

SWAMI JESUSANANDA: Did Jesus Go to India?

The occult teachings inform us that the seventeen or eighteen years of Jesus' life regarding which the Gospels are silent, were filled with travels in far and distant lands, where the youth and young man was instructed in the occult lore and wisdom of the different schools. It is taught that He was taken into India, and Egypt, and Persia, and other far regions, living for several years at each important center, and being initiated into the various brotherhoods, orders, and bodies having their headquarters there. Some of the Egyptians' orders have traditions of a young Master who sojourned among them, and such is likewise the case in Persia and in India. Even among the lamaseries hidden in Thibet and in the Himalayan Mountains are to be found legends and stories regarding the marvelous young Master who once visited there and absorbed their wisdom and secret knowledge.

-Yogi Ramacharaka, *Mystic Christianity, Or The Inner Teachings of the Master* (1908),

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Pretend you're reading a biography of a famous historical figure, say one of the great Yogis of all time, Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, winner of three American League Most Valuable Player awards. The biographer carefully follows the Yog's early years up to the time he's 12 or 13, all well and good. Then you turn the page and suddenly, without any explanation, he's 29 years old and in his eighth year with the Yankees. You search through the book looking for clues to Yogi's "lost years," but nothing turns up. Determined to fill in the biographical gap you go to another biography and, strange, it happens again, the narrative breaks off after Yogi turns 12 and starts up again on his 29th birthday. You try two more biographies but the same thing happens with both, the 18 years between 12 and 29 are blank.

Many Christians face exactly this dilemma when it comes to their MVP, Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels Fab Four, Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, are strangely silent about their subject between 12 and 29, the so-called "lost years" of his life. The gap might be understandable if it occurred in one or even two of these chronicles, but all four? Over the centuries people have come up with four theories (that I could discover) to account for this omission. The most conservative and believable—and, not surprisingly, most acceptable to orthodox Christians—is that Jesus simply stayed home and minded his own carpentry business, so the "lost years" weren't lost at all, just relatively quiet and un-good news-worthy. The second theory has Jesus traveling to Egypt, where he studies either with the Egyptian sages or with a community of Buddhists in Alexandria. This latter explanation is particularly favored by those who see—or would like to see—parallels between Christianity and Buddhism. The next theory sends Jesus (and maybe Mary) on what we might call a business trip with Mary's tin merchant uncle, Joseph of Arimathea (who would donate his tomb for Jesus' burial 20 years down the road) to the Roman province of Britannia, Britain as we know it today. There Jesus is supposed to hook up with the local Druids and, according to one source, complete their 19-year training program at Glastonbury (how ironic, if this theory is true, that the Christian Church, once it became the dominant religion in Britain a few hundred years later, would persecute the Druids). The final and most far-fetched theory is that teenage Jesus tagged along with a merchant caravan traveling to India (or Sindh).

The Jesus-goes-to-India "lost years" story was popularized in the West by an enigmatic Russian named Nicolas Notovitch. Notovitch, an aristocrat, military officer and journalist, was a character of somewhat questionable morals though charming mien, a combination that landed

him a starring role, as such behavior often does, as “Dirkovitch” in “The Man Who Was,” a 1907 short story by Rudyard Kipling:

Dirkovitch was a Russian—a Russian of the Russians—who appeared to get his bread by serving the Czar as an officer in a Cossack regiment, and corresponding for a Russian newspaper with a name that was never twice alike. He was a handsome young Oriental, fond of wandering through unexplored portions of the earth, and he arrived in India from nowhere in particular. At least no living man could ascertain whether it was by way of Balkh, Badakshan, Chitral, Beluchistan, or Nepaul, or anywhere else. The Indian Government, being in an unusually affable mood, gave orders that he was to be civilly treated and shown everything that was to be seen. So he drifted, talking bad English and worse French, from one city to another, till he foregathered with Her Majesty's White Hussars in the city of Peshawur, which stands at the mouth of that narrow swordcut in the hills that men call the Khyber Pass. He was undoubtedly an officer, and he was decorated after the manner of the Russians with little enamelled crosses, and he could talk, and (though this has nothing to do with his merits) he had been given up as a hopeless task, or cask, by the Black Tyrone, who individually and collectively, with hot whiskey and honey, mulled brandy, and mixed spirits of every kind, had striven in all hospitality to make him drunk. And when the Black Tyrone, who are exclusively Irish, fail to disturb the peace of head of a foreigner—that foreigner is certain to be a superior man.

In the late 1880s Notovitch was in Ladakh, an area in what is today northwestern India, there to study, he claimed, the local customs, sort of an amateur anthropologist. But there's also a sneaking suspicion that the anthropologist was a cover, the proverbial the sheep's clothing, and that underneath was the wolf. It's rumored Notovitch was a spy, gathering intelligence in preparation for a Russian invasion of India. But wait, we can peel off another layer of clothing—there's an even more sinister suspicion that underneath the wolf's clothing is another wolf, that Nicolas was a double agent also in the employ of the British.

One day our anthropologist-double agent fell off his horse and broke his leg, and wound up recuperating at the nearby Hemis (or Himis) monastery in the care of the resident lamas. During this interlude he heard about a very old book in the monastery's library, which was described to him as the biography of a traveling saint by the name of Issa, “best of the sons of men.” The lamas were at first reluctant to show him the book, but Notovitch pestered and persisted and finally got his way. The story, related through an interpreter, begins when this “marvelous child” Issa, aged 14, arrived in India. He first went to live with the ascetic Jains, then proceeded to Jagannath and/or Benares where for six years he studied the Vedas and learned to “cure by aid of prayer, to teach, to explain the holy scriptures to the people, and to drive out evil spirits from the bodies of men, restoring unto them their sanity.” But when he started teaching these holy scriptures to all and sundry, including the bottom-of-the-caste-barrel Shudras, forbidden by tradition not only to hear the Vedas but to even *think* about them, the Brahmin priests had a fit. They ordered Issa to cease and desist, but being a budding saint of course he didn't, and what's more he began ragging on the arrogant Brahmins. “God the Father,” he told his audiences, though not mentioning God the Mother, “makes no difference between his children; all to him are equally dear.” Finally the Brahmins decided they needed to take drastic steps to stop the dissemination of their secret, sacred holdings, so they put out a contract on Issa. Warned of the danger, and not yet ready to be martyred, he wisely hastened off to the Himalayas and Nepal where he studied Buddhism before returning through Persia, where he preached to the Zoroastrians, to Palestine.

Notovitch decided that Issa couldn't be anyone else but Jesus, the lamas' book being an account of his lost years. Once back to Europe he wrote (in French) *The Unknown Life of Jesus*, which was published in 1894 (and later translated to English, German, Spanish and Italian). Not surprisingly, the book generated strong reactions, mostly negative, even before it was published. Notovitch showed his manuscript to several higher-ups in both the Russian Orthodox (Notovitch was a convert, having been born a Jew) and Catholic Churches and was strongly advised to bury it ... deep. He did however have a few supporters. Hindus and Buddhists cited the *Unknown Life* as proof positive that Christianity had been influenced, despite Western denials, to some degree by Eastern religion, for which the former would forever be indebted to the latter. Notovitch's story also hangs the blame for Jesus' execution on the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, which pleased the Jews, who for centuries had borne the burden of the blame. And finally ecumenists eagerly championed the Issa story, which proved to them beyond a shadow of a doubt that all religions can ultimately be traced back to the same common source.

The naysayers came from two camps. Mainstream Christians of all stripes vigorously attacked the book, which to them seemed to threaten either the supremacy—as they imagined it—of their religion or its very foundation; after all if Jesus survived the crucifixion, there's no atonement for or possibility of salvation from Original Sin, and so no Christianity. And academics like Max Muller thought the whole story a hoax, full of improbabilities, not to mention impossibilities, and anachronisms. Critics maintained either that: Notovitch had never been to India and made up the story out of whole cloth because, as a journalist, he wanted to write a best seller and cash, or that Notovitch had been to India, and either made the story up or had been duped into thinking it true by some impish lamas.

After the initial stir of controversy, the *Unknown Life* slipped out of public consciousness and went into hibernation. But this isn't the end of the story. Over the next decades other curious travelers made the arduous trek to Hemis to see Issa the manuscript for themselves.