The Wisdom of Jesus and Buddha

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Westminster College of Salt Lake City

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Well good evening. Let me do a sound check right away to see if I stand right here with the microphone right there, if everything's fine those of you in back, if you're having any trouble hearing me, put up a hand, or you either can't hear a word I'm saying or it's okay. Okay. Good. Let me start tonight by saying that it is very nice for me to be here for more than one reason. One is that this is my second visit to Salt Lake, in the last year. I was here in September doing an event for the Episcopal Dioces of Salt Lake City and I enjoyed my time very much.

I'm also pleased to be here because I'm both honored and grateful to be this year's Tanner/McMurren lecturer in the history and philosophy of religion, and I don't know if Carolyn Tanner is here tonight or not but she is the daughter of one of the founders of this series and a bishop of an Episcopal bishop of Utah, and I met her when I was here last time. I want to thank in particular vice president for academic affairs, Steve Bar and Professor Michael Popich from the philosophy department for being the two primary people here at Westminster making arrangements for my visit to be here.

Before I turn to my lecture I want to take just a couple of minutes to find out something about you as an audience so I'm going to ask you a few questions to which the appropriate response is a raising of your hand okay and I'll do a quick estimate as I see those hands go up. Let me start off by asking how many of you have a connection to Westminster College whether as students, staff, or faculty, or sleeping with one of the above. How many of you have a connection to Westminster? Okay, got a whole bunch right here, which is nice. I would say only about 20% of you as a whole though okay and so I don't need to ask the opposite question how many of you aren't connected to Westminster. Instead I'm going to go immediately on to doing a bit of religious affiliation checking in because that's interesting to me, might be interesting to you as well. So I'll call out a number of denominations and religious traditions and again raise your hand when appropriate. Since we're in Salt Lake City, how many of you are LDS? Okay that might be a quarter of you. Okay good. And then, in no particular order, how many of you are Presbyterians? Okay I think two of you.. and that's easy to count, I can do that. How many of you are Methodists? Oh my. Okay, okay I don't know, we have.. 25 Methodists here maybe. How about Lutherans? Any Lutherans? Half a hand for Lutherans. So I think there are six and a half of us here and Episcopalians? I can put up a whole hand for that there's maybe, I don't know, 18 of us or something like that, Roman Catholic?

United Church of Christ. Thank you, United Church of Christ. Thank you. Thank you. About ten of you. You are all typically amongst my biggest fans so I'm glad you reminded me. Baptists any Baptists here? Okay a couple of you. Welcome. I sometimes remark that you're typically not my biggest fans, but I know there's great variety in the Baptist tradition. As I said I don't make a list that I then read off so I almost always forget to ask about somebody. Is there a denomination I haven't mentioned that you're part of that you want to find out if there are others of you here? <Somebody> Muslim. <Somebody else> I'm just an observer. Okay we'll get to that. Any Muslim's here? Okay Okay. And then finally a category that the Episcopal Bishop Jack Spong has taught us to think about, it's a serious category, the Church Alumni Association? You know, people who grew up in a church but aren't sure they're part of it anymore? Okay good. There's always some around. There are actually millions of you of course in our culture. Last question before I get underway, how many of you have heard me in person before? Okay maybe twenty percent of you. I'm going to apologize to you for telling an old joke that you heard no doubt. So let me introduce the evening then. I'm going to talk about 55 minutes once I get going here. Professors tend to speak in sound bytes of about that length. And in order . . . and then we're going to have some Q & A. Uh, our ending time is 8:30 we should have at least, I would imagine, 20, 25 minutes for Q & A, which is my favorite time of the evening. And in order to keep myself honest with time, I use a duel electronic count down timer which gives me a read-out in minutes and seconds both, telling me exactly how long I've talked. I think every preacher should have one of these, every professor should have one of these. And um, when I introduced my timer in Seattle some seven years ago, this tells you how long I've been telling this story, I made the remark to the audience that they might find me slightly anal retentive with regard to time. And during the coffee break a man came up to me with his notepad in one hand his pen in the other hand and with what seemed to me to be a rather anxious look on his face he asked me, "Does anal retentive have a hyphen?" And when I told that story in I think, Richmond, three/four years ago, somebody from the audience called out, "No, but it should have a colon."

So now I will begin. The title of my talk, as you know, is the wisdom of Jesus and Buddha.

And so tonight I'm going to be talking about two of the most remarkable people who have ever lived. Indeed, in my own galaxy, my own personal galaxy of religious figures I think Jesus and the Buddha are the two most remarkable religious figures who have ever lived. And let me mention a terminological thing here that I will then ignore. If I were going to express this exactly we're going to be talking tonight about Jesus the Christ and Gut tama the Buddha. That is Gut tama is the Buddha's personal name just as Jesus is Jesus' personal name and Christ and Buddha are both titles, exalted titles within their respective traditions but I will follow common usage and simply refer to them as Jesus and Buddha. And before I give you a road map of my talk I want to tell you just a little bit about the perspective that I bring to this topic so just a little bit about me but for the sake of disclosing perspective. Two remarks: First, I am a committed Christian of a non-literalist and non-exclusivist kind. Now when I speak of myself as a Christian I am more specifically an Episcopalian who grew up as a Lutheran. And I'm deeply involved in the life of the church and committed to living my relationship with God within the framework of the Christian tradition. And when I say of a non-literalist kind I mean that I
bring a non-literalist reading to the scriptures and doctrinal tradition of Christianity. I see them as a mixture of both memory and metaphor of historical memory and metaphorical narratives. And when I say of a non-exclusivist kind I mean that I do not think that Christianity is the only true religion or the only path of salvation. But rather I affirm the truth and validity of all the world's enduring religious traditions, a point to which I will return in the last part of my talk. And the second remark about my perspective is that both Jesus and the Buddha have been important in my own religious and intellectual journey, Jesus from the very beginning. I grew up as a Christian in a home that was deeply involved in the life of the church. I became interested in theology late in my undergraduate years, and then fascinated with the study of the bible and Jesus and the gospels in graduate school. And the study of the historical Jesus has been my special area of scholarship and publication ever since. The Buddha came along much later in my life. Roughly twenty-five years ago. About five years after I had started teaching college. And I note that all the way through my undergraduate education and graduate education all the way to a PhD in biblical studies I never once had to take a single course in non-Western religions. So I had no academic exposure to anything outside of the Jewish Christian traditions all the way through graduate school. I don't know if you can still do that and get a PhD in biblical studies this day, today without an exposure to other religions. But in my day it was possible. And then I got a teaching position in a private college. In a small department, that required that every member of the department teach one section of the intro course each year, and the requirement furthermore was that we had to use at least fifty percent non-Western texts. And, so suddenly I found myself teaching history of religions, world religions, and it's an interest that has continued to be part of my teaching ever since. And beginning, some twenty-five years ago then, I was struck initially by a number of similarities between what I was reading about the Buddha and what I'd already come to know about the historical Jesus and Christian origins. And over the years my sense of the similarities, the parallels has deepened. And it has been very illuminating for me. I think in h`n fact seeing the parallels between Jesus and the Christian tradition on the one~iy.ind the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition on the other hand has helped me greatly to understand better what Jesus and the Christian tradition are about. Nevertheless, there is a difference in my competency as a Jesus scholar and a Buddhist scholar. As a Jesus scholar I am as the world reckons things, a professional. As a Buddhist scholar, a scholar of Buddhism, I'm very much an amateur. I've read perhaps twenty-five books on the Buddha. Something like that, which is far, far less of course than what I have done in Jesus scholarship.

So with those comments about my perspective finished, I now turn to my topic and I begin by giving you a roadmap of the rest of my talk. There'll be three main parts. Part one will be an overview of the similarities. In part two, I will focus on a primary similarity, namely their wisdom-teaching as teachers of "the way" and then in part three, my concluding part, I will relate our topic to the question of religious pluralism. So I turn to part one: an overview of the similarities. And as I begin, I note that I will speak about how each is presented in their respective traditions. That is, I will talk about the Jesus we meet in the Christian tradition, and the Buddha we meet in the Buddhist tradition. And thus I will not be very much be concerned with the question, "how much of this is historical?" but primarily be talking about how these figures are presented in their traditions. My central claim of course, is that I see striking similarities between
these two figures, and of course there are differences as well and I'm going to begin by mentioning some of the most obvious differences. They lived roughly five hundred years apart. The traditional dating for the birth of the Buddha in Nepal in the far North of India is 563 BC, traditional death date is 483 BC, and so he lived roughly eighty years. There are a few Buddhist scholars that are now suggesting that maybe he's a hundred years more recent than that but we won't go into that right now. Jesus of course is born much later in 4 BC and is executed in the year 30 AD and thus lived a much shorter life.

Secondly, the length of their public activity differed dramatically. The Buddha taught for roughly 45 years after his enlightenment experience. The public activity of Jesus was remarkably brief. As short as one year, if Matthew, Mark, and Luke are right, and perhaps as longs as 3 or 4 years if John should have the chronology closer. The reason why their public activity differed so dramatically in length is yet another difference. Namely, Jesus was executed, whereas the Buddha lived into his old age, and died, as I've already mentioned, around eighty years of age. And these two differences, Jesus being executed, and living a much shorter life are connected to another difference. There's kind of a web of differences here. Namely there is a social prophet dimension to the activity of Jesus that we don't find in the Buddha, a passion for social justice in the ministry of Jesus. And if we ask why is there this difference, it's hard to know but let me mention two possibilities quickly, one is that Jesus stood in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, with their passion for social justice figures like Amos, Jeremiah, Micah, and so forth. And secondly, there is a strong social class difference between Jesus and the Buddha. The Buddha comes from a privileged class. Jesus almost certainly comes from a marginalized peasant class, and almost a general rule that one can make is that a passion for justice typically comes out of the experience of injustice. And so Jesus growing up in the peasant class would have known injustice firsthand in a way in which the Buddha might not have. Finally the last difference I'm going to mention before turning to the similarities, again an obvious one, they lived on two different continents, approximately three thousand miles apart, and thus also in two very different cultures which accounts for the considerable difference between Buddhism and Christianity as religious traditions, each is deeply shaped by the culture in which it emerged, as well as by the cultures in which each has lived in subsequent centuries.

So I turn now to the parallels, in part one, I'm going to mention six. The first three, concern how each is spoken of in their respective traditions. So the first of the parallels: Similar stories are told about both, and I'm going to mention five very quickly. There were miraculous events surrounding their births. In both traditions, a great light is spoken of as illuminating the world at the time of their birth. In both traditions, wise men come to pay homage to the infant Buddha and the infant Jesus. There's a tradition about the Buddha being born walking and talking, coining forth from the womb already able to do both. We don't have quite the same thing in the Christian tradition, but in one of the apocryphal infancy gospels, the gospel, infancy gospel of pseudo Matthew. We have that famous story of Jesus from the manger pointing his finger at the animals and the animals talking. And this is where we get that Christmas story of the night the animals talked. Not quite the same as walking and talking yourself, but not bad for an infant. Second item on this list: Both are reported to have performed healings. Now more healing stories are told about Jesus but there are some told about the Buddha as well. Both are reported to have walked on water, which I think is very interesting. Both are seen transfigured by their
followers, that is their bodies full of light, glowing with light. And finally, on this first list, there are earthquakes as each of them dies, almost a cosmic mourning going on surrounding their death where the earth itself trembles.

Second set of similarities: Both are spoken of as incarnations. That is, both were seen as incarnations of a transcendent and preexisting reality. The historical Buddha was seen as the incarnation of the cosmic or heavenly Buddha who existed before and after the life of the historical Buddha. And of course, in the Christian tradition, Jesus is spoken of the incarnation of a preexistent reality namely of the word which was with God from the beginning, that word of God which is also the wisdom of God or the Sophia of God. And so Jesus is the preexistent word made flesh, just as Gautama is the cosmic Buddha made flesh.

Third similarity: both are spoken of as divine. We're very familiar with this of course in the Christian tradition where Jesus is spoken of as the second person of the trinity, son of God, true God and true man of one substance with the father and so forth. More surprising to us perhaps is the fact that the Buddha is also spoken of in his tradition as "God of Gods." It's almost like "Light of Light" and so forth. And it's also interesting that both Jesus and the Buddha during their lifetimes seemed to reject being called by any magnificent title. There's this story about the Buddha in which late in his life an inquirer asks him, "Are you a God?" and he says "No." "Are you then a spirit or an angel?" and he says "No" and the inquirer says 'Well, what are you then?' And the Buddha's response was, "Awake." And a similar story is told about Jesus, the ending isn't quite as interesting perhaps, but it's in the tenth chapter of Mark, where an inquirer comes up to Jesus and says "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and Jesus' response is, "Why do you call me 'good'? There is no one good but God alone." Jesus there making a very significant distinction between him and any kind of exalted status that might be ascribed to him. Nevertheless, after their deaths, both are spoken of as divine.

Now, the next three parallels concern the kind of person that each was and each of these will get, except for one, more development than my previous points. So the fourth in my list of parallels, the first of the next three: Both Jesus and the Buddha were mystics. Now, I define a mystic as a person who has vivid and typically frequent experiences of "the sacred", which I use synonymously with spirit and God, but the sacred is the term I want to use for this talk. And both Jesus and the Buddha fall into this category of religious personality type, and to make this more specific, at around age thirty, or shortly thereafter, following a dramatic mystical experience each began a public ministry. Now they had somewhat different lives before this decisive mystical experience, the Buddha as I've briefly mentioned, grew up in a setting of privilege, he is the son of an aristocrat, somebody from the highest cast in India, of great wealth, and according to the story of the Buddha the Buddha is basically kept with inside his father's estate for the first twenty-nine years of his life. So that he lives in a world that is full of beauty, pleasure, and wealth and has no clue whatsoever about sickness, old age, death, poverty, all of that is hidden from his eyes. Whereas Jesus on the other hand, grows up in the marginalized portion of the peasant class, I know to your enpassing (?) that if Joseph and Jesus were woodworkers, or carpenters, artisans in the world of the Jewish homeland in the first century . . . actually meant, people who had lost their land. Okay? Because the standard
was every Jewish peasant was to have its own parcel of land and if you were an artisan in meant that you had lost your land. So an artisan in a way was an even more marginalized occupation than being a peasant who still had a small land holding. So, they led, as I say, somewhat different lives beforehand. But in their late twenties, both of them embarked on a religious quest. To say something about the Buddhists first, we are told quite a bit about it in the Buddhist text. At age twenty-nine he began his quest by abandoning completely his life of privilege. And for six years he tried out a variety of teachers and disciplines as his quest continued. And finally, at roughly age thirty-five, he had a foundational mystical experience under the bodhi (?!) tree. And according to the tradition, this experience of mystical union with what is, this enlightenment experience went on for seven days. And it was accompanied by temptations. Temptations that came from a figure named Mar rah, who is the lord of this world and the temptation that assailed the Buddha immediately after his enlightenment experience was that Mar rah, the lord of this world, offered to give him the kingship of this world, the temptation is to be the universal world ruler. He resisted the temptation and his experience, this foundational experience is commonly spoken of as an enlightenment experience, marked by seeing more clearly than ever before and sometimes also spoken of as an awakening, awakening into a state of consciousness compared to which our ordinary consciousness is like being asleep. And after this, he began his public activity as a teacher which he continued for forty-five years until his death. Now to say something about Jesus' quest: we are told much less about it. We basically have no stories about Jesus between age twelve and thirty and even the one at age twelve is probably legendary. What we do know is that at around age thirty Jesus went out into the wilderness of Judea to become a follower of a radical, unconventional teacher named John the baptizer. John was an anti-temple prophet and a preacher of both repentance and judgment. Now from the fact that Jesus went out to see John, and became attached to his movement, we may infer that Jesus must have been on a religious quest. You would not otherwise leave your home village to go to the wilderness and become interested in the baptizer. How far back into his life his quest went it is hard to know. But presumably by sometime in his twenties he had become intentional about it. Now, it's in connection with John, according to all the gospels, that Jesus has his foundational religious experience. It is the story of his baptism of course, and whether that is an idealized literary construction, or whether it's a fairly accurate description of something that happened. Clearly, either way, it points to a foundational spiritual experience as being as at the beginning of Jesus' public life. The gospels portray it as a vision, in which Jesus sees the heavens opened. He sees a tear or a rent in the fabric which separates this world from the world of spirit that is all around us. And he saw and felt the spirit descending upon him. And then of course as you all know, he faces a set of temptations including the ruler of this world offering him all the kingdoms of this world. And shortly thereafter, according to the gospels, he began his public activity. Now, along with other texts in the gospels, this is the basis for my most compact, short-hand crystallization of what the historical Jesus was like. He was a Jewish mystic. And so, the Buddha was an Asian mystic. Jesus was a Jewish mystic. And I see this commonality of experience as the foundation of the other similarities that I will be talking about.

So the fifth similarity, this one going quite briefly: Both were movement founders within an existing religious tradition. That is the Buddha founded a revitalization movement
within Hinduism, Jesus founded a revitalization movement within Judaism. Neither of them was religion, but to revitalize an existing one. But around both of course, what became a new religion eventually emerged, but the basic point is, they both were movement founders.

And then sixth, and the similarity that I'm going to spend the most time on: Both were wisdom teachers, and their teachings are remarkably similar. And I'm going to develop this in two parts. First, there are similarities at a very specific level, that is parallels of individual sayings, not exact language, but the same thought captured in the individual sayings, three quick examples: the golden rule. In the gospels, Jesus is reported to have said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The Buddha is reported to have said, "Consider others as yourself.". Similar teaching about non-retaliation: In the gospels, Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, turn the other cheek." The Buddha says, "If anyone should strike you with a blow, you should abandon any desires and not utter evil words." Yet, one more specific similarity: Love of enemies. In the gospels of course, "Love your enemies".