

# THE SANSKRIT SOURCES OF THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES OF THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF JESUS AND A DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIAN LINDTNER

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## Introduction and Thesis

People in England call themselves or are referred to as the English, descendants of the Anglo-Saxons from Europe, though Scandinavians settled down in England from the eighth century and the Celtic people have lived there before the coming of the so-called Anglo-Saxons. There are quite a few Scandinavian loan words in English to confirm the partial Scandinavian ancestry of the English. On the other hand, there are far fewer Celtic words in the current English speech, like smithereens, some place names, and MOM and DAD. It has recently been confirmed that a vast number of the English carry Celtic mitochondrial genes in them to support the view that the English are not only Anglo-Saxons but also Celtic or British. This means that the original mothers of the present-day English were British mothers, though it is normally, from a historical perspective, impossible to prove. In other words, the people of England, ethnically speaking, are Germanic, Scandinavian, and Celtic. Rightly so. From a similar perspective, such is also the case of the Christian gospels, which mitochondrially speaking, contain too many Buddhist literary genes but not easy to prove with contemporary historical documentation except through analysis of the gospel texts and Buddhist texts. Such a literary study is what many of us have been doing all these years. Just recently my anatomical analysis of the gospel narratives of the trial and death of Jesus has convinced me that these narratives, besides the birth stories and teachings of Jesus found in the gospels, were also originally influenced significantly by Indian Sanskrit texts. In particular, the two texts are the second-century BCE Sanskrit play MRCHCHAKATIKA (Little Clay Cart) and the SANGABHEDAVASTU of the Mahaprinirvansutra from the Vinayapitaka of the Mulasarvastivadins. It is Professor Christian Lindtner,--thank you, Christian for your brilliant scholarly investigations and insights--who has brought my attention to the SANGABHEDAVASTU, which itself has influenced the Sanskrit play. Together these two works will account for very many details found in the trial narratives of the gospels. As a result, we can view the gospels not merely as Christian texts but also as Buddhist and Hebrew texts.

My Apology. Earlier I had been toying with the idea of presenting a paper with a CD Rom or videotape at this conference. Meantime, being retired, rather lazy, very distracted, I kept procrastinating. At the last minute, I decided to contribute my mite to your scholarly discussions with a paper sent electronically to Christian. Please accept my apologies for not being able to be present in Sweden in person. Scope

There are two major parts to this paper: (1) a synopsis of my discussion of the Sanskrit sources of the trial and death of Jesus and (2) a cross-section of my discussions,

disagreements, agreements, and arguments, in short my dialogue, with Christian on the extent of the influence of Buddhist ideas on early Christianity.

## **1. Sanskrit Sources of the Trial Narratives**

First I shall point out briefly the problem with the historical or testimonial accuracy of the gospel narratives to argue that it is an ancient literary text or rather a composite of several subtexts, which is studied like any other literary text from the scholarly point of view rather than from a confessional or theological stance. I suggest that we keep mythology separate from history, theology separate from literary analysis, one without necessarily intruding into the other's space.

Trouble with the Gospel Passion Narratives.

There is hardly any contemporary historical record to verify the details of the trial and death of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. Perhaps only the bare fact that a certain Jesus was executed by fellow Jews during the tenure of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate can be attested with some credibility from non-Christian sources. Such a case can be made from Josephus, Tacitus, Memoirs of Pilate (perhaps), and the Talmud.

As for Christian sources, apart from the gospels, we have very little in the Acts of the Apostles and Letters of St. Paul. I Timothy 6:13 refers only to the Roman trial; I Thessalonians 2: 13-16 appears to claim that the Jewish authorities killed Jesus. Remarkably, the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, an Akhmimic manuscript in 1887, confirms the Jews' responsibility to Jesus' death to the extent that it was King Herod and not Pilate who gives the execution orders.

The four canonical gospels, on the other hand, provide detailed accounts of the last days and hours of Jesus' life by projecting these accounts as eyewitness accounts. The Fourth Gospel says, "This is vouched for by an eyewitness whose evidence is to be trusted. He knows that he speaks the truth so that you too may believe" (John 21:35). As a believer, I have no problem here because I take the whole package of our Christian tradition in the manner I take my American citizenship with the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence by professing allegiance to the United States of America—an act of confession and oath-taking. As a scholar, like most of you, I am pessimistic about the historical accuracy of the many inconsistent testimonies of the so-called eyewitnesses, just as I disagree with the many policies and pronouncements that come from my government in Washington. As the Catholic Jerome Biblical Commentary (43:1810) puts it, "The trial of Jesus and events and persons associated with it is one of the most complex problems in the Gospel interpretation." Simply stated, there are far too many inconsistencies and variations in the four gospel trial narratives to warrant a historical, faithful eyewitness report of the trial and death of Jesus by the writers of the gospels.

As for these inconsistencies, scholars over the past two hundred years have questioned the

chronology of events, legal aspects of the trial, the execution of Jesus, the topography of the various scenes, and so on. Let me point out just a few on account of time restrictions.

The trial of Jesus is different in Mark and John: Jesus speaks differently, acts differently, and dies differently in these gospels. Mark's or the Synoptic Jesus is arrested on the 15th of Nissan, sentenced to death at night, bound for trial, and sentenced a second time with Simon Cyrene of carrying the cross to the place of execution; he is raised on the cross at 9:00 A.M., and dies about 3:00 P.M., after the plaintive cry why he was forsaken. Mark nowhere mentions the restriction of the Sanhedrin's authority to carry out judgments it has passed (Mark 14:64 vs. John 18:31). Mark does not provide an explanation why the prisoner was handed over to Pilate. John's Jesus, on the other hand, is arrested on the 14th of Nissan, put into fetters immediately, sentence at midday, led to execution in the afternoon with Jesus himself carrying the cross, dies toward evening. While Mark's Jesus, rather taciturn during trial and on the cross, John's Jesus loquacious, converses with bystanders, and dies contentedly by uttering that it is all accomplished and not by crying, "Eli, Eli, lama shabaktani." As for the time that lapsed between Jesus' death and resurrection, Mark seems to contradict himself: Mark 15:42 and 16:2 say that Jesus died on the cross on a Friday evening and rose from the dead very early in the morning on the following Sunday. But Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33 ff., say that the Son of Man will rise from the dead only after three days. Apparently Matthew and Luke were aware of this chronological difficulty by writing "on the third day" (Matt 16:21, 17:23, Luke: 9:22, 18:33). Further, according to all four narratives, less than 24 hours elapse from the Last Supper to the burial of Jesus. Evidently the evangelists compress too many events like the arrest, nocturnal trial, morning trial, then trial by Pilate, trip to Herod Antipas' palace, flogging, mocking, condemnation, via dolosa, crucifixion, death, and burial in the afternoon into such a short time. Distances in Jerusalem are not negligible; also the agon of the crucified lasts usually a long time.

There are hardly any solid grounds to support the theory that the Jewish Sanhedrin had no authority to execute a serious law-breaker so much so the Sanhedrin had to send Jesus over to the Roman Governor. There is further no recorded custom of releasing a prisoner during the Festival. It looks like Jesus, Son of Abba(s), is an interesting case; as I read it, Pilate dismisses the charges of blasphemy of the son of the Father (Jesus' accused crime of claiming to be the Son of God the Father) and accepts the charge of sedition---Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews and says so on the titulus of condemnation:: "King of the Jews." John, on the other hand, puts both charges on his titulus: "Jesus, the Nazorean (heretic) and King of the Jews." Also, all told, there are five various mockery scenes in the four gospels.

The simple conclusion is that we can hardly claim that all the details of passion narratives are eyewitness, accurate, historical reportage, rather, these four narratives are resourceful compositions based also on different sources other than the four gospel accounts. We know that none of Matthew's additions to Mark are found in Luke; in fact, Luke's additions are incompatible with Matthew's. For example, details of Judas' death (Acts 1: 16-20) are inconsonant with Judas' suicide story in Matthew 27:3-10. Luke seems to rule out the Matthean episode of women seeing the risen Jesus (25:9 ff); Luke ignores appearance of the risen Jesus in Galilee and replaces it with a similar event in Jerusalem (24: 36ff). John's

passion narrative, which is twice as long as Mark's, does not seem to be based on any of the three Synoptic versions; for example, the plot against Jesus (11:47-53) differs radically from the Markan version (14: 1 ff). Also, the story of the arrest of Jesus in John (18:1-12) varies in many ways from the Synoptic account as to location, Judas' role, the arresting party, escape of the disciples, the identification of the one who draws the sword, and the victim. Unlike in the Synoptics, in John there is no session of the Sanhedrin, but Jesus appears for an interrogation at the house of Annas who does not give a verdict and later before Caiaphas, who incidentally appears only in Matthew. However, similarities in all four gospels abound: questionings of Jesus by the High Priest, Peter's denial, the Barabbas episode, reference to Passover Pardon, Pilate's offer to release Jesus, the crowd's reaction, the scourging and mocking of Jesus—the Ecce Homo episode is unique to the Fourth Gospel--, the handing over of the prisoner to be crucified, the crucifixion of Jesus, the drinking/tasting of vinegar, and the death of Jesus, and finally leading to the references to the live Jesus after the crucifixion. The purpose of showing the similarities found in the four gospels is to argue that all the four gospel writers had used a common archetype. One may also arguably conclude that there is a historical kernel to the story of the trial and death of Jesus. However, the many textual variants indicate that though the four editors might have consulted one another, as we do when we exchange papers at a symposium, the four narrators were not contemporary eyewitness reporters of the trial and death of Jesus. Rather, the gospel writers used other non-biblical sources like texts and words from dramatic enactments of various passion plays and Holy Week liturgical services.

Of course, none of us will deny that the Christian gospels are Greek texts at least simply because they were written in Greek for Greek-speaking audiences.

In a similar vein, we can argue that the gospels are also Hebrew texts on account of the plethora of quotations and allusions to the Hebrew Bible found in the gospels.

The gospels even present the passion narratives as illustrative commentary on a collection of Hebrew biblical texts. Also, the gospels portray Jesus as a Jew, born of a Jewish mother, circumcised as a Jew, and presented in the Temple as a Jew, and he was most likely a rabbi, as evidenced by the fact that Jesus is addressed in the gospels by some as rabbi.

## **2. The Passion Texts as Sanskrit Texts**

We have been able to identify two major Sanskrit sources for the trial narratives.

A. Sangabhedavastu of the Mahaparinirvanasutra:

Professor Lindtner has identified the Sangabhedavastu section of the Mahaparinirvanasutra of the Vinayapitaka of the Mulasarvastivadians. I have studied this text carefully and have arrived at some significant conclusions. Since Professor Lindtner is the discoverer of this resource, I think he alone should take credit for the discovery. This is the story of Gautama, a holy man, who was wrongfully condemned to die on the cross for murdering the courtesan Bhadra. Gautama is impaled on the cross, and his mentor Krishna Dvapayana visits him and

enters into a long dialogue, at the end of which he dies at the place of skulls after engendering two offspring, the progenitors of the Ikshavaku Dynasty. Professor Lindtner will speak about this source after I have discussed my own discovered source, time permitting.

#### B. Mrcchakatika and the Trial Narratives:

The gospel narratives of Jesus' trial seem to have been heavily influenced also by the classical Sanskrit play *Mrcchakatika* (The Clay Cart), dating from the second century BCE, which itself is based on the *sangabhedavastu* mentioned above.

This remarkable play is the story of a truly good man, compared to Lord Shiva. He is accused of the crime of murder of the courtesan *Vasantasena*, betrayed to the authorities, and is subjected to a lengthy trial. The judge, admitting his incompetence to condemn a Brahmin, sends the case over to the king who condemns the good man *Charudatta* to be executed and impaled with an inscription on him. The condemned is then ordered to carry his cross (Skt *sulam* vs. Gk *zulon*, also as in the Bible) to the place of execution. Meantime, the king's brother-in-law, who murdered the courtesan had buried her body under a pile of leaves is identified by *Vasantasena*, who rose from her deadly swoon with the help of a Buddhist monk. She saves *Charudatta* from death. The good man *Charudatta* forgives his accuser *Samsthanaka* and appoints the Buddhist monk as the bishop or head of all the Buddhist monasteries in the realm. There is a marriage in the end as well: *Charudatta* accepts *Vasantasena* as his second wife by making her a *kulastrī* (noble woman and no longer a despised prostitute). There is a subplot or political foregrounding to the plot: According to the prophecies, a new king *Aryaka*, a cowherd, is reported to replace the reigning evil king *Palaka*, who promptly imprisons *Aryaka*, purporting to put him to death. *Aryaka* is rescued from the prison by his followers, and *Charudatta* helps him escape his captors by letting him get away in his bullock cart. When *Aryaka* seizes power, he orders King *Palaka* executed like a lamb on the sacrificial altar and appoints *Charudatta* as his suzerain king, all of which should remind us of the role played by King Herod in the gospels and of Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father after his ascension into heaven.

I believe that the play *Clay Cart* is one of the resources of the early Passion narratives and/or Passion plays, of which only one, the Greek play *Christos Paschon*, has survived. The play also provided numerous ideas and suggestions to the pre-canonical and/or canonical gospel tradition. This perception is based on my studies and others' research, which have shown so much Buddhist and Indian religious material in the Christian gospels. I have myself shown that there is more Buddhist material embedded in the Nativity stories of Jesus than there are references to the Hebrew Bible. Further, Christian Lindtner and others have so many sayings of Jesus to their Buddhist sources.

What has eluded scholars so far is the passion narrative. Now we have found two major sources that would account for many details in the passion narrative. I will list below some

of those interesting parallels without much explication for your own reflection.

1. Foremost, both narratives are stories about unjust accusation, unfair trial, death, burial, and resurrection.

2. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus utters “I thirst” which is reminiscent of the basic teaching of the Buddha on “thirst” (trshna/tanha); also, in the play Vasantasena asks for water. The Buddhist monk wrings water off his habit into the mouth of the strangled Vasantasena and quenches her thirst. In the gospel, the drink was proffered to Jesus on a hyssop. Actually, the word “hyssop” is a pun, which also means cotton or cloth and not just the reed of the Synoptics. The cotton plant is a variant of genus gossipum, metonymically standing for cloth.

3. The revivification/resurrection parallel is intriguing. The strangled Vasantasena was, of course, not dead forever. She was probably only asleep like the dead Lazarus of the Fourth Gospel, where the writer equates sleep with death.

4. The Sanskrit play, like the Passion narrative, begins with a meal; also, there is an exquisite meal in the play.

5. Jesus, after the meal, retires to a garden where begins his passion with betrayal and arrest. Charudatta’s betrayal, accusation, and ordeal begin also in a garden.

6. The literary enemies of Jesus try to bribe Judas before Jesus’ arrest and the guards after Jesus’ death. In the Sanskrit play, the villain Samsthanaka tries to bribe the servant Sthavaraka to lie, but he refuses.

7. During Peter’s denial scene a cock crows in the gospel narratives—a sign of ill-luck. In the Indian play it is a raven that is cawing.

8. As Jesus cries in Gethsemane, “My soul is sorrowful unto death; not as I will but as Thou willest,” Charudatta cries, “Now I am sunk deep in sorrow’s sea. I know no fear. I know no sadness any more.”

9. The cup metaphor of Gethsemene is also found in the Mrchchakatika: “How can I, helpless, taste that dread poison/To drink shame’s poisoned cup how can I bear?”

10. The bewildering image of unbroken colt ridden by Jesus during his triumphant entry into Jerusalem has this echo in the Sanskrit play: the colt is associated with Fate in the play: “Fate, like the colt, is reckless.” In the gospels, Jesus seems to be going along with fate or conquers it.

11. Mark and Matthew attribute Jesus’ arrest to his enemies’ envy as in the Mrchchakatika, where Samsthanaka is moved by envy towards Charudatta who has the love of Vasantasena. Perhaps Judas harbored envious thoughts against the Galilean Peter, who was the heir

apparent of Jesus.

12. We find the ritual of washing of feet in the *Mrchchakatika*. The servant Vardhamana asks the maid Radanika to wash the feet of the Brahmins.

13. While the disciples slept, Jesus' enemies came and snatched him away. In the Indian play, the thief Sravilaka came at night and stole the reassurance while disciple Maitreya (Peter's counterpart in the play). Read Jesus as treasure in the gospels.

14. The name "Maitreya" for beloved follower of Charudatta is intriguing. "Maitreya" means "lovable, friendly, and friend." In the Fourth Gospel Jesus calls his disciples "friends."

15. The bewildering kiss of betrayal seems to have been foreshadowed in Maitreya's betrayal of the gold box in the Indian play; "Take it," says Maitreya in his sleep. In the gospels, the sleeping disciples let the brigands steal Jesus.

16. According to the Fourth Gospel, the enemies of Jesus fell down at his feet when they came to arrest him. In the *Mrchchakatika*, only the sword of the executioner falls on the ground at the nick of time in the execution scene, which never takes place. Later in the play, the enemy Samsthanaka falls down at the feet of Charudatta.

17. The scene in which Charudatta forgives his mortal enemy Samsthanaka reminds me of Jesus' words on the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

18. Matthew's reference—in Jesus' rebuke to Peter for drawing sword during his arrest—is interesting. In the *Mrchchakatika*, the one who would protect and rescue Charudatta from his enemies is a symbolic army, the army of spring, which is the literal meaning of the word *Vasantasena*.

19. There has been no satisfactory legal explanation for the handing over of Jesus by the Sanhedrin to Pilate; the Council claimed it lacked the authority to condemn a blasphemer to death when, in fact, it had the authority. Perhaps the Indian play gives the answer to this crux. The judge in the play lacked the authority to sentence a Brahmin to death. Therefore, he sent the case up to the king, who promptly sentences Charudatta to death, as Pilate does in the gospels.

20. Only Luke would send Jesus to King Herod Antipas during the trial. Here the role of King Herod is intriguing. According to the canonical gospels, it is Governor Pilate, the representative of Caesar, who pronounces the death sentence on Jesus. In this context, I have never been able to understand why Luke would dispatch Jesus to King Herod? According to one gospel, as in the Indian play, it is King Herod who orders Jesus to death. It is the Gospel of Peter!

21. In both traditions, enemies threaten the judge with dire consequences if the judge were to refuse to condemn the accused man to death.

22. In both traditions, the accused condemned to be impaled or crucified. In the Indian play, as in Deuteronomic practice, impaling is expected to take place only after execution. The gospels perhaps are alluding to the Roman form of impaling the live person. However, the Fourth Gospel appeals to the Deuteronomic code when Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask Jesus' body for burial!

23. The breaking of the legs of the crucified is referred to in both literary texts.

24. The Fourth Gospel provides an interesting but enigmatic explanation on the relationship between the high priests Annas and Caiaphas as in-laws—father-in-law and son-in-law. In the Indian play the evil Samsthanaka and the wicked king Palaka are brothers-in-law.

25. In both texts, there is reference to a titulus or inscription to be displayed on the dead body or the cross. We see the titulus on our crucifixes as INRI (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum—slightly different on Greek crosses, where rex becomes basileus--). Why would John insist on including Nazarenus/Aramaic Nazraya (heretic on account of blasphemy) as part of the titulus unlike the other evangelists who have only “king of the Jews” on the titulus? Let us ignore the linguistically untenable explanation that Nazarenus means “from Nazareth.” The Jewish authorities had already established the guilt of Jesus but refused to stone Jesus to death, as the Torah stipulates. My only explanation is that the pre-canonical narratives, which the gospel writers accepted, were following the lead of the Indian play. The Indian judge says, “A judge decides the guilt; a king decides the punishment.” In my opinion, this explanation is the best response to the crux mentioned above. This also explains why the Fourth Gospel includes heresy as one of the charges against Jesus to be included in the titulus.

26. The “field of blood” (hql dma), a truly Aramaic phrase with the quotation taken from Zechariah 11: 12-13, which is attributed erroneously to Jeremiah and not quoted faithfully by the evangelists has been a celebrated crux in the gospels. Then again Golgotha or Calvary is not a hill. I suspect that the gospel writers or the pre-canonical narrators were referring to the burning ground or burial ground where Charudatta was taken to be executed. Professor Lindtner is right in pointing out that the best explanation is found in the Buddhist Sangabhedavastu.

27. According to the gospels, Jesus was buried in a private garden exactly as Vasantasena of the Mrchchakatika was.

28. The appointment of Peter as the shepherd of all the sheep by Jesus in one of his post-resurrection appearance is certainly reminiscent of the appointment of the Buddhist monk as the bishop or overseer of all Buddhist monasteries or viharas in the kingdom.

29. What is most intriguing in the Indian play is that at the end Charudatta marries the

courtesan Vasantasena to make a kulastri (honorable woman) of her. In the gospels, on the other hand, there is no marriage between Jesus and, say, Mary Magdalene. Perhaps we have to seek the answer to this paradox on the mystical/eschatological/mythological level as in the book of Apocalypse, where the divine Lamb or Bridegroom is espoused to 144,000 virgins. Perhaps Matthew is using the kulastri-motif in his Infancy Gospel where Mary is made a legitimate wife by Joseph who marries her as Charudatta marries Vasantasena.

30. The Apocalypse also carries a description of heavenly Jerusalem, which reminds me of the elaborate description of the glorious mansion Vasantasena, whom Charudatta at one point addresses as the “goddess.”

31. What bothers me is why the word “cart” does not appear in the gospels if it is a play purportedly used by the gospel writers. In Buddhist parlance, the cart stands for “vehicle” as in Mahayana and Hinayana. My only answer is that boat replaces cart in the gospels, as when Jesus climbs into the boat of Peter—like Aryaka climbing into Charudatta’s bullock cart.

32. I have saved the best for the last. All of us vividly remember Jesus’s response to his accusers: “You have said it” (su legeis).

These two words are exactly what Charudatta utters when he is accused by his own accuser Samsthanaka: “You have said it” (tvayi yavoktam).

I HAVE JUST DECIDED AT THIS POINT TO LET PROFESSOR LINDTNER HIMSELF ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF THE MANY PARALLELS FOUND IN THE GOSPELS AND THE SANGHABHEDAVASTU OF THE MAHAPARINIRVANASUTRA OF THE VINAYAPITAKA OF THE MULASARVASTIVADINS. HE CAN DO A BETTER JOB HERE THAN I CAN. ALSO HE CAN ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF THE DEPENDENCE OF THE INDIAN PLAY MRCHCHAKATIKA ON THE BUDDHIST TEXT AND ITS ANTIQUITY.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude: I have given only a sampling of the many parallels and allusions found in the Mrchchakatika and the Passion narratives of the gospels. The influence of the Indian play can be seen in all the four gospels in their entirety. But the influence is mainly on the Passion narratives. Which leads to my contention that the Passion narratives were originally dramatic performances like our present-day Passionspiele.

Now, as for the question about the time of the composition of the Indian play, opinions vary. Modern critics want to place the date of composition to a later period. The traditional Indian date of the play is between the second and first century BCE. That will be the subject of an entire chapter of a book, which is what I am trying to do at this point.

Nest, as for the question in your mind about contacts between India and the Middle East, I have devoted an entire chapter in my book Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian

Traditions to show that intellectuals, traders, and writers of the Middle East know plenty about India and its rich culture. There was unbroken spice trade between the Greek/Roman Empire and India especially since the days of Alexander the Great. There were Greek kingdoms in northwestern India. The great Buddhist work of the second century BCE, Milindapanha is a dialogue between the Greek Bactrian king Menander and Buddhist sage Nagasena. In fact, an Oxhyrrincus Papyrus fragment from Egypt contains a passage in a South Indian language. Remarkably, the gospel writers, especially the authors of the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse, were literary geniuses, very erudite in the literatures of the ancient world. They were all great mythographers as well. They went beyond the Buddhist mythology and created a new mythology, which we now call Christian. The myths they have created are far more powerful and enduring and more truthful than the unverifiable "historical" truths we are clamoring for. The stories of the New Testament, including the Passion narratives, belong not to history but to mythology. The details of the life of Jesus, like those of the Buddha found in Buddhist texts or like those of Krishna found in the Puranas, belong to the realm of mythology, which we accept as part of our cultural/religious heritage and do not try to prove them as facts from contemporary historical records. As a professing Oriental, Indian Catholic, I can live with this line of thinking and reflection like most of the rest of heathendom and Christendom.

## PART II: DIALOGUE WITH PROFESSOR CHRISTIAN LINDTNER

Last September here at Notre Dame/St. Mary's College, I had the pleasure to meet Christian Lindtner, Kim Beck, and Robert Countess. We enjoyed each other's intellectual company for a couple of days. I greatly admire Lindtner's profound knowledge of Sanskrit/Pali and Buddhist texts as well as the constructive criticism of Bob Countess along with the frank views of Duncan Derrett presented by Kim Beck. Derrett argues for mutual influence between the Gospels and Buddhist texts. Obviously, Lindtner succeeded in making Derrett change some of his view in his last published book. Lindtner and I argue that the Christian gospels, especially the apocrypha, were influenced by Buddhist texts and not vice versa.

Lindtner and I do not see eye to eye or agree on the nature and extent of influence.

I would agree with Lindtner that the Jesus of Faith is a "fiction"??in the good sense that the Jesus of faith belongs to the realm of myth/faith and not to the realm of unreliable history. TRUTH is not defined by us merely as correspondence between faith and history (*adequatio intellectus et rei*) but as coherence (it all makes sense or at least it all does not make total non-sense), as Kim Beck would put it. On the other hand, I hold, especially on the basis of other texts, that there was a Jesus of history, of whom we know very little. In my Catholic/Oriental tradition, faith is not based on the written scriptures since my folks, like the disciples of Jesus, were already members of the Jesus Movement long before Jesus died and long, long before the New Testament or the works of St. Paul came into existence. We are "Christians" simply because we are born into a Christian community and because we have received baptism.

Having said that, let us go back into the dangerous, precarious realm of the so-called "history" based on testimonies—whether they are reliable or not. Verifying testimonies would lead us almost into a processus ad infinitum. Don't we need a lot of faith to accept these testimonies? Faith is only a matter of acceptance and not the result of scientific verification. We can't even verify events that happened a few hundred years ago or even a few years ago, let alone verify events that supposedly happened some 2000 years ago.

As for the dating of the New Testament Gospels, it is worth pointing out that the earliest fragment (from the Fourth Gospel) comes only from 125 A.D., or so. The complete NT texts come from around the fourth century. Having said that, I don't deny the gospels texts in their entirety could have existed already in the second century at least simply because the gospel texts deal with a phenomenon from the first century.

As for the Buddhist texts, they describe a phenomenon from the fourth/fifth century BC. The Buddhist traditions antedate, in written or oral or both forms, long, long before the NT gospels ever came into existence. We argue rightly that the OT texts preexisted the NT texts and that the authors of the NT gospels knew the OT at least on the basis that the OT texts are cited directly or indirectly in the NT even when the OT texts are not identified openly by the gospels writers; for example, Luke's first chapter and the Magnificat appear to be in several places to be a string of "plagiarized" quotations or paraphrases. That the Gospel writers deliberately tried to hide their sources seems to be evident from the fact they don't cite most of their OT sources. Of course, they were not obligated to cite all their sources. The situation is the same with the NT and Buddhist texts. When we see, as Lindtner, I, and several other scholars have shown, that the Buddhist texts and traditions (oral or written or both) inhere in the NT gospels so extensively, we have no hesitation to conclude that the gospels were extensively influenced by the Buddhist traditions just as the NT gospels were extensively influenced by the OT.

Lindtner and I seem to agree in general along these lines. Of course, we also disagree, as all scholars do.

On my part, I think that the latest redactors of the gospels were not trying to show that they were influenced by Buddhist texts. The Synoptics--the Fourth Gospel seems to be an exception--seemed to want to show that Jesus was a second Moses or another figure foreshadowed in the OT. I don't think they wanted to present Jesus as an exotic figure from India. So they had to disguise or conceal their Indian sources. However, they could not suppress all the Buddhist elements without doing violence to the Jesus of faith—myths and teachings—from the earlier gospel texts (St. Luke admits to his use of such pre-texts at the beginning of his gospel).

I see much OT and local Palestine in the gospels, especially in personal names and place names. The gospel writers might have tried to equate local names with Sanskrit names deliberately; as a result, they sort of tied up Magdala with Magadah, Petros with Putra—so there is truth in Lindtner's gematria studies, which I don't totally agree with. Magdala and Petros (Aramaic kepa) came first. The metaphor of rock plays a prominent role in OT texts.

My view is that Matthew translated kepa into Petros, which he probably found to make sense also in onomastic environment of Sariputrah. I hold that the Acts of the Apostles provides a reliable guide to determining the historical environment, where we find the nature of clashes between early Christianity, fusion of contemporary Judaism and Hellenism, and-Gnosticism, into which cauldron I put Buddhism. Baptist is another interesting case: the word is a direct translation of the Aramaic mamda or mamdana as in Yohannan Mamdana (John the Baptist); the followers of John the Baptist, who did not join the Jesus Movement, are known today as Mamdaye, who still survive in Iraq and Iran, now many in America and Europe. These people are not fictional folks but real people just like John the Baptist of history, the Jesus of history, and the Gautama Buddha of history—alas, we know so little about the historical details of their lives. Of course, no one is going to stop us from demythologizing these figures or from creating new myths about them. As Bob Countess points out, some of the fascinating puns that Lindtner finds can be traced to the linguistic affinities between two members of the Indo-European Family of languages, Sanskrit and Greek.

I am still trying to understand Lindtner's thesis that the gospel writers have reproduced the same number of syllables and words from the Buddhist scriptures in given sections of the Christian gospels. We both claim, however, that even Buddhist words were transferred into the Christian scriptures. One excellent example is the word WAY, as in Jesus's expression in the Fourth Gospel: "I am the Way, the Truth, and Life" and as in the Acts reference to the Jesus Movement as the WAY (he hodos). Remarkably, the Greek word seems to be a translation of the Sanskrit marga/Pali magga.

I rather hold the view that there is an Aramaic substratum (as evidenced in Aramaic quotations, place names, and personal names in the least) as well as strong OT foundation (evident in the hundreds of OT references found in the gospels) in the NT, which transformed Buddhist/Hindu beliefs into Palestinian conditions. In other words, some of the NT authors were Palestinian or Egyptian or Libyan, Aramaic-Greek-speaking locals well-versed in OT and Buddhist traditions; these writers used the Buddhist traditions as well as Greek and OT traditions to create a new myth—the Jesus of faith. The authors of the existing gospels seem to have less knowledge of Aramaic, though. Obviously, a long process seems to be involved in the redaction of the existing gospels; the original authors must have known Aramaic and Buddhist texts better than the later redactors, who had seemingly tried to suppress Buddhist elements in the gospels for the purpose of emphasizing its OT dimensions. We scholars see fault lines in the gospel narratives—most people don't see them--, which we try to account for.

Christian: This morning's Gospel reading at Mass again persuades me to suggest that Matthew or whoever had a Palestinian-Jewish version of the Buddhist tradition to work on. The Buddhism of Palestine had already become Jewish in the Palestinian intellectual/cultic/cultural environment just as the Theravada tradition was adapted to suit the needs of popular Hindus through the Mahayana tradition in India. The Gospel reading relates the question of the scribe regarding the greatest of the commandments. I understand the Jewish authorities of the time had identified some 175 commandments. The response of

Matthew's Jesus was to reiterate the Deuteronomic "Shamah Israel." My point is that the Buddhism of Jesus/Matthew is neither pure Theravada or synthetic Mahayana but a newly minted synthetic one. It is like the synthetic quranic tradition or the Sikh tradition or the early Christian (an amalgamation of Hellenism, Mithraism, Hebraism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc). My Syrian Christian Indian tradition is a classic example: we use almost all the Sanskrit words for god for the Christian god. We even have a Christusahasra nama! It is also like our own intellectual and ethnic roots--a den of vipers, to quote my old favorite author Francois Mauriac.

As for the Fourth Gospel, I am again intrigued by his decision to exorcise his work, unlike the Synoptics, of too much Jewishness; he does not like the Passover connection with Jesus's death by making Jesus die a day before the Passover; also, he deliberately omits the passover dinner and the recitation of words of institution in his version of the discourse of Jesus during his last supper.

I tend to think that the Greek "ho Hristos" is a mistranslation of the Persian "Massieh" (god), which was rendered into Aramaic as Mashih, which means the anointed one. I have been unable to find any OT reference to "hristos" as god, as the High Priest was made to allege in the Synoptics! The Fourth Gospel omits such a reference.

"Nazraya" simply means "rebel" or "heretic"; it has nothing to do with the place Nazareth, as though Nazraya were a derivative from Nazareth as the synoptics would like to have it, which derivation apparently is rejected by the Fourth Gospel.

I like to think that the original title of Jesus in Palestine was Isho/a, meaning god (Sanskrit ishah); it was cleverly connected with the Hebrew Jeshua and the Persian Massieh, a variation of divine Mithra. This clever combination will give us "Isho Mshih"--translated into Greek as Iesus hristos. Is it possible that ishah became ishow when coupled with massieh, according to usual sandhi rules? I don't deny several of your Grecisms, but I am also for Hebraicisms in the gospels. The synoptic gospels are more for Hebraicisation than the Fourth gospel Writer; the synoptics, in fact, literally repeats some Aramaic phrases and sentences besides a host of quotations from the LXX, still the hebrew Bible. One interesting point: It is Aramaic they are quoting and not Hebrew in "Eli, Eli, lama shabaktani" a garbled Aramaic version, in which the verb "Shwak" is not a Hebrew word at all; the bystanders thought Jesus was calling on Elijah! (Certainly a dialect is used in this scriptural quotation from the pslams). In other words, sometimes the authors replaced Sanskrit words with Aramaic (or Greek) equivalents. A case in point is Dharma which was rendered as "sandikuza" or "chakra" with the Aramaic "shmayya" or Greek "ouranos," instead of retaining the Sanskrit word itself. You can probably cite hundreds of other examples. Or "Subhashita" or "suvishesha" with "euangelion"--sutra/sukta/sutta notwithstanding. I agree with you that the sutra-genre is used by the evangelists. I like to give the gospel writers more imagination and freedom to operate in a different cultural environment, where they were propagating the essential Buddhist doctrines in a Greek/Hebraic garb. It is like what we find in the Acts, where Paul and Barnabas are equated with Zeus and Apollo. Paul makes Jesus into a Greek deity with Greek philosophical underpinnings, especially in his oration in the Areopagus. Later at the Council of Ephesus Mary would be declared

"theotokos," giving her the attributes of the Artemis of Ephesus or of Hera. In other words, it is like the transcendent bodhisatva becoming incarnate in different forms and shapes and names in different countries: in substance same but in appearance and name garb different. No wonder that the white elephant image is replaced by the Ruha (spirit or wind from Genesis 1:3 and Kings etc) descending upon Mary. The same spirit of adaptation is found in the Synoptic writer quoting LXX for parthenogenesis--Hebraicisation coupled with Grecisation, both together! Intentionally speaking, the Hebrew "ha almah"--young woman--is replaced by parthenos! These writers knew what they were doing.

By the way, I liked your comment on Japamaala/Japaamaala/rosary. You are quite enlightening here. --Zach.

Lindtner sees more Buddhism in the gospels; I see a great deal of the Hebrew Bible and Aramaicisms as well in the NT gospels. Our studies complement each other. My own studies on the Indian sources of the Gospel narrative of the trial and death of Jesus, which was primarily the subject of the St. Mary's Conference, are really and helpfully supported by the erudition and observations of Lindtner. We shall show that even the trial-death-resurrection aspects of the Jesus myth is firmly founded on Buddhist sources—a point that has so far escaped many scholarly investigations. Hopefully, we will be able to present the results of our recent research on the Trial-and-Death narratives of Jesus—the Gospels vis-a-vis Buddhist/Indian texts—to the scholarly public next year.

The issue of chronology works in favor of the influence of the eminently rich and profound mythologies of Buddhism and Hinduism on the ill-equipped, ill-educated early Christians, as St. Paul would characterize them in one of his epistles. Early Christians were trying to develop a mythology for the Jesus of their faith; the Hebrew traditions with its exaggerated notion of monotheism and the notion of the transcendent Yahweh were not adequate and sufficient for this purpose. The mythologically rich Buddhism helped out the early Christians in this regard. I believe that the Buddhist missionaries, whom Emperor Ashok had sent as early as the fourth century BC, as epigraphic evidence avers, were still active in Palestine and Egypt. We may want to look at the Therapeuts of Egypt and the Essenes of the desert of Palestine, with whom probably John the Baptist and Jesus were apparently associated, were probably indigenized Buddhists. Alexander had encountered the Indian sages; The Greek kings sent their embassies to India. The Mediterranean world knew a lot about India during the early centuries of Christianity. I have treated this problem of chronology and influence extensively in my book *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (E. J. Brill, 1993).

My position is that gospel writers who were members of the Jesus Movement (one may call them Christian missionaries or even Buddhists) created the Jesus of Myth/Faith, utilizing the rich resources of Buddhism (as well as Hinduism), Judaism, and the amorphous Hellenism. If the gospel writers really were dharma-bhanakas (Buddhist missionaries) trying to present Buddha-dharma through Hebraicized gospels, they had already become members of the Jesus Movement or Christians, creating a revised dharma, the Jesus-dharma. Thus they are no different from the Hindu Brahmins like Ananda, Kashyapa, and Sariputra,

who themselves became Buddhists when they became Buddha's followers. Hindu relatives continued to consider them Hindu Brahmins just as Gautama Buddha was considered by his royal kin as a Kshatriya. But one may also view the gospel writers as simultaneously being Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian. It is in this sense that the self-styled Jewish Pharisee Saul-Paul could be considered Jewish. One may even be tempted to call Augustine of Hippo at once a Manichee and Christian, though Augustine himself would prefer to be called a Christian and Manichee or an ex-Manichee Christian; alas, Mani himself had borrowed much from his own Christian background.

Finally, the key to answer the question whether the gospel-writers were Buddhist or not lies in the application of the principles of Fuzzy Logic to the issue of origins or authorship. As comparative literary scholars of the gospels, some of us are often tempted to use the word "probably" to resolve the issue of the origins of the gospels. We may say, basing ourselves on the evidence of the Buddhist elements in the gospels, that they were probably written by Buddhists ; on the contrary, most people say, on the basis of Old Testament references and associations found in the gospels, that they were composed probably by the Jewish disciples of Jesus. The problem with this either-or approach is that "probability" refers only to one side of the equation and excludes the other and ignores the essential ambivalence of reality located between the two poles of bivalence, between 0 and 1, between A and not-A. I can look at an inexact oval and say, "This is probably a circle." My statement ignores that the drawing is also probably an oval. Fuzzy logic recognizes the fuzziness of sets to which objects can belong with various degrees or grades as in the case of a car parked in two spaces in a parking lot. It is also the case of the part belonging to the whole and the whole in part. The part cannot contain the whole unless the part is equal to the whole, but the part contains the whole in direct proportion to its size or mass. In other words, containment is not whole or none. The real world is fuzzy, so are the concepts we create and use to deal with fuzzy reality. All complex systems are fuzzy systems and boundaries are fuzzy. Such is the case with the NT gospels; they are neither totally Buddhist nor totally Jewish. The concepts of the Buddhism and Jewishness and Christianity are fuzzy sets, in which objects belong to several sets to a degree. A gospel like Mark's or Matthew's may be viewed as more Jewish and less Buddhist, whereas the Fourth Gospel is more Buddhist and less Jewish. The fuzzy NT gospels are both Buddhist and Jewish.