks of the "knowledge of Brahman having drunk of which one never thirsts...."

Jesus said "...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25)... "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst" (John 4:13).

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"...What is it that impels a man to commit sin, even involuntarily, as if driven by force...?" "It is desire, it is anger ...all consuming and most evil. Know this to be the enemy here on earth" (Bhagavad Gita III:36,37).

"...but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin..." (James 1:14,15).

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In Indian philosophy, Yoga is the spiritual practice through which one gains union with God or with the divine. The word "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit root meaning "to yoke" (Deutsch, 1968:6). Meditative practices that are a part of yoga settle the mind into a condition of wakeful inner stillness and result in a profound state of physical relaxation. In the quotation from Matthew below, the "yoke" that Jesus is speaking of, from the Hindu point of view, is a form of yoga.

"...that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us..." (John 17:21)... "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly at heart, and you will find rest for your souls...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29, 30).

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In Hinduism, Atman is the spirit dwelling within man. It is often designated by the term "Self." It is through enlightenment that Atman is realized to be Brahman. Some Hindu sages also refer to Atman as God within. (Prabhavananda 1948:v). In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad it says: "now if a man depart this life without knowing the kingdom of the Self, he, because of that ignorance, does not enjoy the bliss of liberation. He dies without reaching the goal...Wherefore let him know the kingdom of the Self, and that alone" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad).

"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the Kingdom of God is within you"

(Luke 17:20, 21. Note: the RSV mistranslates the last phrase as "Kingdom of God is in your midst." The literal Greek text, however, says "within you.")

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"Smaller than a grain of rice is the Self, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a mustard seed...Yet again is that Self within the lotus of my heart, greater than the earth, greater than the heavens, yea, greater than all the worlds" (Chandogya Upanishad).

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God...It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade" (Mark 4:30-32).

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"As one not knowing that a golden treasure lies buried beneath his feet, may walk over it again and again, yet never find it, so all beings live every moment in the city of Brahman, yet never find him, because of the veil of illusion by which he is concealed" (Chandogya Upanishad).

"The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44).

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"The door of truth is covered by a golden disc. Open it, O Nourisher! Remove it so that I who have been worshipping the truth may behold It" (Isa Upanishad).  
 "Wisdom is veiled by ignorance. Thereby creatures are deluded" (Bhagavad Gita, V:15).

"And [the Lord] will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations" (Is 25:7). ... But when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed...And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another...(2 Cor. 3:16, 18).

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"...the wise, knowing the Self as eternal, seek not the things that pass away" (Katha Upanishad).

"...because we look not to things that are seen but to things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (II Cor. 4:18).

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In Hindu scripture, Brahman is described as "He who dwells in the sky and makes lightning his home," and as "Mighty and awful...like to a thunderbolt crashing throughout the heavens" (Chandogya Upanishad; Katha Upanishad).

"For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day" (Luke 17:24; see also Matt. 24:27).

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"...for the world of Brahman is light itself" (Chandogya Upanishad).

"...God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5).

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"Thou, [Brahman] sole guardian of the universe, thou, lord of all, in the hearts of thy creatures thou hidest thyself...Of all religions thou art the source. The light of thy knowledge shining, there is nor day nor night, nor being nor non-being, thou alone art" (Svetasvatara Upanishad).

"And the city has no need for sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb...and night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 21:22, 23; Rev. 22:5).

### **The Story of Nachiketa**

In addition to this list of highly similar teachings, the Katha Upanishad (ca. 500 B.C.) contains a story which includes many of the important themes and events recorded in the Christian epic. It tells of a boy named Nachiketa, "whose heart had received the truth taught in the scriptures" and whose father had given him over to die. The son comes to accept his destiny when he says: "Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season" (Prabhavananda, 1948:14). Nachiketa subsequently spends three nights in the house of the King of Death and afterwards receives three boons, the third of which is the secret of immortality. In the gospels, Jesus, who is to be given over to die, similarly recognizes his destiny when he says: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but

if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). He then spends three days in the tomb (the House of death) after which he is said to have overcome death and been raised to life eternal.

The three boons granted by the King of Death in the Katha Upanishad are very significant with respect to themes found in the gospels. For the first boon, Nachiketa asks that his father not be angry with him and that his father recognize and welcome him upon his return. In granting this boon, the King of Death replies: "thy father shall recognize thee and love thee as heretofore; and seeing thee again alive, he shall be tranquil in mind, and he shall sleep in peace." This aspect of the story carries overtones of the parable of the prodigal son, particularly when, in the gospel account, the father greets his returning son with the words, "for this my son was dead and is alive again..." (Luke 15:24).

For the second boon, Nachiketa asks to be taught the fire sacrifice that leads to heaven (Prabhavananda, 1948:15). In the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus says "I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). After his death and resurrection, the disciples then receive the fire of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Finally, for his third boon, Nachiketa requests to be taught the secret of immortality. This portion of the story is reminiscent of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Before imparting this teaching, the King of Death tempts him with power and riches, hoping to convince Nachiketa to choose a different boon. "Choose for thyself a mighty kingdom ... ask for that -- not for sweet pleasures only but for the power, beyond all thought, to taste their sweetness." He also promises him "celestial maidens beautiful to behold." But Nachiketa holds fast, resists temptation proving himself worthy of receiving the secret of immortality (Prabhavananda 1948:16).

### **Morality and the Domain of Thought**

The earliest and most respected codifier of the yoga system in India was Patanjali (ca. 300 B.C.). In his *Yoga Sutras*, he enumerates eight "limbs" of yoga, the first two of which deal with the observance of moral teachings. The first limb, "yama," consists of 1) non-violence, 2) truthfulness, 3) integrity, 4) chastity, and 5) non-attachment. The second limb, niyama, consists of 1) simplicity, 2) contentment, 3) purification, 4) refinement, and 5) surrender to the Lord (Shearer, 1989:30, 34-36).

At first glance, it is apparent that these ethical teachings bear a certain resemblance to the Hebrew "Ten Commandments" which form the basis for morality in Judaism and Christianity.

But the truly significant similarity between Hindu and Christian morality lies in *how these moral teachings are interpreted in each tradition*. Both Jesus and the teachers of classical yoga broaden the application of these rules to include the inner domain of thought in addition to the behavioral domain of action. The first yama "non-violence," for example, means not only refraining from acts of violence, but also not entertaining thoughts of anger or the internal desire to inflict harm. "Chastity," or yama number four is interpreted to mean chastity in thought and word as well as in action. In addition, niyama number five, "surrender to the Lord," means making a total commitment to God, embracing thought and feeling in addition to right action (Shearer, 1989:34-36).

In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus' commentary on the commandments clearly includes the domain of thought and speech as well as action:

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire .... (Matt. 5:21, 22). You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:27,28).

Finally, the message of total inner commitment to God, as designated in the Yoga Sutras by the word "surrender" is clearly present in Jesus' command "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Thus the moral teachings of Jesus and the commitment necessary to realize God are in agreement with Hindu teachings as found in the *Yoga Sutras*.

### **Christ and Krishna**

Of the five great world religions, Hinduism and Christianity are the only two that believe the divine can incarnate. It appears the early Christian writers defined Jesus, their spiritual master, by combining the avatar concept in Hinduism with the messiah concept in Judaism.

In the Hindu tradition, Lord Krishna is generally considered to be the leading divine incarnation or avatar. His teachings are contained primarily in the Bhagavad Gita (meaning "Song of our Lord") a scripture which is very dear to most Hindus. While there are many differences between the life of Krishna and that of Jesus, there are stories about their lives that so similar one cannot help but suspect the Gospel message was influenced by the Mahabharata and

other epics Indian texts that pre-date Christianity.

When Krishna was born, he is taken from his family to a remote village where he is raised by cowherders. The reason for this flight was to hide the child from Kamsa, the jealous king who fears Krishna's destiny is to slay him. Kamsa is firmly committed to killing the child. At a meeting of his advisors, the king is told that the only way to insure the child is dead is to destroy all children around us who are less than a year old (Subramaniam, 1997:318).

The story comparable in Christianity is known as the "slaughter of the innocents." Herod, king of Judea, fears the child Jesus who is being lauded as the "king of the Jews." Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is warned in a dream to take the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. Herod then orders all male children in Bethlehem under two years of age to be killed (Matt. 2:16).

Granted, there are many who may now dismiss the historical validity of both Hindu and Christians renditions. On the level of myth, however, I suggest the meaning intended is that the divine presence, even when found in an innocent helpless child, is a great threat to the most powerful people on earth, even to the extent where those in authority are willing to commit genocide to preserve their power.

Another story found in the Mahabharata involves Krishna and the 10,000 disciples of a temperamental sage named Durvasa. Durvasa was visiting of King Yudhishtira and requested that the King provide dinner for him and his disciples as they were all extremely hungry. Durvasa and his disciples were bathing in the river when Lord Krishna, at the dismay of Draupadi, the woman charged with preparing dinner, tells his disciple Bhima to go to the river and announce to Durvasa that dinner is ready and waiting. When Bhima arrives at the river to do as Krishna instructed him, Durvasa is amazed to find that the ravenous hunger of him and his followers was gone. "They had all the comfortable cheerfulness of people who had feasted well" (Rajagopalachari, 1990: 138).

In the gospels, Jesus, after blessing five loaves of bread and two fish, miraculously provides food for a multitude of 5000 people who were listening to his teaching. The number 5000, however, is misleading as the gospel text reads that the crowd numbered about five thousand men, not counting women and children (Matt. 14:21). Assuming that many of the men present had wives and children, we can conclude the multitude Christ "fed" numbered closer to 10,000. The symbolic message in either story, Hindu or Christian, is that the presence of the

Lord is all that is necessary to satisfy one's needs and elevate a person to experience of fulfillment.

There are also striking similarities between the unifying spiritual "Body of Christ" and descriptions of Krishna in the Gita as the "supreme spirit" (Purushottama). The Gospel of John states that Christ was "in the beginning with God" and that "all things were made through Him" (John 1:1-3). The letters of the apostle Paul re-affirm this by describing Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) in whom "all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16). Likewise, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is described as the "source of all beings, Lord of all creatures, God of gods, Lord of the world" (X:15).

"I am the source of all; from me all arises" (X:8). . . "All this (universe) is strung on me like jewels on a string" (VII:7).

Paul also states that Christ is "before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). In addition, we are told that God has a plan to "unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita portrays Krishna as that in which all things are united.

"Behold today the whole world of moving and unmoving things, united in My Body. . ." (XI:7).

Christianity teaches that through Christ, people are set free from sin and no longer a slave to sin (Rom. 6:20-23; John 8:32-36). Likewise, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says: "He who knows Me . . . is undeluded and is freed from all sins" (X:3).

In the Gospel of John it is said that Christ "came into the world but the world knew him not" (John 1:10). So too, Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita:

"I am not revealed to all being covered by My power of illusion. This world is deluded and does not recognize Me. . ." (VII:25).

Christianity also teaches that Christ will come to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). The Bhagavad Gita ascribes a similar role to Krishna:

"For the preservation of good, for the destruction of evil, for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being in age after age." (IV:7).

And while Christ is said in the Gospels to be the "Light of the world" (John 8:12), Krishna is likened to "a mass of light shining everywhere with the radiance of flaming fire and the sun, difficult to regard beyond all measure" (IX:17). All this supports the view I am

asserting, that the early Christian writers took the avatar concept in Hinduism and combined it with the messiah concept in Judaism.

### **Brahman and the Concept of a Supreme God**

Indian philosophy refers to the primordial unformed condition of creation as the "unmanifest" wherein lies the potential for creation to become manifest, as a seed holds within it the power to bring forth a tree. Correspondingly, the realm of forms and phenomenal existence is referred to as the "manifest." Indian sages also use the terms "absolute" and "relative" when speaking of these two domains of creation (Yogi, 1966:33). The word Absolute denotes the non-changing, eternal status of the Unmanifest, while the word "relative" emphasizes the changing and temporal nature of the manifest.

Taken together, these two realms of creation, the Unmanifest and the manifest, known also as the Absolute and the relative, comprise the ultimate Unity of life known as Brahman (Yogi, 1967:5). It is the central most concept in Indian philosophy and is inherently beyond definition. Nikhilananda speaks of it as follows:

This Unity pervades the universe and yet is beyond it. All objects, animate and inanimate, are included in it. Gods, men, and subhuman beings are parts of It. As the unchanging Reality behind the universe, It was called Brahman by the Hindu philosophers; and as the indestructible Spirit in man, It was called Atman. Brahman and Atman, identical in nature, were the First Principle. (1949:25)

In Hinduism, Brahman embraces all forms and concepts in creation. As the totality of creation, it cannot be described in a singular way. Any attempt to define it automatically limits it, as it is always greater than any concepts used to describe it. A paradoxical koan from Zen Buddhism aptly captures the linguistic dilemma in which we are caught: "It cannot be expressed in words, yet it cannot be expressed without words." Such is the nature of Truth, and the nature of Brahman.

While Hinduism is most known for its polytheism, there is also found within the Vedic literature the concept of a supreme God and Creator. Indeed, we would expect to find this if it is true that *all* concepts are contained within Brahman. The clearest references to a supreme God come from the Rig Veda and the Upanishads.

With eyes on all sides and mouths on all sides, with arms on all sides and feet on all sides, the One God created the sky and the earth, fanning them with his arms. (Rig Veda, 10.81.3; O'Flaherty, 1981:36)

The All-Maker is vast in mind and vast in strength. He is the one who forms, who sets in order and who is the highest image. . . (Rig Veda, 10.82.2; O'Flaherty, 1981:36)

The one absolute, impersonal Existence, together with his inscrutable Maya, appears as the divine Lord, the personal God, endowed with manifold glories. By his divine power he holds dominion over all the worlds. At the periods of creation and dissolution of the universe, he alone exists. Those who realize him become immortal...The Lord is one without a second. Within man he dwells, and within all other beings. He projects the universe, maintains it, and withdraws it into himself (Svetasvatara Upanishad; Prabhavananda, 1948:121).

Let a man, freed from the taint of passion, worship Brahman alone (Chandogya Upanishad; Prabhavananda, 1948:64).

We must be careful not to confuse the term *Brahman* with *Brahma*. *Brahman* is the all-embracing Reality while *Brahma* is the creator deity within Hinduism. As such, *Brahma* exists in the manifest domain of creation, and is the "first created being in the relative universe" (Nikhilananda, 1948:73). The Upanishads describe him as the first-born of the gods. As the creator deity, Brahma occupies a place in the Hindu trinity along with Vishnu, the preserver deity, and Shiva, the deity of destruction. *Brahman*, on the other hand, is self-existent, eternal, and not dependent on whether creation is in a manifest or unmanifest phase or condition.

The "divine Lord" and "personal God" is "Ishvara," (also spelled Ishvara) which, according to Nikhilananda, has three aspects: "As Brahma He creates, as Vishnu He preserves, and as Siva (older spelling of Shiva) He destroys. These three form one Lord, or God, who is known by three different names according to His three functions" (1949:72). The Supreme Lord is referred to as "Mahasvara" who is "one without a second." Nikhilananda also adds, "Endowed with infinite power, Brahman is the Lord of Lords," (1949:72).

This concept of Brahman, all-pervading and personified as the ultimate deity or "Lord of Lords," as both personal and impersonal, and as Creator, Sustainer and destroyer of the Universe, shares many similarities with the monotheistic God of Judaism and Christianity. The God of the Christian tradition is in our midst (Jer. 14:9), and within and through all (Eph. 4:6). At the same time, it is in God that we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). He is the Creator

(Gen. 1), a sustainer (Psalm 3:5), and the God who destroyed the earth with a great flood (Gen. 7), and Sodom and Gomorrah with brimstone and fire from heaven (Gen. 19:24). He is impersonal in that He is a God of justice who brings punishment (Jer. 14:10); He is personal in that He is merciful and forgiving (Psalm. 103:8; 86:5) and even sacrifices his own incarnate form to redeem humanity.

### **Christianity and the Upanishads in the Context of History**

This examination of scriptural writings reveals that many teachings present in canonical Christian scriptures are also found in the Upanishads. In the context of the gospels, many of these teachings represent pivotal ideas in the emergence of Christianity from Judaism. Some of these ideas are expressed using images found in the Upanishads, several of which are noticeably absent from the Hebrew scriptures that are part of the Christian canon. These pivotal ideas include 1) God as all-pervading (Acts 17:27,28; Eph. 4:6), 2) the incarnate God as the beginning and end of Creation (Rev. 22:13), 3) the Son of God as being tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1-11), 4) life free from desire (thirst) and anxiety (John 4:13; Matt. 6:25-34), 5) desire as a primary cause of sin (James 1:14,15), 6) freedom from sin as gained through the incarnate Lord (Rom. 6:20-23), 7) communion with God as one being "yoked" to the divine through the incarnate Lord (Matt 11:29,30), and 8) the Son as spending three days in the tomb before being raised to life eternal.

It must be said therefore that in substance, many of the primary tenets in Christianity already existed before Jesus and outside of Judaism. However, the context in which these tenets are presented in the gospels is highly dramatic, poetic, and much more concise and accessible than as they existed previously in the Upanishads. Also, unlike in Hinduism, they are given expression through the life and teachings of a single individual who in Christianity is said to be Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord.

Is it actually possible though, that the teachings in the Upanishads could have been encountered by Jesus and the apostles so as to have helped shape the gospel record?

Before addressing this question, allow me to point out that, for some people, this question does not need answering. Those who view Truth as universal and as having been expressed through a variety of sources throughout human history will have their belief confirmed by this discussion of parallel teachings as represented in Hinduism and Christianity. But for readers

who wish to investigate the possibility of an historical cultural link, I can say the answer to the above question is an unequivocal "yes."

As the events of the ancient world recede further into the shadow of the past, there is the tendency to distinguish the cultures of the Mediterranean Asiatic regions more so than is anthropologically accurate. Egypt, India, Greece, Babylonia, Judaea, Sumeria, Persia, all had their mythologies, but the greatest myth is that these cultures lived in isolation. There was gradual but significant cultural exchange going on, a fact well-documented by historian-theologians and by military campaigns and conquests. Let us begin in what is now India.

Around 2500 BC Indo-European tribes from the north invaded the Indus valley of the western Indian subcontinent and established a Brahmanic culture based on the mythology and world view of the Vedas. The word "Veda," meaning knowledge, comes from the Sanskrit root "vid" meaning "to know." The term however, does not connote academic knowledge, but rather intuitive knowledge gained through self-realization or spiritual enlightenment. The Vedas were passed down through oral tradition and are still preserved in this manner today by Vedic pundits who specialize in chanting its hymns. But by the year 1000 BC the Rig Veda had been written down, followed by the primary Upanishads which existed in written form by about 500 BC. The conquests of Alexander the Great then followed (ca 350 BC), which extended from Turkey, south to Egypt, and east to beyond the Indus valley, the heart of the Vedic culture.

History confirms that religious ideas can spread over large geographical areas through military occupation. During the first century AD, the primary rival to Christianity was Mithraism, a religion based on a fertility myth involving the mythological sacrifice of a bull. According to Davies, the exact origins of Mithraism are not known, but date back well before the Christian era into Persia and India (1957:135). Its diffusion throughout the Mediterranean region was the result of Roman military occupation. It is not unreasonable then, to suspect that a similar diffusion of the teachings in the Upanishads may have occurred between 500 BC and 30 AD facilitated by military campaigns such as those of Alexander the Great. In addition, it is known that Buddhist missionaries were proselytizing in Alexandria before the time assigned to Jesus' birth (Pagels, 1981:xxi). Jesus and the Apostles would not have had to travel to India or Tibet to encounter the Upanishads as "new age" writers suggest. Instead, they could have

acquired this knowledge through exposure to the numerous mystery cults in the middle east which may have had access to Indian teachings.<sup>3</sup>

### **Blending Myth with History**

Whether or not one chooses to embrace the idea of an Upanishadic influence in the gospels, the fact that there are teachings in the New Testament that closely parallel those in the Vedic scriptures adds a new and significant dimension to research into early Christian thinking. At the very least, it should provoke us to ask questions that challenge orthodox views of the Christian faith. For example, when Jesus says: "He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life," and Krishna says: "I destroy the darkness born of ignorance by the shining light of wisdom," are they talking about the same light? And is this light the source of spiritual enlightenment as described in the Upanishads?

When Krishna says, "He who knows me is undeluded and freed from all sins," is his redemptive power equal to Christ's? Can both Krishna and Jesus Christ be the source of all things, the beginning and end of creation? Should they not then be considered two different manifestations of the same Truth, the same Eternal Word?

Another implication of these parallel teachings and metaphors is that they potentially make the Christian message far more culturally embracing. Most Christians are well aware of the Hebrew imagery that is represented in Christianity. The Greek, Essene and Persian influences perhaps are less familiar but have been clearly articulated by theological scholars (Davies, 1957; Allegro, 1984). Now images in the gospels that are found in the Upanishads, which predate the gospels by 500 years, also beg for explanation.

From Judaism is derived the image of Christ as the Pascal Lamb, sacrificed on the Passover to bring salvation to humanity and freedom from death. As Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom, so was the Christ seen by the apostles as the means through which God's people could be set free from sin and overcome the ultimate enemy, death. The gospels also link Christ's death and resurrection with the story of Jonah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40). But Jesus is also described as casting fire upon

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion on the mystery cults prevalent in the Mediterranean region during the first century A.D., see A Powell Davies *The First Christian* pp. 119-143 (see references).

the earth (Luke 12:49) and like the Greek Prometheus suffers punishment for his deed. Whereas Prometheus is stretched out and chained to a rock with a vulture gnawing at his liver, Jesus is stretched out on a cross with a spear piercing his right side.<sup>4</sup>

The fire mission of Christ is also representative of the Egyptian Phoenix, the mythological bird that comes to earth, dies, then resurrects and ascends from its own ashes to return to the sun. The Phoenix image also is found in the Rig Veda where it is referred to as the "sunbird." In addition to its cyclical journey from and to the sun, the sunbird is said to carry soma, the elixir of Immortality, on its wings. In the Rig Veda soma is also associated with healing (Rig Veda 8.79.2). The image thus is remarkably similar to the passage in the Hebrew book of Malachi which reads: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteous shall rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:1-2).

The spirit/flesh duality in the gospels and the imagery of light verses darkness, particularly those which imply doing battle with the powers of darkness, are representative of Zoroastrian dualism. The myth of the primordial Adam, found in Gnostic and Essene theology is alluded to several times in the New testament. In the Gnostic myth, there was said to have existed in the beginning of creation a spiritual body of light referred to as the primordial Adam. This primordial body was broken up by demonic forces into pieces of light, each piece becoming a soul to be born into the world. At the end of time a redeemer was to come to "save" the souls of light, rejoining them into the great spiritual body (Davies 1957:120).

In the *Gospel of John*, this Gnostic idea is recast in the parable of the sheepfold where the sheep, representing the souls of light, are scattered by the wolf, the wolf signifying the forces of darkness (John 10:14-16). In addition, the apostle Paul speaks of the "Body of Christ" in which one is spiritually baptized (I Cor. 12:12). There are also several New Testament references to those in Christ as being the "sons of light" (John 12:36; I Thess. 5:5, Luke 16:8), and God's plan to rejoin the spiritual body, to "unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

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<sup>4</sup> In artistic renditions, the wound in Christ's side is traditionally placed over the liver as indicated by the descriptive phrase in John's gospel "... there came out blood and water" (John 19:34). The "water" in this passage is believed to refer to bile. It may be significant that the account of Jesus being pierced by the spear only occurs in the Gospel of John. John's Gospel begins by equating Christ with the powerful Greek concept of Logos. Could it be that the apostle was intentionally evoking the promethean image so as to appeal to those familiar of Greek philosophy and mythology?

Now, in addition to these Hebrew, Gnostic, Zoroastrian, and Egyptian images, the Christian writings are found to contain images present in the Hindu Upanishads as well. These include: 1) the “Kingdom” of God as lying within and as being analogous to a mustard seed and a treasure buried in a field, 2) the fulfillment of spiritual life being a life free from anxiety and desire (thirst), 3) desire as being a primary cause of sin, 4) freedom from sin as gained through the incarnate Lord, 5) man being compared to a grain of corn or wheat which bears fruit only after falling to the earth to die, and 6) the son who being given over to death, spends three nights in the house of the King of Death and resists the temptation in order to receive the secret of immortality.

This cross-cultural integration of imagery and mythological themes found in the gospels, from a literary standpoint alone is truly remarkable. Even to people who view the Christian epic as total fiction, the integration of symbolism accomplished by the gospel writers and the subtlety with which it underlies and enhances the more apparent circumstantial drama is unsurpassed in all of literature, even in the powerful plays of Shakespeare. It appears that the apostles conceived of the presence of God on earth as the union of mythology and chronology; that is, the marriage of myth and history such that the most meaningful myths of humanity are acted out on the stage of the world through the life of an extraordinary person.

Christians therefore should not feel threatened by the unveiling of so-called "Eastern" motifs in the gospels, particularly those dealing with nirvana or spiritual enlightenment. Rather, connections with Hinduism and Buddhism should be viewed as adding to the power and universality of the gospel message. Independent of a person's acceptance or lack of acceptance of the Christian epic, it appears the apostles who gave birth to Christianity saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of *all cultural traditions*, and spoke to that fulfillment simultaneously in both historical and mythological contexts.

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- Biblical passages are taken from the Revised Standard Version and checked against the Alfred Marshall *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*.

### **A Word about Translations**

The primary translation of the Bible used for this study is the Revised Standard Version. Biblical passages were also checked against the Alfred Marshall *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (see Bibliography, page 18). Passages from the Upanishads were taken from the translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester. Swami Nikhilananda's four volume translation and commentary on the Upanishads was also consulted. The hymns cited from the Rig Veda are from an anthology by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty while verses from the Bhagavad Gita were taken from separate translations by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Elliot Deutsch.