

Theologies of India in the West - Part I

Bruce Thompson, PHD

We were originally scheduled to hear a talk on the Dead Sea Scrolls, today. I hope that talk will be rescheduled because I am eager to hear it. However, I am planning to touch briefly on the Dead Sea Scrolls myself, so I hope no one who was expecting to hear the other talk will go away disappointed. I want to talk about Indian theology, and how Indian theology has influenced Western theology. To give the talk a concise if somewhat simplistic thesis, I shall argue that Christianity is a branch of Hinduism—not just *similar* to Hinduism, but actually *descended from* Hinduism.

I've been telling my friends about this talk all month, and it has led to some interesting conversations. Some of them went like this:

“*Where* did you say you are giving this talk?”

“At my church.”

“Your church?! What religion *are* you.”

If this is your first visit, perhaps I should offer a disclaimer. We Unitarian-Universalists sometimes like to subject ourselves to a good, old-fashioned *lecture*. Perhaps, given our roots in the more severe schools of Protestantism, we do this as an act of discipline, a sort of mortification of the flesh. Don't be frightened away. We don't do this *every* week. But down to business.

I want to trace the effect of a single idea that originated in India and had a profound effect on the course of Western civilization. The idea is called the Doctrine of Emanation and it is usually associated with a late-period Greco-Roman school of thought known as Neoplatonism. A Third Century philosopher named Plotinus is generally credited—in textbooks of Western

philosophy—with inventing the doctrine. The nutshell version of the doctrine is an elaborate analogy between reality and light. It goes like this.

Light is brightest near its source. Consider a candle, or better yet, the sun. The flame itself, where the light is created, is the brightest place of all. As the light *emanates* from the source, it grows dimmer and dimmer, ultimately giving way to darkness. So it is with reality. All reality emanates from God. God is the creator of reality, and around God, all is bright and full and good. But just as the light grows dimmer as it is further from the flame, so reality becomes progressively less real as it is further from God. It even becomes less *good*. It becomes heavier and darker and more corruptible.

The Doctrine of Emanation implied a dualism of mind and body. Minds, or souls, are bright and transparent, so they originate near to God; but, matter is heavy and dark, i.e. opaque, so matter, including especially the human body, is corruptible and evil, and it originates far from God. Somehow souls and bodies have become enmeshed with each other, and now the soul must be rescued—or *saved*—from its bodily prison.

In case this sounds familiar, it is. Most histories of Christianity will tell you that, as Christianity spread across the Roman Empire it was heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. But this history is flatly wrong. For one thing, we know that emanationism was being taught at Plato's Academy long before the time of Plotinus; and, I believe the relationship between Christianity and Neoplatonism is being misrepresented here as well. To tell the story correctly we have to go back to the beginning—and that means, in this case, back to India.

Long ago India was the site of one of the four earliest civilizations on earth, the others being Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. Little is known about the Indus Valley civilization. They were an austere people who left behind little in the way of decorative arts. They used a form of

writing, but it has not been deciphered. If they had a religion, it was not one that was centered in large, gaudy temples. They appear to have practiced a form of ritual purification that involved emersion in water. They built steps into the banks of rivers, and the largest public building in the city known to us as Mohenjo Daro was a bath house. It is thought that the Great Bath of Mohenjo Daro was not just a public bath, but was used ceremonially, since private homes had their own bathing facilities. Curiously, the practice of ritual bathing survives in India this day, now chiefly associated with the Ganges River.

Our best guesses about the beliefs of people of the Indus Valley are based, not on what the archaeological evidence tells us, but on what written records of a later period *fail* to tell us. Around 4000 years ago the people of the Indus Valley were overrun by a race of unwashed, illiterate barbarians from the north. These illiterate barbarians spoke a language that we would almost recognize. They called themselves “aryan,” which is related both to the ancient name “Erin” for Ireland and the modern name “Iran,” for Persia. Being related to the people of Europe, the Aryans brought with them a religion that was not very different from other European religions. We know about their religion because their religious hymns, after a millennium of preservation as an oral tradition, were eventually recorded, around 3000 years ago, in a collection of writings known as the Rig Veda.

The Rig Veda has been traditionally thought of as the founding document of Hinduism, but, in fact, there is little resemblance between the deities addressed in the hymns of the Rig Veda and the major deities of Hinduism. Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Krishna do not appear in the Rig Veda. Instead we find Dyaus Pitar, or Father Sky, whose name is cognate to the Greek sky god, Zeus Pater, from which the name “Jupiter” is derived. The Rig Veda also mentions the sun god, Mitra, identical to the Persian Mithra, who becomes Mithras, the favorite god of the

Roman legions. However, some of the most distinctive doctrines of Hinduism are not only conspicuously missing from the Rig Veda, they appear to be flatly contradicted by it. There is no mention of reincarnation in the Rig Veda. Instead the hymns suggest that, upon death, people can look forward either to “blind darkness,” or to joining the ancestors in the abode of the blessed—ideas that sound almost Norse. The idea of karma is not in the Rig Veda, nor is the idea of a final release from the cycle of death and re-birth.

If these ideas are not in the Rig Veda, and were not introduced into India by the Aryan invaders, then these ideas must have originated locally. By extrapolating out of Hinduism the ideas that *do not* appear in the Rig Veda, but *do* appear in Buddhism and Jainism, the other two religions that originated in the Indus Valley, we can make a guess at the original beliefs of the Indus Valley people. Apparently, before the Aryan invasion, the people of the Indus Valley believed that souls, called Atman, are trapped in a pointless and unpleasant cycle of deaths and re-births, and that the conditions of each re-birth are determined by ones moral actions in the previous life. Apparently they believed in the desirability of escaping this cycle of death and re-birth, and that escape would result in a final, permanent death, or nirvana, which means “to extinguish” or “to blow out,” as with the flame of a candle. Finally, they believed that one could achieve nirvana by engaging in the regular practice of certain physical exercises or meditation techniques that the Aryans later called “yogas.” Some small figurines—some male and some female—survive from the Indus Valley civilization. Most are made of terra cotta and are exceptionally crude, but one, made of bronze, is surprisingly realistic. When I saw pictures of the bronze figurine I was immediately reminded of a standard Hatha yoga stance. Several of the rough clay figurines, and various etchings suggest even more strongly the classic yoga positions.

Hinduism is a synthesis of the religion of the indigenous people of the Indus Valley with the religion of the Aryan invaders. The synthesis was worked out between 800 and 300 B.C.E. Although the great masters who worked out this synthesis did not originally leave any writings, their teachings were preserved orally, and were eventually written down as dialogues. Their teachings came to be known as “secret teachings,” or *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* are the real beginning of Hindu philosophy. The problem for the *Upanishads* was to reconcile belief in an Aryan creator deity who presides over the abode of the blessed, with the notion that the soul, or Atman, is trapped in a meaningless cycle of death and re-birth from which it seeks to escape. The solution offered is this: Atman is Brahman. We are all God, trapped in His (or our) own creation. The creator deity is us, but we are trapped in a pointless cycle of death and re-birth. Release from the trap does not result in a final death, but in a return to the knowledge of ones own divinity, that is, a return to the abode of the blessed.

I want to focus on the teachings of just one of the great masters of the *Upanishads*. His name was Uddalaka, and we do not know anything about him. We do not know when or where he lived, or if he was a historical figure at all. He is portrayed as a father who has sent his son off to school. When his son returns home, after twelve years, Uddalaka questions him to discover whether he has learned anything of importance. Of course, he has not. So Uddalaka proceeds to teach his son what schools cannot teach: the real meaning of life.

Uddalaka tells his son that God, the Existent, is the center and source of all Being. Reality, he tells his son, is composed of three fundamental elements or substances that emanate outward from God. The first substance, which comes directly from God, is light and heat—what we might call “radiant energy.” Light-and-heat then gives rise to the second substance, which is fluid or moisture—water. We know, of course, that heat and light give rise to moisture, because

we observe that people sweat on a hot day. Moisture then gives rise to the third substance, which Uddalaka calls “food.” By “food” I take it he means any solid substance, including rock, since plants “eat” dirt, we eat plants, and dirt eventually eats us in a constant cycle of death and re-birth. We know that moisture gives rise to “food” because we can observe that, when you water plants, they grow.

The idea that any solid substance can be thought of as food creates an interesting image. Apparently Uddalaka thought of the universe as a vast living organism made of “flesh.” Each of our bodies is a microcosm essentially similar to that macrocosm. If we were to ask Uddalaka where consciousness is located in the body, he would reply that it is suffused *throughout* the body. To make this point, he asks his son to place a pinch of salt into a cup of water and leave it for a day. The next day Uddalaka asks, “Where is the salt?” By tasting the water, first on one side of the cup and then from the other side, his son determines that the salt is *everywhere* in the water. So it is with consciousness in our bodies, and so it is with the consciousness of the world. Just as each of us is aware of our bodies from head to toe, the universe is aware of itself. The original Existent from which all Being arises is now suffused throughout the body of the world as the consciousness of the world. Indeed, *our* consciousness is *that* consciousness. The world is conscious, and we are conscious because we are part of the world. We are all God, trapped in our own creation, and the purpose of life (my son) is to return to an awareness of our own divinity.

There are several key ideas here that we need to keep track of. First, of course, there is the idea of emanation itself—that God creates by overflowing or emanating outward. Second, notice that the first things created are bright and ethereal, but that later elements of creation become progressively heavier and darker. Body—“the flesh”—is the last phase of creation, the element most remote from God, and it is involved in a cycle of pain and suffering inflicted on

itself by itself. Third, even though God is the “center” of creation, God is also suffused throughout creation—trapped in creation (as us) and striving to return to self-knowledge. A fourth idea, not present in Uddalaka’s account, but still important to Hinduism, is that God can manifest itself in material form as an enlightened being capable of teaching lost human souls how to return to oneness with the center. Such a being is known as an avatar, and the most important of the avatars was Krishna.

In the middle of the Fourth Century B.C.E., just as the *Upanishads* were being written down, a window between India and the West was suddenly thrown open, and ideas of various sorts began climbing through. The reason for the window was, of course, that Alexander the Great had managed to create an empire that stretched from Macedonia in the west to the Hindu Kush in the east. Alexander was an educated man—educated, in fact, by no less a philosopher than Aristotle. He took philosophers with him on his conquests, and they mined the conquered regions for ideas worth bringing home. It is also known that Alexander brought philosophers back from Persia and India when he returned. Now, I hasten to add that contact between India and the West had been going on for some time. As early as 600 B.C.E., Pythagorean philosophy shows evidence of some contact with India, and trade with the East had already been established. The Alexandrian contact, however, was of a different order. This was not just incidental contact, but a concerted effort to make contact with the East.

Athens was the chief center of education in the Greek world at that time, so it was to Athens that the new ideas from India were chiefly brought. The philosophers at Plato’s Academy especially liked the Doctrine of Emanation. It bore a vague resemblance to the teachings of their founder, Plato. Following upon some ideas originally found in Heraclitus, Plato taught that the material, sensory world was given its comprehensibility and order by abstract ideals that he

called Forms. The central Form—or Form of Forms—was a concept that Plato called The Good, which he described as illuminating the mind, just as the sun illuminates the world. Heraclitus had earlier developed a similar view, calling ideal abstractions “Logos,” a complex Greek concept that means “story,” or “speech,” or even language as a whole. Sometimes it is given the simple translation, “Word.” Plato and Heraclitus were saying that the world of perceptions would be just a blur of colors in motion except that we are able to pick things out, define their boundaries and freeze them in place, by means of their name or Word. Without Form or Logos, nothing could be understood; indeed, nothing could even exist.

Now, in my opinion, Plato never imagined his Forms as existing in a separate realm of Being. Form is a part of reality, namely the part that makes things stable and understandable; but, the Forms do not *create* reality. In Plato’s philosophy, creation is handled by a minor deity known as Demiourgos, which means “Workman.” Heraclitus, likewise, did not think of Logos as creating reality; he merely thought of it as *structuring* reality. Yet, in the Post-Alexandrian Academy, Plato’s Theory of Forms was re-interpreted in a way that sounds a great deal more like Uddalaka than Plato. As Plato’s successor, Speusippus, explains the matter, the Good is a central creator deity, identified with Zeus, that *gives rise* to the Forms, and the Forms, in turn, *give rise* to the material world, intermingled *with* it while still maintaining their own separate existence in a “higher” and more perfect realm.

Besides the Academy there were other educational institutions in Post-Alexandrian Athens. The most important of these, founded by Zeno of Kitium, was run out of a shop in the Athenian marketplace. The Greek word for a market shop is “stoa,” so the school was known as the Stoa. The doctrine taught there was based on the teachings of Heraclitus. However, the

scholars at the Stoa transformed the Logos of Heraclitus into “Logos Spermaticos,” the *seed* of all Being, a creator deity, again identified with Zeus, from which all reality grows, or *emanates*.

It must be understood that Plato’s Academy and Zeno’s Stoa were not just any schools. They were the most influential institutions of education in the Greco-Roman world. The Academy was in existence for over 900 years, training the political elite, first of Greece and then of Rome. Philosophers trained at the Academy started similar schools all around the Greco-Roman world. One of the most important of these was in Alexandria, Egypt, where Plotinus was the headmaster. The Academy in Athens was not closed until 529 C.E., by which time it had become the last bastion of organized paganism in an otherwise Christian world.

Zeno’s Stoa was even more influential. Schools of Stoicism were also spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. By the height of the Roman Empire nearly every member of the ruling elite considered himself a Stoic. Stoicism was effectively the state religion of the Roman Empire. Under the influence of the Academy and the Stoa, everyone in the educated upper class of the Greco-Roman world was exposed to, and even indoctrinated in, emanationism.

It was not only the upper classes at the center of the Greco-Roman world that embraced emanationism. It was also the lower classes and those at the fringes of the empire. Naturally, this history is less well documented, mostly because history always has a tendency to forget its poor, but also because later generations had an incentive to suppress and even destroy much of that history. However, tantalizing bits of information survive, and more keep coming to light. We know that in the Post-Alexandrian world there was a revival of interest in various traditional mystery cults, notably the Cult of Mithras from Persia and the Cult of Osiris from Egypt. There were many others. What these cults had in common was that they featured a man-god who takes human form to visit the material world. Various cults added various colorful details to this basic

frame. The crop god Osiris was killed, but returned as his son, Horus, born to the virgin goddess, Isis, usually portrayed as a be-haloed infant, resting in his mother's arms. He was ritually torn to pieces and eaten in the form of bread. Dionysus was grokked in the form of ritual wine. The god Mithras also promised to return some day. As a sun god, his symbol was four radiating sun beams, forming a cross. The Mesopotamian god Dummuzi, by that time known as Adonis, from the Semitic word "adonai," meaning "lord," was killed by being nailed to a tree. Naturally, these details have their source in the original myths from which the cults were derived. However, it is notable that the most popular of these cults were devoted specifically to *sun* gods, who were praised with such epithets as "light of the world." Moreover, in their re-vitalized form, each of these cults incorporated one element that was central to Indian emanationism: a promise of release from the torment of the material world and of a return to a state of blessedness. The god-made-flesh had come to the material world, not just on a routine visit, but to *save us from our suffering*, specifically, from suffering due to our sinful involvement with "the flesh."

There was also a Jewish version of Indian emanationism. It took the form of a movement referred to by modern scholars as the "kingdom of heaven" movement, and one of its important leaders was John the Baptist, whose cult, of course, was centered around the ritual practice of emersion in river water. One branch of the "kingdom of heaven" movement was a cult sometimes referred to as the Essenes. The Essenes believed in the immortality of the soul, a belief typical of Hinduism, but *not* found in Judaism prior to that time. They may even have believed in reincarnation, although that is controversial. They certainly believed that someone known as "the Teacher of Righteousness" had taught them to withdraw from the world and live an ascetic life of meditation and prayer in preparation for the final destruction of the world, after which the kingdom of heaven would be established. An Essene monastic community was

established at a place now known as Qumran, on the banks of the Dead Sea some time in the 1st Century B.C.E. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that members of this community called themselves the Sons of Zadok, and that they called their community “Damascus.”

The next part of the story is the most difficult to tell because it is the most important, and also among the most obscure. What we know is this. Some time around the year 50 C.E. a man named Saul, an enforcer working for the Temple in Jerusalem made a journey to a place called Damascus to capture and imprison “followers of the Way.” While on the road, he fell from his horse and had a vision. Now, it is unlikely that Saul was on his way to Damascus, Syria, which is hundreds of miles from Jerusalem, in a different country, and certainly outside of Saul’s jurisdiction. But it is quite reasonable to suppose that Saul may have been on his way to visit Qumran, which was barely a day’s brisk walk from Jerusalem.

Following his fall, Saul changed his name to Paul, and his relation to the “followers of the Way” also changed. But how? *Acts 9:20* tells us that Paul spent some time “among the brothers at Damascus.” They were surprised that he was no longer intent on persecuting them, but he did not spend his time there learning *from* them. Rather, he spent it preaching *to* them. His message to them was that Jesus is the Christ.

We now enter into the realm of sheer speculation, but here is what I think was going on. The Romans were generally very tolerant of other people’s religions. They actually encouraged the spread of Mithraism among the Roman legions, and made no effort to suppress the cult of Osiris in Egypt. However, the Romans made an exception in the case of Judaism. The Jews were a particularly obstreperous people. Since the rebellion of the Maccabees, the Jews were used to running their own kingdom, and the Romans found it necessary to deal harshly with them. From 63 B.C.E. when the Romans first seized Jerusalem, until 70 C.E. when the Second Temple in

Jerusalem was destroyed, there was no peace. Small groups of rebellious Jews kept forming, hiding out in caves in the desert, and predicting the coming of a great warrior-king, the Messiah, who would smite the Romans. Of course, not all Jews were so rebellious. Some thought it would be better to cooperate with the Romans, and Saul was surely one of these. Saul was a Jew, and he felt sympathy for his fellow Jews. He understood their anger at the Romans. Perhaps, at times, he even felt it himself. Yet he also understood the need to cooperate.

On a fateful day in the middle of the first century, Saul was sent out on the unpleasant task of destroying the intellectual center of a new rebellious movement. The leaders of the movement were a group of ascetics known as the Sons of Zadok, and their headquarters was at an old fortress on the banks of the Dead Sea. He didn't want to go. Indeed, he was so torn and upset that on the road he actually suffered a seizure. And then, at the moment of the seizure, a brilliant compromise occurred to him. He knew that "the brothers at Damascus" already held views that were colored by emanationism. He was also familiar with emanationism in Greco-Roman thought. He put two and two together, and the answer was obvious. The Sons of Zadok did not need to be destroyed; they could be converted! They only needed to be persuaded that their anticipated Messiah had already arrived, and that he was none other than the mediating deity of Greco-Roman emanationism. Jewish emanationism could be reconciled with Greco-Roman emanationism, and all the fighting would be over.

Paul was ultimately unsuccessful with the Sons of Zadok. Their community was eventually destroyed by the Romans, probably about the same time the Second Temple was destroyed. Prior to their destruction, the brothers managed to hide their founding documents in some well-hidden caves near the old fortress, and those documents lay undisturbed for nearly nineteen hundred years. However, Paul was otherwise remarkably successful. Two branches of

Judaism managed to survive that tumultuous period. One branch, now known as Rabbinical Judaism, remained unconverted, and continued to nurture hopes for the eventual coming of the Messiah. The other branch were those Jews who accepted Paul's compromise.

Of course, Paul's vision was not just that Jews be converted to a Roman religion. As a good Jew himself, Paul's vision was that "the Way" of the Sons of Zadok was the right way of understanding Greco-Roman mysticism. In his effort to promote peace between Romans and Jews, Paul was just as intent upon converting Romans to Judaism as he was intent on converting Jews to a mystical emanationism that would be acceptable to the Romans. He was out to convert everybody! And in the end, he seems to have done so—in a sense.

By 150 C.E. there were a bewildering variety of "Christians" in all corners of the empire. Sometimes referred to as Gnostics, these other "Christians" held views that seem almost like a comical parody of the Christianity that we know. Scholars generally assume that the various schools of Gnosticism grew up in *imitation* of orthodox Pauline Christianity, but that hardly makes sense. There were simply too many different varieties of Gnosticism, and they were too widespread, and too well established merely to be misunderstandings of a recently promulgated orthodoxy. To believe that Gnosticism is an imitation of Pauline Christianity one must believe that Paul's doctrine spread like wildfire, covering the entire Roman empire barely a generation, and with an amazing lack of fidelity, writhing and twisting into an incomprehensible variety of forms as it spread. It is surely more reasonable to believe that the various varieties of Gnosticism grew up *at the same time as* Pauline Christianity, having a common source in ideas that had already been around for three hundred years and that were being actively promoted by such powerful and respected educational institutions as the Academy and the Stoa.

The Christianity that emerged from the Roman world was not exclusively, or even primarily, Pauline Christianity. There are far too many elements of later orthodox Christianity that cannot be found in Paul. Paul, for example, makes no mention of the trinity. There are no clear references to the concepts of heaven and hell. We find no angels in Paul, and the devil is likewise absent. Where did these elements come from? The answer is that they were present in those various other versions of Christianity known as Gnosticism. Explaining what the Gnostics believed is a nearly impossible task, but, in broad strokes, the story goes something like this.

In the beginning there was a god beyond human comprehension, called Bythos, or “the Deep.” He is beyond description and unites all dualities. In Him, all is one. Bythos sends forth emanations, giving rise to new beings, each created by the one before, and diminishing in power and brightness as each becomes progressively more remote from the Deep. These beings are known as Aeons and the realm in which they dwell, forming concentric circles, with a domain for each Aeon, is known as the Pleuroma, or Fullness. Various versions of Gnosticism give the Aeons various names, but in a typical version their names are Mind, Grace, Reason, Power, and Wisdom—similar to the Thrones, Dominions and Powers of Dante’s *Paradiso*. In some versions of Gnosticism, the first and most important of the Aeons is Logos, or Word, while the second Aeon is known as Spirit.

In any case, we will call Aeon number 28, out at the edges of the Pleuroma, Sophia, or Wisdom. She is overly curious. She wants knowledge beyond the boundaries of her own domain. In seeking this forbidden knowledge, she crosses boundaries that should not be crossed, throwing the edge of the Pleuroma into chaos and darkness. Sophia herself is broken into fragments and lost in the darkness.

Within the darkness, an evil deity—a jealous and angry deity—known as Demiourgos, or Workman, imposes order on the chaos, shaping the material darkness into a world. This deity is explicitly identified with the creator god, Yahweh, of the Old Testament. (Gnostics considered that in worshipping Yahweh, Jews were actually worshipping the devil.) Having no creativity of his own, Demiourgos patterns the physical world after the Pleuroma, but in reverse, with the darkest and heaviest matter at the center, water above that, air above that, and fire in the outer reaches. Fragments of Sophia form the souls of the living beings that inhabit this place of darkness and suffering. As fragments of Sophia, they share in her guilt for having caused the fall from the Pleuroma. They yearn for forgiveness, and they yearn to return to their home in the Pleuroma.

From the center of the Pleuroma, Bythos hears their cries for redemption and, out of his infinite mercy and compassion, sends forth a final emanation—the Savior—to enter the material world and rescue Sophia. In order to enter the material world the Savior must assume material form, and, to achieve this, is born—miraculously—to a virgin. The Savior brings a message of forgiveness, and he brings the *gnosis*, or knowledge, of how to escape bondage to the material. Usually escape involves some sort of withdrawal from the world, meditation and prayer, and in some versions of Gnosticism, an ascetic mortification of the flesh.

In typical versions of Gnosticism, *two* Aeons are sent to effect the rescue, namely the first and second Aeons—those closest to God himself, and made of the same essence. The firstborn of God is Logos, who, in becoming material, is the Word Made Flesh. The second Aeon is Spirit, or Holy Spirit.

Also typical of Gnosticism was the belief that once a sufficient time had passed for the salvation of Sophia, the evil material world would be swept away, and the Pleuroma would be

restored to its original, unblemished state. Any fragments of Sophia *not* salvaged would have to be cast into oblivion with the rest of the material world.

The Gnostic story is obviously richer and more detailed than the original Doctrine of Emanation as it appeared in the *Upanishads*. However, the core elements are unmistakable. There is the notion of emanation itself—that creation occurs in layers flowing outward from God. There is the idea that the process of creation gives rise first to bright, ethereal substances, but later to darker and heavier substances. There is the idea that God—or at least *a* god—is suffused throughout the material world, and that *our* souls are *that* soul. Finally, of course, there is the idea that being trapped in the material world is a bad thing, but that an enlightened being has, by manifesting itself in the material world, brought us instructions on how to escape.

If all that isn't enough to convince you that Christianity is almost a branch of Hinduism, consider one last connection, having to do with the etymology of the word "Christ." Most etymologies will tell you that the Greek word 'Christos' comes from the verb 'chrio', which means, "to rub." It refers to the kind of massage that an athlete might receive after a hard workout at the gymnasium. Although the word 'Christos' does not exist in classical Greek, it is reasonable to suppose—as most etymologists do—that the word was invented in later Greek to translate the Hebrew word 'messiah', which means "anointed one." In Hebrew culture, being "anointed" with oils was an essential part of the installation ceremony for kings, so "anointed one" in Hebrew means "one who has been made king." The Greeks, of course, had no such ceremony, so being massaged with oil is as close as one is likely to get, in Greek, to the concept of being anointed. However, if a word had to be *invented* to translate the word 'messiah', why not simply adopt the word 'messiah' into Greek?

The real problem with this etymology, however, is that Jesus was not the only man-god of the Roman world to be given the title Christ. Mithras and Osiris were also honored with this title, although the spelling of the word is 'Chrestos' or 'Chreistos', with the Greek letter eta in place of the letter iota. Surely this cannot just be a coincidence. Yet that seems to be the answer that most etymologists give. When applied to these other man-gods, the title is thought to derive from the adjective 'chrestos', which means "useful" or "good." It is thought that the followers of Mithras and Osiris were giving their god an honorific, i.e. "Mithras the Good." But this doesn't make sense. The proper Greek word for "good" in this sense is not 'chrestos' but 'agathos'. 'Chrestos' means "good" only in the weak sense of "good for its type." It is the kind of praise one would lavish on a favorite pair of scissors. When applied to a man it means "a good man" in the sense that one might call someone a solid citizen or a trusty helpmeet. It is hardly an honorific that one would apply to a god, unless there were some other reason to do so.

There is, however, one word that draws these words together. What Christ Mithras, Christ Osiris and Christ Jesus have in common is that they are all gods made flesh. Of course, the original god-made-flesh was none other than the Hindu man-god, Krishna. I believe that the word "Krishna" entered the Greco-Roman world along with the Doctrine of Emanation, and in close association with it. Jewish emanationists found it convenient to confuse the Indian word "Krishna" with the Greek verb "chrio" and understood it to mean "the anointed one." Followers of Mithras, however, having no messiah in their religious tradition, found it more convenient to confuse the name Krishna with the Greek adjective "chrestos." To them it was more important for their man-god to be *useful* than for him to be anointed. I think this theory explains both the coincidental similarities between Christ Mithras and Christ Jesus, and the slight variation in the spelling of the words.

If I am right, then, the earliest people who called themselves Christians were actually calling themselves “Krishnans,” and the core of their belief system came, not from the Old Testament, and not even from classical, pre-Alexandrian Greek philosophy, but ultimately from the theologies of India.

Annotated bibliography

Christian, James L. *The Wisdom Seekers: Great Philosophers of the Western World, Vol. 1 From the Presocratics to the Renaissance*. New York: Wadsworth, 2002. This is the textbook that I selected for my History of Philosophy class. It is the best history of philosophy I have found for presenting the schools of philosophy that are now considered obscure, but were very influential in their time. This is the source of my accounts both of Neoplatonism and of Gnosticism.

An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon. Founded upon the 7th Ed. of Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. This was the source for my arguments on the etymology of the word “Christ.”

Reat, Noble Ross. *Buddhism: A History*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1994. Reat begins his history of Buddhism with an excellent analysis of the beliefs of the Indus Valley people.

Robertson, J. M. *Pagan Christs*. New York: Dorset Press, 1987. This book gives the best account I have found of the cult of Mithras, and its similarities to Christianity. It also gives a good account of the cult of Osiris.

Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *A Comparative History of World Philosophy, from the Upanishads to Kant*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. Scharfstein's summaries of the ideas of Western philosophers are excellent. I assume his summaries of Indian and Chinese philosophers are equally accurate. This was the source of my account of Uddalaka's emanationist metaphysics from the *Upanishads*.

Silberman, Neil Asher. *The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994. In the world of Dead Sea Scroll scholarship a battle rages between Robert Eisenman, who proposes that the Qumran community were “christians,” and outraged traditionalists, who prefer to consider the “Essenes” to be a foreshadowing of Christianity, but not actual “christians.” Silberman agrees with Eisenman's view that Qumran was the “Damascus” to which Paul was bound, but is not as interested in whether this makes them “christians” or not.

Tripathi, C. L. "The Influence of Indian Philosophy on Neoplatonism," in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*. R. Baine Harris, ed. Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1982. Tripathi, a contemporary Indian scholar, makes the case that the similarities between Hinduism and Neoplatonism are due to influence from India, specifically during the time of the Alexandrian contact. I actually read this paper *after* coming to the same conclusion myself.