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Meet Taoist-Buddhist Jesus

Thomas Moore talks about the remarkable scrolls that retell the Christian Gospels from a Buddhist/Taoist perspective.

Interview by Laura Sheahen

A treasure trove of ancient scrolls, buried more than a thousand years ago in China, were unearthed in the early 1900s but went untranslated until their 1998 rediscovery in a Taoist monastery. The scrolls, which retell the teachings of Jesus through a Taoist and Buddhist lens, are the subject of a new book by bestselling author Thomas Moore and coauthor Ray Riegert. Beliefnet recently interviewed Moore on the meaning of the Lost Sutras of Jesus.

What are the Jesus Sutras?

They're a group of teachings that go back centuries. A group of Christian monks left Persia to enter China in the year 635, and established a small Christian community inside China. The people at first welcomed them very warmly and were very interested in what they had to say about religion. In fact, the local people called this new religion "the Luminous Religion." The people wrote some of the teachings and stories down, and as they did that, they mixed them with their own Buddhist and Taoist ideas. Some of the writings are very close to the gospel stories.

These documents were kept in a cave because, after a while, these Christians weren't so warmly received. They hid the documents, [which] weren't discovered until 1900. They really haven't been made accessible to us until just recently.

These sutras don't represent a highly developed theology. There's a simplicity about them, a folk quality that represents ordinary people trying to understand what the new teaching is.

Some of the sutras are similar to Christian texts that Westerners would know—there's the story of Jesus, for instance. Other sections seemed much more Taoist. With some, if you were reading them in isolation you wouldn't think they had any connection to Christianity.

When you read the Jesus Sutras, you have to look to find the direct Christian elements. They're there, and they're quite striking. Sometimes they're concealed. For myself, I may be familiar with a certain way in which a Christian story or teaching is worded, and it's worded differently in the sutra. You recognize it, but there's still enough of a difference to make you sit up and say, "Do I know this?"

It makes it fresh. That's one of the key values of the Jesus Sutras. With a slight change in point of view or language, they sound very fresh, and you may consider them in a new light.

For example, there's a part where Jesus talks about karma. That's not something you normally associate with Jesus—you wouldn't, because karma is not a Christian idea. But when it's put in the mouth of Jesus, it makes you think about more familiar words like sin. You think differently.

We're not trying to say this *is* Christian teaching. There's no argument here. But putting the two together makes you think, "I wonder if the Christian teaching might have a deeper understanding if we did associate it with the idea of karma for a moment."

What would happen if Christians were more open to karma?

Their ideas of morality would change slightly. I think this is another key idea in the Jesus

Sutras as a whole. A lot of people think of Christianity as a moral religion: what is right and wrong, what not to do, people in authority telling you how to live. The trouble with that is if you follow all these things, you may not really live a moral life. You may be following the rules, but not be deepening your ethical sense as you grow up and live a more complicated life.

If you're thinking of karma, you don't have quite that same emphasis on morality. Instead, you realize that everything you do, every minute, has its impact and consequences. That leads to a moral way of living, but with a different quality than the one I described before.

What sections of the Sutras do you find striking?

I enjoyed the story of the birth and early life of Jesus. It's abbreviated, very short. You hear the story a bit differently. Instead of referring to the Holy Spirit, the Sutras refer to the "Cool Wind." It makes it more sensuous, something you can feel with your body and not just think about with your mind.

Those natural images throughout the Jesus Sutras bring body and mind closer together, I think that's something Christianity could really use.

These Jesus Sutras are beautiful writing. They're sensuous, the imagery is very strong, they're fresh. You could live the teachings every day without having to think too much about it. Within religions, we generally overlook the fact that the beauty of expression is important. If you read the Psalms, the great sutras in Buddhism, the Tao Te Ching, or the wonderful poetry coming from the Sufis, the beauty in the language and in the ideas is so strong it knocks you over.

In the sutras, translated phrases like "Good Spiritual Friend" and "Dharma Sovereign" seem to refer to the divine. Another name was the "One Spirit."

They direct the reader to focus on the invisible elements in their lives. The Sutras give the example of an arrow—if you see one going through the air, you know someone has shot it. You don't have to see the person shooting the arrow to know they're there; the source, the ultimate cause.

Almost everything in today's culture is telling us that the only thing that is real is what can be seen and measured. The Sutras go in a different direction. That whole attitude is summed up in the phrase "One Spirit."

In the sutra version of Jesus' life, the text didn't actually say Jesus died, though it was implied. And it didn't indicate at all that he rose.

The Sutras do not talk about the resurrection, but they also don't talk about many things that would be considered essential to Christianity. You get fragments of Christianity mixed with fragments of Buddhism and Taoism. You don't get the main teachings of Buddhism or Taoism either. You get pieces of each and the flavor of each. It might be disappointing to Christians to read the Sutras and say "The things that are very important to me aren't there. Does that mean they didn't believe in them?"

I don't think so. What we have here are scrolls, not a book that's supposed to be complete. These are stories and teachings—practical wisdom. We have to take it for what it is and can't expect more from it than what it has to offer. You get a sketch of Jesus' life, but not theology.

It puts the focus on the basic teachings of Jesus, and not the development of theology.

Eastern and Western traditions have a lot in common. But what does Christianity emphasize that Eastern traditions don't, and vice versa? Where have the connections

not been fully developed?

That's a huge question. But, for example, Buddhist teachings like the Four Noble Truths include the notion that desire gets us into trouble. You find that teaching summarized in the Jesus Sutras in a simple phrase, "No desire." Right in the same section they have, "No virtue." I don't think you'd find in Christian teachings the phrase "No virtue" or "No truth." You might find questions about desire. So the Buddhist teaching is really quite different from Christian teaching.

Yet when it said "no virtue" it seemed to be saying "no desire to *show* that you're virtuous." The idea seemed to be that you should be acting virtuously, but not because you want to make a statement about it. It's not like "Let's all have orgies."

But I think it goes deeper than that, because I think within Christianity—certainly in the way it's come down historically—people worry about being virtuous: Am I doing the right thing, am I a good person? In Buddhism as I know it, which is much less than I know Christianity, I would say people would be more interested in what sort of wisdom you have. Do you have some degree of enlightenment, are you in tune with the law of nature and of life? That's a different notion from being virtuous.

In that one area alone, the Buddhist and the Christian are really very different. That doesn't mean they're not compatible. As much as I want to bring the religions together in dialogue and community, I think they're very different from each other, and it's important to maintain those differences.

What are some other differences?

In Taoism, if you read the Tao Te Ching and other sources, you find that one of the great teachings is that we really can't know as much as we'd like to know, and the things we think we know we don't: "He who speaks does not know and he who knows does not speak." "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao."

Within the Christian mystical tradition, Nicholas of Kucza, a mystical theologian from the early Renaissance, wrote several books about not knowing, about how important it was not to know—very close to the Taoist idea. But his thinking is not in the center of Christian thought at all. It's off on the side, with the mystics.

If you dig deep enough, you'll probably find that these traditions are very close to each other, but the accents are very different. What we have to do with the Jesus Sutras in particular is see how these three religions can come together and make something quite beautiful.

Laura Sheahen is a Religions producer at Beliefnet.

The Lost Sutras of Jesus

by [Ray Riegert](#) (Editor), [Thomas Moore](#) (Editor)

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