

Article

# Jesus and Spirituality in Interreligious Perspectives

Nancy M. Martin

Department of Religious Studies, Chapman University, Orange, CA 92866, USA; nmartin@chapman.edu

**Abstract:** Rarely do members of diverse religions engaged in interreligious dialogue find agreement on metaphysics and doctrine, though such conversations may be very fruitful and lead to greater understanding and mutual illumination. In the area of religious experience, however, recognition of commonality may be much more readily apparent, and in such encounters, the life and spirituality of Jesus provide a meeting ground. This essay examines Jesus as a catalyst for spiritual inspiration and transformation from Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and nontraditional perspectives. As an integral figure in Islam, Jesus appears in the writings of the likes of Ibn Arabi, Rumi and more contemporary Sufi teachers. Hindus and Buddhists, too, have embraced him, from Sri Ramakrishna and Gandhi to Thich Nhat Hanh. This essay will explore the integral role Jesus plays in such interreligious contexts, embodying self-sacrifice, wisdom and active love and interweaving personal transformation, contemplative practice and social engagement in the pursuit of liberating spiritual realization. In so doing, the essay will argue that such interreligious perspectives are an essential element in a full accounting of Jesus' place in the spiritual lives of diverse human beings.

**Keywords:** spirituality; interreligious dialogue; Jesus; Islamic spirituality; Hinduism and Christianity; Thich Nhat Hanh; Sufism and Jesus; Rumi; Ibn al-Arabi; Gandhi and Jesus



**Citation:** Martin, Nancy M. 2022.

Jesus and Spirituality in Interreligious Perspectives. *Religions* 13: 1157. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121157>

Academic Editor: Paul Anderson

Received: 18 October 2022

Accepted: 13 November 2022

Published: 28 November 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

The character, life and teachings of Jesus have been a catalyst for spiritual inspiration and transformation for many, well beyond the boundaries of traditional Christianity, who draw on the broad spiritual heritage of humanity to foster realization and compassionate action. To explore the impact of Jesus in this experiential realm of spirituality across religious boundaries, it is necessary to step beyond conceptual discussions of theology and metaphysics, however congenial and mutually illuminating, and into the lives of those “deeply immersed in and faithful to [their] own tradition” (Schneiders 2003, p. 179) for whom Jesus has become a living reality. For purposes of this essay, we will look to the lives and writings of select individuals in Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism for whom Jesus has become a vital part of their spiritual paths and in doing so also consider the insight they may offer for those of Christian heritage in their own evolving understandings and experience of Jesus.

It is important at the outset of such an examination to note the impact of European colonialism and the genealogy of the category of “religion”, which is inseparable from its twin “secularism” and imbued with assumptions of exclusionary belonging and of an evolutionary hierarchy culminating in Christian supremacy and exclusive truth. Islam has been in dialogue with Christianity as well as Judaism since its inception, but interreligious encounters between Christians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, particularly from the nineteenth century, have been heavily marked by missionary diatribe and concomitant rejection of Christian imperialism and hypocrisy, a legacy that remains with us still. Yet even so, Jesus' character and teachings provide an opening for “participative experience”, “existential appropriation” and “personal engagement” (characteristics Sandra Schneiders identifies as fundamental to biblical spirituality) for some outside the bounds of Christianity (Schneiders 2016, p. 426). We will begin with Islam, where Jesus is already an integral figure in the tradition, and then turn to Hindu and Buddhist experiences, as we seek to understand something of Jesus' significance as he is integrated into diverse spiritual paths.

## 1. Jesus in Islamic Spirituality

Jesus is a much-admired prophet in Islam, beloved of God and figuring prominently in the Qur'an as the Son of Mary, born without a father, enlivened by the Word of God "Be" and the breath of the Spirit, even as Adam was, and able through the permission and power of God to speak as an infant, to heal congenital blindness and leprosy, to resurrect the dead, to shape and breathe life into clay birds, and more. Jesus is, importantly, also an eschatological figure, taken up by God rather than actually crucified, who will return to defeat the false messiah at the end of time. Though Muhammad remains the ideal and preeminent guide for Muslims, Jesus nevertheless also has an integral place in Islamic spirituality.

Islamic understandings are grounded in Qur'anic references to Jesus and influenced by "intimate encounters with a living Christianity suffused with rich and diverse images" in the early centuries of Islam's development (Khalidi 2001, p. 29). Beyond direct Qur'anic references, there is a considerable body of sayings of Jesus, often contextualized in narrative vignettes that were and remain widely circulating and are imbedded in the writings of interpreters of the tradition and included in collections of tales of the long line of prophets recognized by Muslims, beginning with Adam.

In the early sayings, Tarif Khalidi contends, we find Jesus described as:

... a patron saint of Muslim asceticism. Here, renunciation of the world is total and uncompromising. Identification with the poor is crucial to his mission. Poverty, humility, silence, and patience are, as it were, the four cardinal virtues. The world is a "ruin" and all worldly goods must be shunned. The believer must keep in mind the afterlife perpetually before his eyes; he is a sorrowing traveler, "stranger", or "guest" in this world. (ibid., p. 34)

Jesus readily embodies this spiritual trajectory of renunciation of power and privilege and the embrace of poverty and humility, in his own life and in his words, resisting temptations to power and glory, wandering without a home or possessions, moving among the marginalized, returning blessings for curses, offering acceptance rather than judgment, acting as a servant rather than master and manifesting compassion and mercy in the world.

As the tradition expands, Jesus is increasingly portrayed as "the lord of nature, the miracle worker, the healer and the social and ethical model and indeed, as one who is "a living moral force ... a Jesus of popular piety and devotion whose sayings and stories ... continued to appear in Arabic Islamic literature throughout the premodern period" (ibid., pp. 41, 39). In addition to Qur'anic references, a number of these sayings correspond to New Testament passages, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, but others to noncanonical materials, and many offer guidance in proper behavior, with Jesus emblematic of "a heart turned perpetually toward God, constantly on guard against the temptation of haste and heedlessness" (ibid., p. 43).

Beyond this popular piety, we find Jesus embraced within Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam that develops among both Sunni and Shiite Muslims, whose practitioners are driven by a longing to know and love God as the Divine Beloved. The external practices of Islam are maintained and right conduct (*adab*) deemed essential, but these are coupled with an interior alchemy that entails plumbing the inner depths of the prophetic teachings and moving through a series of states and stations toward full realization of God, analogous to Muhammad's ascension into God's presence on his night journey, the *mi'raj*.

Of this inner dimension of Islam, William Chittick observes, "If any single word can sum up Islamic spirituality—by which I mean the very heart of the Qur'anic message—it should surely be love ... conveying the nature of the quest for God that lies at the tradition's heart" (Chittick 2013, p. xi). Indeed, in an oft-quoted sacred *hadith*, God declares:

I was a Hidden Treasure  
and I yearned,  
I loved  
to be known

intimately  
 So I created the heavens and the Earth  
 So that they may know Me  
 intimately (Safi 2018, p. 21)

The creation is an overflowing, a manifestation of the attributes of God, a self-revelation and self-actualization of God, with humans uniquely created in God's image and drawn to seek the source of their being, to know and love God intimately. However, in the literature of the Sufis, love is "not . . . merely another divine quality, but the divine quality par excellence" and the "love that mingles humanity and divinity . . . not an emotion but a doing, a being, a becoming" (ibid., p. xxx). The love that defines the path to union with the divine Beloved is agonizing longing and exultant ecstasy, utter devastation and jubilant intoxication, consuming flame and inundating ocean. Herein Jesus is both a teacher of the way of love and a quintessential exemplar, "illustrat[ing] both the transformation and perfection of the human soul and the journey that it must endure in order to achieve its end-goal, *fana wa baqa* (annihilation and subsistence in God)" (Milani 2011, p. 49).

Among the many references to Jesus made by the great religious scholar and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE), in his *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (integrating Sufism with Sunni Islam), is a tale which illustrates the cost of such love. A young man entreats Jesus to ask God to give him a single atom's weight of love for God, but Jesus says he will not be able to bear it. So he requests only half an atom's weight; Jesus complies and departs.

A long time later Jesus . . . found him standing on a rock, staring up at the sky. Jesus greeted him, but the young man did not return his greeting, and so he said, "I am Jesus." God then revealed to Jesus, "How can he whose heart has half an atom's weight of love for me hear the words of human beings? By my glory and might, even if you were to see him through, he would not be aware of it". (Khalidi 2001, pp. 183–84)

So overwhelming is the love of God, even in the smallest measure, that it ultimately allows for nothing else, whether of the world or within the self (Siddiqui 2013, pp. 208–9). Only the Beloved remains, leading the great mystic al-Hallaj famously to declare "I am Truth". He was executed for his perceived crime of claiming to be God by those who did not understand his mystical state—a death sometimes compared to the crucifixion of Jesus—he, too, misunderstood by his fellow Jews when he declared "I am in my Father and my Father in me", but also by his followers who mistook the vessel for the divine, from a Muslim perspective (Milani 2011, pp. 60–61).

The specific nature of Jesus' conception without a father but by the word and breath of God illuminates this mystery of union and distinction between God and humans, "the paradox of 'He' and 'other than He'" that captivates so many Sufi writers, including the highly trained Islamic scholar and mystic visionary Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240 CE) (Austin 1980, p. 174). In his culminating work *Bezels of Wisdom*, he dedicates each chapter to one of the prophets as "the human setting in which the gemstone of each kind of wisdom is set", with Jesus associated with "prophecy" (ibid., p. 16). For Ibn al-'Arabi, Jesus is "in a special way, what every [person] is potentially, that is to say, a spirit enshrined in natural form, which is nothing other than the Spirit enshrined within His Nature" (ibid., p. 174). Within his complex mystical understanding, God speaks the cosmos into existence as a manifestation of his attributes or names, revealing Himself therein, and he forms and breathes spirit into humans, starting with Adam, making them in his image, so that while his attributes are dispersed throughout the cosmos, they are present in a unified way in human beings as "innate disposition" (Chittick 1998, p. xxiii). The human then is a microcosm of the relationship between God and the cosmos and completes this, with the highest human perfection "bringing these attributes out of hiddenness and into manifestation" (ibid.). Jesus is such a "perfect human", as indeed are other prophets and friends of God (saints), most especially Muhammad, and they provide guidance to others

in this pursuit and also play a crucial role in fully actualizing divine attributes such as “mercy, compassion, wisdom and love” in relation and in the world (*ibid.*, xxvi).

Because of his unique conception, Jesus is called “Spirit of God” and “Word of God” in the Qur’an, but also “Servant of God”, and indeed Jesus proclaims even as an infant that he is such. Thus, while Jesus may enliven the dead or inanimate with his life-giving breath and words, it is with the permission and power of God. Indeed, so too does anyone who awakens the soul that is dead to God, Ibn al-‘Arabi assures his reader—it is the Spirit of God who acts in either case. Ibn al-‘Arabi struggles to capture this mystery of human and divine collaboration, as oneness and yet distinction, which is epitomized by Jesus but true for every human:

But for Him and but for us,  
That which has become could not be.  
We are servants in very truth,  
And it is God Who is our master.  
But we are of His very essence, so understand  
When I say “man”  
And do not be deceived by (the term) “man”,  
For He has given you a proof.  
Be divine (in essence) and be a creature (in form)  
And you will be, by God, a compassionate one . . . .  
In Him we were existences, essences,  
And instants of time . . . . (*ibid.*, p. 179)

The cosmos in its entirety is in some sense “God’s body” and humans are God manifest, but God is far more than either and humans are thus also not God, but rather momentary forms with no existence apart from God.

The full recognition of this truth comes only through experience:

Perfect knowledge of God demands seeing with two eyes. The highest of God’s friends . . . are those who recognize God in His self-disclosures and at the same time acknowledge His utter incompatibility with everything found in the self and the cosmos. They have achieved knowledge of the heart, whose beating signifies the constant fluctuation between understanding God as different, far and incomparable and seeing Him as same, near and similar. ([Chittick 1998](#), p. xxiii)

Jesus is one who had such perfect knowledge in love, affirmed as a prophet of the heart and instrument of God, and one who:

. . . manifested in a powerful way the truth that each creature is ‘He and not He’ . . . .In his poverty and humility Jesus demonstrates that he is a creature, as he is utterly poor with respect to being; but insofar as in his creaturely nothingness he reveals the divine power and raises the dead, he is a theophany—a manifestation of divine Essence *within* created being. ([Dobie 2014](#), p. 240)

Like a mirror, Jesus reflected all the divine qualities, revealing and manifesting God, particular yet universal, in his perfected humanity ([Nurbakhsh 1983](#), p. 33).

Such perfection is the telos of every human, and Sufis identify Jesus as both an ideal to be emulated and the live-giving breath that awakens, enlivens, restores and transforms the friends of God along the journey. Drawing on many who came before and influencing innumerable others, the great Sufi poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi (1207–1273), known as Rumi in the West ([Lewis 2008](#)), often invoked Jesus in his poetry. Sometimes Jesus is portrayed as humbly riding a donkey and thus as one who has overcome the lower soul driven by sensual desire and mired in the world ([Chittick 1983](#), p. 34; [Nurbakhsh 1983](#), pp. 55–56; [Schimmel \[1978\] 1993](#), pp. 103–6). Rumi takes up this image, encouraging others to follow Jesus’ lead:

When Jesus escaped from the ass, his prayers were accepted. ([Arberry 2009](#), p. 138)

When you discover the pith, my son, and have learned to disregard the husk,  
When you have entered the quarter of Jesus, you will not any more say, "Where  
is my ass?" (ibid., p. 184)

Indeed, in moments of discouragement Rumi refers to the world as "the pasturage of asses, not the abode of Jesus" (ibid., p. 206). Though there are those who would "give up the ass to buy Jesus", there are others who would "give up Jesus to buy the ass", even though Jesus has the potential to guide and transform according to each individual's nature, no matter how high or low the starting point, not even death an obstacle (ibid., p. 306). His prophetic "wine" can even make the ass sprout wings to fly (ibid., p. 149).

Yet Rumi counsels:

[I]f wisdom weakens, then that donkey  
Becomes a dragon, making you its monkey.  
If life with Jesus makes your heart feel pain,  
He'll give you health soon, so with him remain. (Mojaddedi 2007, p. 109)

Jesus as "physician of the soul" is able to restore health and youth; he "gives life to the body, intoxication to the soul . . . [and] takes away from the heart's slackness, from the cheeks' pallor", offering "the antidote, if you have swallowed the poison of death" (Arberry 2009, p. 319). Elsewhere Rumi asks "[C]ould the blind remain blind in the protection of Jesus?" (ibid., p. 363). Moreover Jesus is known as one who laughs, trusting God completely (ibid., p. 170) and is associated with the spiritual station of "hope", as the "enduring quality that best characterize[s] his inner condition" (Renard 1996, p. 214). Rumi also encourages the spiritual aspirant to heed the call of Jesus' "Welcome" from the fourth heaven (Arberry 2009, p. 81).

Yet it is clear from these latter passages that "Jesus" for Rumi is not only an exemplar and spiritual teacher to be followed but also indicative of an inner potential within every human:

Our body is like Mary.  
Each of us has a Jesus inside.  
If a pain and yearning show up inside us,  
the Jesus of our soul is born.  
If there is no pain, no yearning,  
the Jesus of our soul will return to its origin from the  
same secret passageway that he came from . . . (Safi 2018, p. 129)

In this sense, "Jesus" is the spiritual self, the spirit of God that is the very being of each person and that can rise to the same heights, through a path that includes discipline and self-emptying so that "God's qualities of love and mercy [might] flow through [us even as they do through] fully realized human beings", most especially Muhammad but also Jesus and other prophets and saints (ibid., p. 1). "Your spirit's Jesus is within, so pure—Seek help from it, then you can feel secure!" (Mojaddedi 2007, p. 29) he counsels, yet humans seek satisfaction in the world, so that Rumi implores "Have mercy on Jesus, not the ass! Let not your animal nature rule your intellect . . ." (Chittick 1983, p. 34). If we do, then we too will be able to birth the Jesus within ourselves, becoming physicians of the soul and manifesting the attributes of God in the world. So the way that Rumi counsels is to follow the path of Jesus, to walk with him:

[H]arken to the call of God, "Return!"  
Our speech and action is the outer journey,  
The inner journey is above the sky  
The body travels on its dusty way;  
The spirit walks, like Jesus, on the sea. (Nicholson 1950, p. 74)

For Rumi, Jesus is not only a prophet, perfected human and one who might breathe spiritual life into us but also the spirit itself within us all, capable of such perfection, of



“walking on the sea”, of becoming a “physician of the soul”, of manifesting the divine attributes in the world. A multitude of other Sufi writers also make reference to Jesus in similar ways, some even reporting dream or visionary encounters (Nurbakhsh 1983, pp. 91–92; Lawrence 1998). Importantly Rumi’s Jesus remains fundamentally grounded in the Qur’an and hadith and in the scholarly traditions of Islam as well as personal mystical experience, even as Ibn al-Arabi’s Jesus does. As James Roy King notes, for Rumi, Jesus is an “absolutely integrated or unified personality . . . endowed with a special capacity to renew and transform human lives, to render them whole and complete but without ever going beyond the Islamic insistence that there is no god but God” (King 1990, pp. 86, 89–90).

Although Sufi literature, including the writings of both Ibn al-Arabi and Rumi, also offers clear critiques of Christian conceptions of Jesus, to suggest as Milad Milani (2011, p. 48) does that these Muslim mystics referenced Jesus primarily to “feign familiarity with their Christian contemporaries . . . to convince Christians of the superiority of Islamic doctrine” and “for purposes of conversion is unwarranted and tantamount to denying Jesus’ vital place in Islamic spirituality. Sufi ideas took shape in religiously diverse and cosmopolitan societies, and famously it is said that Jews and Christians attended the funeral prayers at Rumi’s death as well as Muslims, calling him “our Moses” and “our Jesus”, signaling their deep respect and attraction to this man of God (Schimmel [1978] 1993, p. 36). Today he is not only held in high esteem across the Middle East and India but has become arguably the most published poet in the United States, though with translations of his poetry and Westernized forms of “Sufism” often universalized, their Islamic roots deliberately obscured (Lewis 2008). Yet in his writings, those of Ibn al-Arabi and the compositions of so many other Sufis, we find a decidedly Muslim lived experience of Jesus that may yet open up more fruitful relations between Christians and Muslims in our time. Such a hope motivates Shaikh Javad Nurbakhsh in his own work to unveil this relatively little-known Sufi Jesus, this hidden treasure, to the world (Nurbakhsh 1983, p. 10).

## 2. Jesus in the Spiritual Lives of Hindus

Christianity has also been a living presence in the Indian religious landscape for centuries, its origins traced to the alleged coming of the apostle Thomas to South India in 54 C.E. but, in any case, very early in the history of Christianity (Barker and Gregg 2010, p. 153). However, records from these centuries are largely nonexistent, particularly with regard to Jesus’ meaning in the spiritual lives of individuals. When we reach the 19th and 20th centuries, we find an array of Hindu responses to Christianity in the context of colonialism, missionization and the formation of “Hinduism” as a coherent religion to stand beside others so defined. In this context, Jesus and his teachings become a way for Hindus to critique colonial Christian hypocrisy and challenge dogmatic claims on Christians’ own terms, but also, as Gavin Flood points out, their positive valuation was “a theological necessity in light of the kind of Hinduism they espoused, namely a rationalist and universal Hinduism formed in the context of colonial encounter” (Barker and Gregg 2010, p. 201). In much subsequent Hindu–Christian interreligious dialogue, we find comparison of similarities and differences at the conceptual level—for example, notions of incarnation and uniqueness and of creation versus manifestation—with resulting degrees of clarification and mutual appreciation (Barker 2005; Barker and Gregg 2010). There are also European Christian monastics who have incorporated Hindu ideas and practices into their own spiritual lives. For example, Abhishiktananda (Henri le Saux, O.S.B.) offers a Christian approach to the *advaita* experience of being, consciousness and bliss (*sacchidananda*), and Bede Griffiths composes his Christian commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, both men embracing the persona of Indian holy men and founding ashrams there (Abhishiktānanda 1974; Griffiths 1987). But we also find individuals and communities identifying as Hindu for whom Jesus and his teachings have been profoundly meaningful and spiritually transformative, and it is in these accounts that we may glimpse the potential impact of Jesus in the realm of an interreligious spirituality.

Among those most highly respected and influential is Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886 CE), the great devotee of the Goddess, who was recognized by his followers as an embodiment of God-consciousness and avatar of the Divine. His most illustrious disciple Vivekananda would compellingly present his universal Hinduism to a global audience at the first Parliament of the World Religions in 1893 in Chicago, and his disciples would form monastic communities and the Vedanta Society to propagate his teachings. His ecstatic experiences of unity, first with the great goddess Mother Kali and then with unmanifest Brahman, led to an overwhelming desire to experience Divine Reality in all its manifest forms and to practice not only multiple paths within Hinduism but also Islam and Christianity. In 1866, he would immerse himself deeply in Islam to the total exclusion of all else, culminating in a vision of a figure whom he would identify as Mohammed, who walked toward him and then dissolved into him, even as an experience of Allah washed over him.

In 1874, he would be overcome with a desire to experience Christianity and so began to immerse himself in the life and teachings of Jesus, leading to an encounter that would have even more profound influence on his own life and teachings. Looking at a picture of Mary and Jesus, he entered into a spontaneous trance of *samadhi*, seeing rays of light emanating from the figures. He remained in a state of ecstasy for the next three days and on the fourth day had a vision of Jesus. His disciple Nikhilananda describes Ramakrishna's experience thus:

He saw coming toward him a person with beautiful eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice rang out in the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's soul: "Behold the Christ, who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world, who suffered a sea of anguish for love of men. It is He, the Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate". The Son of Man embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and merged with him. Sri Ramakrishna realized his identity with Christ, as he had already realized his identity with Kālī, Rāma, Hanumān, Rādhā, Krishna, Brahman, and Mohammed . . . Thus he experienced the truth that Christianity, too, was a path leading to God-Consciousness. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 35)

Ramakrishna's path integrated *advaitic jnana* realization of the One with *bhakti* devotion to God/Goddess. The *bhakti* or devotional path of Hinduism cultivates love for the Divine in whatever form one encounters that reality, with the understanding that, because of our individual differences, we might be drawn to a particular manifestation, our *ishtadev* or chosen deity, or perhaps more accurately the divine comes to us in love in the ways most accessible to us, whether in particular forms or as the one who transcends all form, the *nirgun* Lord. The *bhakti* goal of the spiritual life is to deepen our capacity to love God, indeed to manifest the love which is God and our truest nature. Ramakrishna's desire was to experience the Divine Reality in all possible ways and to realize the presence of the Divine within, for all that exists is God manifest, the *lila*, or play, of the Divine.

Ramakrishna had many visionary experiences of *darshan* of the Divine in myriad forms, which sent him into such ecstatic states. *Darshan* is a principal mode of encounter in Hindu traditions, its meaning including both to be seen and to see the Divine and thus to be fully in the divine presence. That presence might be mediated by an image in a temple or by great human beings, such as Ramakrishna himself. Ramakrishna's realization of the oneness of God and of the religious paths was grounded in such direct experience rather than mere intellectual assent to a perennial philosophy or theological monism.

His experiences would lead him to conclude that all religions led to the same God-Consciousness, his encounter with Jesus verifying Christianity's place therein. He would repeatedly affirm the unity of God and the common goal of spiritual experience. "Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize Him" (ibid., p. 35). The names for God may be different and many, but the reality is One. In the words of a devotional song he regularly requested: "Some laugh, some weep, some dance for joy; Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Gauranga [Chaitanya],

All are drunk with the Wine of Thy Love” (ibid., p. 399). He would criticize those who claimed exclusive possession of the truth or who argued over whose religion was superior.

Stories and teachings of Jesus were woven through his conversations with his disciples and theirs after his passing, along with those of great Hindu teachers, Indian and European philosophy, and Hindu scriptures (ibid., p. 991). Ramakrishna did not convert to an exclusive allegiance to Jesus but rather understood Jesus as an avatar of God, a complete manifestation of divine love in human form and saw himself as inseparable from Jesus, both equally God manifest, in order to guide others to the experience of God-consciousness in their times. Among the pictures of holy persons that adorned the walls of his room would be one of Jesus reaching out to rescue Peter from the waves when his faith wavered (ibid., p. 606). Ramakrishna’s disciples would see many parallels between their guru and Jesus, in both teachings and way of living, and they would remain devoted also to Jesus after Ramakrishna’s passing (ibid., p. 838).

His most illustrious disciple, Vivekananda (1863–1902), was said to have carried with him only two books: the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Imitation of Christ* (Barker and Gregg 2010, p. 177). In the introduction to his unfinished Bengali translation of the latter, he writes, “The spirit of humility, the panting of the distressed soul, the best expression of Dasya Bhakti (devotion as a servant) will be found imprinted in every line of this great book and the reader’s heart will be profoundly stirred by the author’s thoughts of burning renunciation, marvelous surrender, and deep sense of dependence on the will of God” (ibid., p. 179). It is this spirituality of Jesus and his followers that Vivekananda could deeply admire and embrace, irrespective of his highly critical stance toward contemporary Christians and rejection of Christian dogmatic assertions and claims of exclusivity.

Another of Ramakrishna’s direct disciples, Swami Abhedananda (1866–1939), would become a key leader of the newly established Vedanta Society in New York. From 1907–1911, he delivered a series of lectures on *The Great Saviors of the World*, including Krishna, Zoroaster, Lao-tzu, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and Ramakrishna. Of Jesus he would affirm:

By his unique self-renunciation and self-sacrifice and disinterested love for humanity, Jesus the Christ has conquered the hearts of the spiritually minded people among all the nations, has taught them how to live the life of blessedness, how to reach perfection and God-consciousness, how to work for others, how to live and die for the good of humanity; and for that reason, Vedanta accepts the Spiritual Christ’s ideal, presents him before the seekers of spirituality and tells them to follow his path and to worship him as the Son of God, the Savior of mankind and the Redeemer of the world”. (Abhedananda 1958a, p. 147)

Explicating Jesus’ statement “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), he would confirm that the spiritual path Jesus taught was one which led to God-consciousness, “where all duality vanishes, where all idea of separateness ceases forever, and where the tremendous onrush of the divine essence of the universal Spirit, breaking down all the barriers and limitations of our human consciousness, causes us to realize our eternal oneness with the Heavenly Father on the spiritual plane” (Abhedananda 1958c, p. 218). For him, Jesus and others, including Ramakrishna, are uniquely transparent to the divine within, emptied of self and able to guide others to realization—“to show [them] the path of righteousness, to show how to live the God-like life; how to realize that Divinity which dwells in each individual soul, and that to follow the Divine Will in every action should be the aim of human life” (Abhedananda 1958a, p. 148). Elsewhere, he details the ways in which Jesus embodies in his life and teachings this perfected ideal (Abhedananda 1958b) and asserts, “The Hindu is not satisfied merely to accept Christ in theory, but he strives hard to live the life which Jesus lived, to lead a life of renunciation, of self-control, and of love to all” (Abhedananda 1958a, p. 219).

It would be the life lived by Jesus that would also inspire Mohandas K. Gandhi, who saw him as “the prince of satyagraha”, the embodiment of truth force—of active non-violence marked by love, renunciation and self-sacrifice. He would read the New Testament alongside the *Bhagavad Gita*, first during his studies in London and then through the rest



of his life, and he would recognize in the Sermon on the Mount profound similarities with his own religious upbringing, confirming the universality of Truth (Chatterjee 1983, p. 50). In his ashram talks he would regularly speak of the life and example of Jesus, to the consternation both of some Christians in his interpretations and of some Hindus who opposed his “collaboration” with the colonizers. Yet Gandhi did not hesitate to draw on Jesus, even as he did selectively on traditions from Hinduism, wherever he found “transcendent truth”, particularly those sources that affirmed renunciation, sacrifice and “living service” (Howard 2013, p. 183; Chatterjee 1983, p. 50). He would make reference to Jesus in the *katha* style of Indian religious teachers (Howard 2013, pp. 168–73), offering no systematic analysis of Christian beliefs but rather finding in Jesus “an embodiment of universal love” and a man who went through “a progressive process of self-purification” and increasing identification with the lives and suffering of the others, even as Gandhi himself sought to do in his own spiritual journey (Chatterjee 1983, pp. 54–55).

Further, he would claim that, because “Jesus expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God . . . He belongs not solely to Christianity but to the entire world, to all races and all people” (ibid., p. 55). Responding to missionaries, he would insist:

I do not experience spiritual consciousness in my life through that Jesus (the historical Jesus). If by Jesus you mean the eternal Jesus, if by Jesus you understand that religion of universal love that dwells in the heart, then that Jesus lives in my heart—to the same extent that Krishna lives, that Rama lives. If I did not feel the presence of that living God, at the painful sights I see in the world, I would be a raving maniac and my destination would be the Hooghli (river). As, however, the Indweller shines in the heart, I have not been a pessimist now or ever before. (ibid., p. 53)

Gandhi would argue adamantly against the need for conversion, either to Christianity by Hindus or to Hinduism by Christians (Sharma 2003, pp. 99–100). It simply made no sense to him. To his mind, the goal of life was spiritual transformation, and the world’s religious traditions provide immense resources that should be available to all without the need to renounce one’s own culture and religious heritage. For the karma yogin Gandhi, Jesus embodied active love in the world and the same selfless action on behalf of Truth without attachment to the fruits of one’s actions advocated in the *Gita*—expansive love and self-sacrifice pursued with absolute dedication even unto death. As Margaret Chatterjee concludes:

[Gandhi] had a very special sense of kinship with the Son of Man who collected dust on his feet on the rocky path to the Mount of Olive[s], who went about doing good and who fell foul of the authorities, including the leaders of his own community. It was Jesus the Son of Man that Gandhi could greet as a brother. (Chatterjee 1983, p. 56)

Importantly, he did so as a Hindu, one whose own spiritual path was enriched by this companionship with Jesus.

Gandhi’s spiritual depth was recognized by others who would give him the title of Mahatma, or Great Soul, though he made no such claims himself, nor did he report visionary encounters with Jesus as Ramakrishna and others would. Notably, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) reports such an experience in his *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda [1946] 1998, pp. 536–37). Therein he recounts his own journey to realization via the *kriya yoga* path taught by his guru Sri Yukteswar (in a line of succession from Lahiri Mahasaya and Lahiri’s guru Babaji). It was from his guru that Yogananda would first come to understand Jesus as a self-realized master, a fully enlightened yogi able to heal, to take on the karma/sins of others, to transcend materiality, etc., and to embrace *kriya yoga* as the path taught by Krishna in the *Gita* and “known to Patanjali and Christ, and to St. John, St. Paul, and other disciples” (ibid., p. 264). He would understand Babaji as a *Mahavatar* and “ever in communion with Christ”, working with him to craft a method of “salvation for this age” (ibid., p. 334).

Yogananda would take this “spiritual technique” to the world, officially establishing the Self-Realization Fellowship in the United States in 1935 with the explicit aim of unifying East and West through the spiritual traditions of the world (ibid., p. 401). In that same year, he had the opportunity to meet a German Catholic mystic Therese Neumann of Konnersreuth (1898–1962), who had intrigued him for years—a woman reported to have experienced miraculous healing, who ate only one consecrated wafer each day and who regularly experienced stigmata as she beheld the crucifixion of Christ in weekly visions. He witnessed one such encounter, able to share her vision, he reports.

Yogananda would then have his own vision of Jesus many years later, after fervently praying for Christ’s guidance as he wrote a commentary on selected passages from the New Testament for the fellowship’s magazine. He describes the room filling with light and then Jesus appearing to him:

His eyes were wonderful; as I gazed, they were infinitely changing. With each divine transition in their expression, I intuitively understood the wisdom conveyed. In his glorious gaze I felt the power that upholds the myriad worlds. A Holy Grail appeared at his mouth; it came down to my lips and then returned to Jesus. After a few moments he uttered beautiful words, so personal in their nature that I keep them in my heart. (ibid., pp. 536–37)

Jesus’ gaze offered him spiritual insight through direct intuition, consistent with Hindu ideas of *darshan*, the cup clearly consistent with Christian symbols as well as *prasad*, the transmission of grace through consuming that which has first been offered to God.

Reports of such experiences, like those of Therese Neumann and of Ramakrishna and Yogananda, often make both scholars and more ordinary people uncomfortable. There is considerable skepticism directed toward such claims in both Hinduism and Christianity precisely because their veracity is not directly verifiable and they might as easily be signs of mental instability or fabricated for personal gain, consciously or unconsciously. But there is also a high degree of respect for those deemed authentic. The academic study of religion has often relegated these types of experiences of “presence” to the marginalized and the “primitive” and analyzed them strictly in reductive psychological, sociological and political terms, not taking seriously the reports of the people involved. Robert Orsi calls for the development of a methodology that will allow for a more holistic analysis of such experiences, which he refers to as “abundant events”, impacting not only the individual but much wider circles of people and communities in unexpected and transformative ways (Orsi 2016). I would argue that we must do so or risk missing the powerful import of these reported experiences with respect to the place of Jesus in spirituality within Christian and Hindu as well as other religious contexts.

It is also the case that, in India particularly, individuals such as these, recognized for their spiritual realization, regularly interact with each other and a multitude of spiritual seekers who come to them, so the impact of their encounters with Jesus and their teachings flow out far beyond their spiritual autobiographies. Further, visionary experiences of Jesus within Hinduism are not limited to such towering figures, though our knowledge of them may be largely so, and innumerable references to Jesus’ life and words can also be found in the teachings of many, as exemplary of both the spiritual goal and the path, though interpretations and responses to the dogmatic claims of Christianity vary widely.

Let me offer two more contemporary examples beyond such great male gurus of international acclaim. The first is a highly educated, cosmopolitan woman from a wealthy Sikh background, Indira Devi Niloy (1920–1996), who repeatedly encountered Jesus while in *samadhi*, or altered states of consciousness. Attending a convent school as a child, she had vowed to become a nun, though in fact she had little spiritual inclination until, at the age of 25, her life as a mother and engaged socialite seemed to lose all satisfaction. She would be drawn to meditation and would become the disciple of the musician, philosopher and great disciple of Sri Aurobindo, Dilip Kumar Roy, who had also spent much time with Sri Ramakrishna in his youth. Becoming an ecstatic devotee of Krishna, she was known especially for her ongoing relationship with the 16th-century saint-poet Mirabai,

who appeared to her repeatedly for some 40 years, acting as a spiritual guide and sharing songs with her that she and Roy would then perform. Trained in math, chemistry, and physics, Roy was skeptical by nature, and he and Indira Devi were both aware of doubts and psychological explanations of her experiences offered by others. Recognizing her as a highly spiritually-evolved person, Sri Aurobindo would ultimately offer confirmation of her experiences, and Roy would insist that she share them, though she was disinclined to do so. Indira Devi herself said throughout her life that she would not have believed what was happening if she did not experience it herself.

In their joint autobiography, *Pilgrims of the Stars*, they report that even in the initial stage of her turn toward spirituality, she had a vision of Jesus. Hearing the sound of something being dragged from an alleyway, she was drawn to investigate and saw a weary figure struggling to move an extremely heavy, roughly hewn cross.

After pushing her way through the crowd and drawing near the person dragging the cross, she cried out “Oh Lord, why do you allow them to do this to you?” She went down on her knees and wept. He who seemed so frail and weary looked up at her and she saw that His eyes were not sad. They were like two deep pools of clear water, full of compassion. For He understood why men did not understand. He forgave those very unfortunate beings who hated him and offered them Divine Love. He who was pure and sinless was punished by sinners for their own sins. The eyes smiled though the lips were parched. Indira was overwhelmed by the experience. Peace coursed from her head right down through her body. (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 221)

She would continue to have other visionary encounters with Jesus across the years and to share them with the growing community who looked to her and Roy for spiritual guidance (Roy 1983, p. 58). On Christmas Eve, 1960, for example, Roy reports that she again saw Jesus carrying the cross, but when he stumbled and dropped it, she saw a shining figure of Jesus resurrected behind the fallen figure (Roy and Devi [1964] 2012, p. 200).

Both she and Roy often referred to Jesus in their teachings, and indeed Indira would write in the opening pages of their autobiography: “To aspire for perfection, as Christ did, is yoga. Who was a greater teacher of yoga than Christ? Did he not want a transformation of nature? Did he not preach love, tolerance, humility? After all, did he not teach by example rather than precept?” (Roy and Devi [1973] 1985, p. 5). The immense love that Indira Devi experienced while in his presence, as well as that of Krishna and others, was also said to be characteristic of her own interactions with community members (though she could also be an exacting guru when appropriate), she too teaching by example. Again, the academic study of religion has few methodological resources to deal with ecstatic experiences of the kind Indira Devi reports, yet there is a growing chorus of voices calling for a “revitalization” of religious studies in this direction, including, importantly, not only Robert Orsi (2016) but also June McDaniels (2018).

One final example of a different nature from Hinduism is provided by the Khrist Bhaktas of Banaras. Though often discussed in the context of Christian ashrams, these devotees of Jesus worshipping at the Matr Dham Ashram in Banaras are not converts to Christianity, neither baptized nor participants in the Eucharist (San Chirico 2016). Recognizing Jesus as their *ishtadev*, or chosen deity, these formerly low-caste people who identify as Dalits (those “broken” or “crushed” by social oppression) understand Jesus as *Satguru* (True guru) and *mukti-data* (“liberation giver”), one who responds to their needs with love and compassion and for whom they express their love in terms consistent with Krishna devotion, as servants of God, but also with the language of intimacy of children for parents and vice-versa, of friends and of lovers. For their part, the Christian religious who oversee the ashram speak of them with profound respect. In the words of Father Prem Anthony, “they are better than we are [in faith terms] and yet they are not part of the structural church. And yet of course in spite of that they are loved more by the Lord—definitely—and they love the Lord more at least as much as we do” (ibid., p. 189).

To speak of such devotion in terms of “appropriation” or “syncretism” obscures the transformative impact and experiential reality of Jesus in the spiritual lives of these Hindu devotees, even as it would in the previous examples. In a generalized sense, that God incarnates in the world for the sake of devotees is readily accepted in Hindu contexts, and pictures of Jesus and Mary appear in market stalls along with those of other deities. But among the *Khrist Bhaktas*, Jesus is a living presence and an integral part of their spirituality. One devotee Kerry P.C. San Chirico interviewed, Malini, described how she felt Jesus drawing her to him, initially to her embarrassment, and compared her developing relationship with him to falling in love. “She is initially smitten; she finds his love disconcerting, and she can find no peace until and unless she sits in his presence embodied in the image within the context of *Īsā* (Arabic/Urdu: Jesus) *pūjā*” (ibid., pp. 193–94). Jesus is “not merely ‘believed in’ . . . but experienced” by these *Khrist Bhaktas* (ibid., p. 195). In his study of these Hindu devotees of Jesus, San Chirico turns to Orsi and the language of abundant events and places to explore more fully what is happening here. Jesus, it seems, refuses to be limited by the exclusive claims and boundaries drawn by human beings between religions, even as these ostensibly Hindu practitioners also refuse to do.

### 3. “Jesus and Buddha Are Brothers”

The encounter with Jesus in Buddhism follows a quite different trajectory, without the deep historical roots of interaction and without the same affinities (Barker 2005; Barker and Gregg 2010). Though both positive and negative appraisals have been made and considerable dialogue between Christians and Buddhists undertaken, there is limited evidence of Jesus impacting Buddhist spirituality or becoming a living reality in the spiritual lives of individual Buddhists in the ways found among Muslims and Hindus. A notable exception to this is the Vietnamese monk and founder of engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh, who would come to embrace Jesus as one of his “spiritual ancestors”.

His own early experience of Christianity was quite negative, particularly the missionary denigration of Buddhism and its suppression under the Catholic Diem regime that tore his country apart (Hanh 1995, p. 5). It was only when he came to know Christians in his work for peace and nonviolent social change, among whom were “men and women who truly embodied the spirit of understanding and compassion of Jesus”, that he “touched the depths of Christianity” (ibid., pp. 5–6). He would meet Martin Luther King, Jr., Hebe Kohlbrugger, Heinz Kloopenburg, Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan, as well as so many others through whom he experienced Jesus as a living reality.

For him to say that he has adopted Jesus as one of his spiritual ancestors is a profound claim. As a Buddhist, Buddha is clearly among those ancestors, and when he writes of him as such, he makes clear what he means: “To me the Buddha is very real. I can touch him at any time I want. I can profit by his energy and insight any time I want. It is very real. He is in every cell of my body. Every time I need him, I have ways to call for him and to make his energy manifest” (Hanh 1999, p. 190). He will write similarly of his father and assert “I live in constant touch with my ancestors whether they are blood ancestors or spiritual ancestors” (ibid., p. 191). To honor and embrace Jesus as one of his spiritual ancestors is equally to attest to the reality of Jesus for him. Further, he suggests, our spiritual ancestors give birth to us, in ways not unlike our parents, and continue to birth us anew in an ongoing process of transformation (Hanh 1995, p. 47). In saying this, he is asserting that Jesus is a foundational and integral part of who he is and of his spirituality in the profoundest sense, given the Buddhist understanding of interdependence and interbeing.

In his writings about Buddha and Jesus (Hanh 1995, 1999), Hanh is not writing for Christians as “others” but out of his own profound understanding and deep rootedness in both traditions. With respect to Jesus, he asserts, “[I]t is important to look deeply into every act and every teaching of Jesus during His lifetime, and to use this as a model for our own practice. Jesus lived exactly what he taught, so studying the life of Jesus is crucial to understanding His teaching” (Hanh 1995, p. 36). He does so as he engages the Gospel

writings, developing a nuanced and experientially-based understanding of the Holy Spirit as the “energy of God”, for example. He refers often to the baptism of Jesus as a profound opening to, and affirmation of, the indwelling Holy Spirit and of Jesus’ already enlightened state and yet one that would be strengthened and stabilized in the forty days he spent in the wilderness (Hanh 1995, pp. 20–21; 1999, pp. 45–46). Hanh draws a parallel with the practice of mindfulness as the cultivating and stabilizing of the energy of the Buddha. He also writes powerfully about Jesus being alive in and through us, made manifest through our living his teachings, through our “generating love, moment to moment”. He urges his readers “to practice in such a way that . . . Jesus Christ is born in every moment of our daily lives” (Hanh 1999, p. 92). Indeed, he will even go so far as to say “You are Jesus” in a manner consistent with Buddhist assertions that “You are the Buddha”, all people sons and daughters of God and carrying Jesus within, even as each carries the seeds of Buddhist enlightenment (ibid., p. 138).

Thich Nhat Hanh’s participation in the Eucharist with Daniel Berrigan shocked both Buddhists and Christians. Yet for him it was a natural outcome of shared struggle and suffering, a true communion and a manifestation of interbeing. He offers his own interpretations of Jesus’ intent on that fateful night, suggesting Jesus was employing “a drastic way to awaken His disciples from forgetfulness”, for though they were in his presence, “they had not yet come into contact with the wonderful reality of His being” (Hanh 1995, p. 30). Further, he speaks of the Eucharist “as a way to receive the life of Christ into his or her own body” for those who partake of it and to “touch life and . . . touch the Kingdom of God” (ibid., pp. 30–33). Elsewhere he writes, “This sacrament is both the practice to allow the Holy Spirit to inhabit us and to remind ourselves that we should allow the Holy Spirit to always inhabit us” (Hanh 1999, p. 95).

Clearly, these are the words of one for whom Jesus has indeed become a spiritual ancestor and who might have something to offer to others who count themselves among the followers of Jesus. Speaking from experience, he will develop his own understanding of the Trinity, of Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man, and of the meaning of the crucifixion and the sacraments, and he will not hesitate to challenge aspects of the scriptures, as well as the tradition, which do not ring true to his experience of Jesus. Yet at the same time, he reminds readers, “Discussing God is not the best use of our energy. If we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality” (ibid., p. 21). Concepts, ideas and notions are not reality itself, and in typical Buddhist fashion he encourages people not to cling to them but instead to focus on practice and presence, on manifesting in their own lives the living Christ and the living Buddha.

He interweaves the teachings of his spiritual ancestors through his writings, even as he does in his life, encouraging Christians and Buddhists to work together to support each other to transform themselves and the world. He does not encourage people to convert, but rather he urges them to understand and embrace their own religious and cultural heritage, to ground themselves firmly in that which has shaped them. At the same time, he has no trouble affirming both Buddha and Jesus as his own spiritual ancestors and writes of this in the context of an affirmation of marriage between people of different religions, who might seek to know each other’s spiritual tradition and to share both with their children. Religion is not an either/or proposition for him, even as it is not for many in Asian contexts, and indeed, in a Buddhist understanding of the interpenetrating nature of reality, it cannot be.

Hanh suggests “When we see someone overflowing with love and understanding, someone who is keenly aware of what is going on, we know that they are very close to the Buddha and to Jesus Christ” (Hanh 1995, p. 145). Brother David Steindl-Rast in his foreword to *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, identifies Thich Nhat Hanh as just such a one whose “very presence awakens us and challenges our complacency” (xvii). Further, Steindl-Rast affirms that Hahn:

. . . is a theologian in the deepest sense: He speaks of God out of his own living experiences . . . If we listen attentively, we will hear traditional truths expressed in startling new ways . . . For Christian readers, it would be a great loss to overlook



this voice of insight and compassion, insisting instead on academic niceties and theological precision". (xvi)

Indeed, Thich Nhat Hahn is what Paul Knitter calls a "double believer", even as he himself is. "A double believer no longer feels the need to 'return home' and identify with one's original tradition. Home becomes both one's original context as well as the new context one is exploring. One finds oneself, surprisingly, at home in both" (Knitter 2016, p. 493). A Christian theologian, Knitter comes to embrace Buddhism in a similar way, and he affirms spirituality as a powerful meeting point for people both within and across traditions (Knitter and Haight 2015).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Even these limited examples reveal immensely rich and varied Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist experiences of Jesus. The traditions of both popular and mystical Islam recognize him as uniquely able to know and embody the immensity of God's love and as exemplary of perfected humanity, manifesting compassion, humility, wisdom, indeed all the attributes of God—moving among the poor and ostracized, offering mercy rather than judgment, and renouncing all else by God. Yet even more than this, the Sufis point to Jesus as an inner wellspring of hope, healing and life, indeed as the indwelling spiritual potential in every person waiting to be born and nurtured. Hindu spiritual teachers also speak of visionary encounters with Jesus, experiences of ecstasy and intimacy, that add to their spiritual understanding and teaching in particular ways even while also affirming a universal quest for God-consciousness. The spiritual pragmatist Gandhi turns to Jesus again and again as one who perfectly aligns his life with the will of God and embodies active nonviolence and love. Still other Hindus, the *Khrishna Bhaktas*, experience Jesus as God manifest in the world, reaching out to draw them into an ongoing and loving personal relationship in a distinctly Hindu mode. The trajectory of Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh's journey that leads him to embrace Jesus as his spiritual ancestor, side by side with the Buddha, offers yet another profound example of the immense power of Jesus' teachings and experienced presence to transform the lives of people well outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. Such experiences trouble exclusionary and exclusive definitions of religious belonging, pushing us to move beyond notions of "appropriation" and "syncretism" and to develop new theoretical approaches to understand experiences of divine presence and ecstasy in the study of spirituality. Such experiences also confirm the need to include those deemed outside the boundaries of Christianity in order to fully understand Jesus in relation to spirituality.

Perhaps the distance is not so great as it might at first appear. Experiences and understandings of Jesus have been richly varied across the history of Christianity, and many have distinct parallels with the experiences and understandings referenced herein. For example, drawing on the vast resources of Christian theology and Western philosophy, integrated with the study of world religions and the findings of theoretical physics, Anglican theologian Keith Ward writes of Jesus' perfected humanity and human beings' ability to "contribute positively to the cosmic creative process" in ways that resonate with Ibn al-Arabi's attempts to articulate his mystical realizations, though in Ward's case, with an affirmation, albeit reformulation, of trinitarian doctrine (Ward 2015, p. 78). In his writings, Ward also affirms the need to take religious experience seriously as a source of knowing (Ward 2006, pp. 219–23). The Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist experiences we have explored certainly do provide additional knowledge about who Jesus has been and might become in the spiritual lives of so many, as well as insight into the ways his life and teachings may offer a meeting ground for those of different religious heritages.

No doubt theologian, philosopher, musician and medical doctor Albert Schweitzer would have found much in common with Thich Nhat Hanh and Gandhi. Jesus was all-important to him, the foundation of his spirituality as the embodiment of active love, though his study of the gospel accounts led him to question Christian doctrine with regard to atonement theory, the resurrection, the divinity of Jesus and much more. In his affirmation

of an ethical mysticism of reverence for life, undergirded by experience of the Will to Live that flows through all living beings, he would have found Hanh and Gandhi kindred spirits. In his dedication to relieve the suffering and foster the flourishing and self-realization of all living beings, he would no doubt have been similarly recognized as such by them. To be transformed by the presence of Jesus, then, perhaps transcends notions of religious belonging, with Jesus embraced as a spiritual ancestor, not only by Christians (orthodox and otherwise) and Muslims but also by Hindus and Buddhists.

Schweitzer ends his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* with these words:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is. (Schweitzer 1911, p. 401)

There is no doctrinal test here, no certainty, but rather mystery, experience and a call to action.

A full accounting of Jesus and spirituality, I would argue, must include those marginalized as well as those deemed outside the boundaries of Christianity. For they too have come to experience Jesus, to be transformed by his presence and to live their lives "in His fellowship". Such interreligious perspectives expand and enrich understandings of the place of Jesus in the spiritual lives of diverse human beings and warrant serious consideration in the comparative study of spirituality and religious experience.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Abhedananda, Swami. 1958a. The Great Saviors of the World. In *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda. Vol. V (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math)*. pp. 3–189. Available online: <https://estudentdavedanta.net/Complete-c-Works-Of-Swami-Abhedananda-Vol-5.pdf> (accessed on 15 May 2021).
- Abhedananda, Swami. 1958b. Was Christ a Yogi? In *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda, Vol. III (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math)*. pp. 71–79. Available online: <https://estudentdavedanta.net/Complete-Works-of-Swami-Abhedananda-03.pdf> (accessed on 15 May 2021).
- Abhedananda, Swami. 1958c. Why a Hindu accepts Christ and Rejects Christianity. In *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda. Vol. II (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math)*. pp. 209–20. Available online: <https://estudentdavedanta.net/Complete-Works-of-Swami-Abhedananda-02.pdf> (accessed on 15 May 2021).
- Abhishiktānanda, Swami. 1974. *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*. Delhi: ISPCK.
- Arberry, Arthur John, trans. 2009. *Mystical Poems of Rumi*. Annotated and Prepared by Hasan Javadi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Austin, Ralph W. J. 1980. trans. and intro. *Ibn Al'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Barker, Gregory A., and Stephen E. Gregg, eds. 2010. *Jesus Beyond Christianity: The Classic Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, Gregory A., ed. 2005. *Jesus in the World's Faiths: Leading Thinkers from Five World Religions Reflect on His Meaning*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Chatterjee, Margaret. 1983. *Gandhi's Religious Thought*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Chittick, William C. 1983. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chittick, William C. 1998. *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chittick, William C. 2013. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path of God*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dobie, Robert J. 2014. Jesus in the Muslim and Christian Mystical Traditions: Ibn'Arabi and Meister Eckhart. In *Nicholas de Cusa and Islam*. Edited by Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković and Donald F. Duclow. Leiden: Brill, pp. 235–51.
- Griffiths, Bede. 1987. *River of Compassion*. Warwick: Amity House.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 1995. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead Books.

- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 1999. *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Howard, Veena. 2013. *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Khalidi, Tarif. 2001. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- King, James Roy. 1990. Jesus and Joseph in Rūmī's Mathnawī. *The Muslim World* 80: 81–95. [CrossRef]
- Knitter, Paul, and Roger Haight. 2015. *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Knitter, Paul. 2016. Without Walls=Multiple Belonging? *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51: 487–98. [CrossRef]
- Lawrence, Bruce B. 1998. Gesu Daraz's Vision of Jesus. In *Windows in the House of Islam: Muslim Spirituality and Religious Life*. Edited by John Renard. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 349–50.
- Lewis, Franklin D. 2008. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi*, rev. ed. London: Oneworld Publications.
- McDaniels, June. 2018. *Lost Ecstasy: Its Decline and Transformation in Religion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Milani, Milad. 2011. Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the 'Sufi Jesus'. *Literature & Aesthetics* 21: 45–64.
- Mojaddedi, Jawid, trans. 2007. *Rumi: The Masnavi Book Two*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nicholson, Reynold A. 1950. *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Nikhilananda, Swami. 1942. trans. and intro. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (Originally Recorded in Bengali by M., a Disciple of the Master)*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- Nurbakhsh, Javad. 1983. *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis*. New York: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications.
- Orsi, Robert A. 2016. *History and Presence*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Renard, John. 1996. *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roy, Dilip Kumar, and Indira Devi. 1985. *Pilgrims of the Stars: Autobiography of Two Yogis*. Porthill: Timeless Books. First published 1973.
- Roy, Dilip Kumar, and Indira Devi. 2012. *The Flute Still Calls*, 4th ed. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. First published 1964.
- Roy, Dilip Kumar. 1983. *The Rounding Off*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Safi, Omid, trans. and ed. 2018. *Radical Love: Teachings of the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- San Chirico, Kerry P. C. 2016. Holy Negotiations in a Hindu Heartland: Abundant People and Spaces among the Khrist Bhaktas of Banaras. In *Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*. Edited by Rico G. Monge, Kerry P.C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 183–98.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. 1993. *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press. First published 1978.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. 2003. Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum. *Spiritus* 3: 163–85. [CrossRef]
- Schneiders, Sandra M. 2016. Biblical Spirituality. *Interpretation* 70: 417–30. [CrossRef]
- Schweitzer, Albert. 1911. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Translated by William Montgomery. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- Sharma, Arvind. 2003. *Hinduism and Human Rights: A Conceptual Approach*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Siddiqui, Mona. 2013. *Christians, Muslims, & Jesus*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ward, Keith. 2006. *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Ward, Keith. 2015. *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yogananda, Paramahansa. 1998. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, 13th ed. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship. First published 1946.