

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Around the World in 40 Days* *Part I: What a Christian Can Learn from Hinduism*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
April 11, 2010

Christian Scripture Reading: Luke 9:28-36 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I'll get to our second scripture in just a moment, but first I want to give a little background on why we're doing this series in the first place, in case there's anybody curious about that. Like many of you, when I was a child I had an almost desperate feeling that what I was being taught as Christianity had something tragically wrong with it. When I heard the words of Jesus, I felt this universal love and a call to that kind of compassion for all beings, but the theology I was being taught was often very cruel to other people. I had the feeling that somehow, this came from that one part of Christian theology where it says, "I am the way, the truth, the life; no one comes to God but through me." Because when we believe that; that there's *one* way, and we happen to be it, we happen to have found it, something really bad happens to every other aspect of our lives, and we do things to other people that we would *never* do if we had not put a boundary around our ethics.

When you believe that your nation is superior to every other nation, something happens to your capacity to treat other people justly. And when you believe that the founder of your religion had an inside track that no one else had, it's quite a challenge to respect people who see things differently. Some of the most embarrassing and painful parts of Christian history have been about people acting out of that belief. They felt that if they did not torture other people, those people would go to Hell. If they did not *force* the love of Jesus down people's throats, then the loving God would then torture them for all eternity.

I need to read a passage to you that you're not going to want to hear, and I'm not going to want to read. We're talking about 3 minutes, 5 minutes, but you're not going to want to hear this, and I don't want to share it with you, either; but this is why this sermon series is so important. This is about a video that was released of U.S. troops firing on civilians. Now accidents happen in times of war, but when you think you're better than other people, those accidents are going to happen a whole lot more often. This is Medea Benjamin's article on the news stories covering two such incidents.

*Baghdad:* U.S. aerial shooters chuckle as they let loose a torrent of bullets, killing over a dozen people, (this video's on the web) including two Reuters staff. Then they unleash another round on an Iraqi who—passing by in his van—tries to help the wounded. When the American soldiers discover they have hit two children in the van, they can be heard saying, "It's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle."

It's not really their country, right? It's not really Iraq. Although there were two Reuters people in the group, the idea that we have a right to be in somebody else's country shooting them follows that idea of American privilege.

*Gardez, Afghanistan:* US Special Operations forces surround a home where a party is taking place for the birth of a grandson. Two men come out to see why they are being surrounded. They are shot dead. The US soldiers later report they found three women inside the house, gagged and murdered by their own relatives.

The *Times of London* later reports that the women were killed by the American soldiers. Not only that. To hide the murder, the soldiers dug bullets out of the women's bodies and washed the wounds with alcohol to hide the evidence. One of the women was a pregnant mother of 10; another was a pregnant mother of six; the third was a teenage girl.

Now how do good people come to this? I do not question that these were decent human beings, but how could decent human beings do such despicable acts? We don't want to look over the fence and see what our arrogance does. But the reason we need to do that is so we can understand what we're called to do as Christians, which is to be *more* than your religion, to be *more* than your nation, to be *more* than the narrow frame you would draw around your own survival.

General McChrystal was amazingly honest about some of these events, and I want us to be haunted by what he's haunted by. He says,

"We really ask a lot of our young service people out on the checkpoints because there's danger, they're asked to make very rapid decisions in often very unclear situations. However, to my knowledge, in the nine-plus months I've been here, not a single case where we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it and, in many cases, had families in it...We've shot (this is a General speaking...) an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force."

You didn't come to church to hear those stories, but to come before the common parent of every human being requires of us open eyes and open hearts to hear stories like these.

When I arrived at the University of Texas a long, long time ago, I wanted to escape from the limitations I'd been taught by being raised in Dallas, Texas. I could feel that there was a cruelty that I had been taught that I wanted to purge, but it took years – decades – to even discover what some of these cruelties were, and the arrogance that I had been taught.

So I in a very prayerful way began to study other religions of the world, and made a commitment to go wherever truth led. Now it's not going to surprise you that I wound up back in Christianity; I don't think I'm tipping any hands by saying that. I'm a Presbyterian minister. But the point I want to make is, that only by stepping outside the propaganda of my country, and of my sectarian religion was I able to get to the stature that Jesus was speaking from.

This shouldn't be a surprise, but most Americans have never read a page of scripture from another religion, most Americans I know have never read a page from a foreign journal or newspaper. We have a duty to be world citizens, and it's not comfortable to begin, but it's wonderful once we start doing that. But that is the calling that a Christian has, I believe.

The various messages from around the world are the same in many ways. But it's like trying to understand what water is like in an ocean when you've never been outside the bathtub. They're both water, but it's really, really different. The teachings of Jesus Christ, when we put them in a universal context, are very, very different than when we take them up piecemeal literally and arrange them in the orders of our culture.

We did a baptism in the first service. What a baptism means in most Christian churches is putting holy water on our own purposes. What it should mean is consecrating a human being to the journey of becoming a universal human being. Baptism should initiate us into the world, not into the church. It betrays children when it gives them this limited set of parameters within which then we are ethical.

We're going to go on a tour, and it's not going to be this heavy, the whole time, anyway. (laughter) The reason I told these stories is for us to realize how important it is to learn from other people and other religions. If we do not do that, we do some really bad things.

Well, we're going to start with Hinduism, but for me what happened was I arrived at the University of Texas, head filled with Dallas kinds of things. I found a book store about two blocks away called Grok Book Store. Do we have any old hippies here? Grok Book Store...it later became Book People. It had every kind of weird book you would ever want to find. It had wonderful scriptures from around the world, and it also had every kind of weird guru. It had people teaching how to levitate, and you could see how they kind of jumped and took a picture...you know. (laughter) Great stuff...for a kid from Dallas. So I go to the clerk and say, "I've never thought outside the box I've been given. Can you give me something that will help me wake up and grow up?" The clerk pulls out the Upanishads of Hinduism and the Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism.

So little Jimmy from Dallas is walking down the street with these books under my arm, and I walk by this woman who I had seen a bunch of times, but I had thought she was Hispanic – Latina. In Dallas, if you're a brown person, then that's what that means. (laughter) She was a Sanskrit scholar from India. I'd never even thought about meeting someone from India! So I said to her, "Would you teach me?" She says, "No." (laughter) "No." Life is too short! (laughter) She didn't say that, but it was in her eyes. (laughter) She knew I was too stupid to be able to...yeah. But she did give me one gift. She said, "When you do read the Bhagavad-Gita, know that it's symbolic. It's not talking about going to war outside of yourself; it's a war within yourself. It's all a poem about life"

I'd never heard that view of Hinduism. I started reading these wonderful, fantastical stories, but as I read them, I knew they were symbolic. Krishna has blue skin; it's because he's from the sky. He carries that openness, that universality in his very skin. And when you see these Hindu gods with multiple arms, that represents the creativity of the divine that's manifested in every being. So when very often somebody would look like a regular human being to begin with, but when they would show their divine form, they would have multiple heads, multiple arms, because this represents the love out of which everything comes.

Now we're ready to hear the transfiguration of Krishna. Not maybe what you'd expect coming into a Presbyterian church, but the gift I want us to receive from this is called the *Supreme Identity*; the idea that certain people fall in love with life, with the world, with every being. And when they talk about "I" and say "I am," they're not talking about their ego. They're talking about the core of their being, out of which every other being also comes. I believe that's what Krishna is saying, I believe this is what Jesus is saying. But notice how these "I am" sayings sound a little bit different.

Hindu Reading: Passages taken from the Bhagavad-Gita

I am the source of everything, and all the worlds come out of Me; (this is Life speaking)  
knowing this, the wise ones honor me in the cave of their hearts.

I am the Supreme Self dwelling in the hearts of all creatures; they are born in me, sustained by me and in the end, return to me.

I am the Great Chant of the ancients, the metre of the Vedic hymns; the first cool month of the year, the Spring bursting with flowers.

O Arjuna, I am the primal seed of all existence; no being moving or unmoving, can exist without me.

Arjuna, behold my forms in the hundreds and thousands; various, divine, of every shape and hue. This vision you have seen is difficult to obtain; even the gods are ever wishing for such a sight. Not through study of scriptures, austerities, charity, or sacrifice, can I be seen as you have seen me.

O Arjuna, only by the unswerving love of a human heart, can my supreme state be seen, and known, and attained.

Well, that sounded familiar to me. That sounded like the “I am” sayings of Jesus. But they were different; I could *hear* something there. When this “I am” says “only me” it’s really clear that it is talking about the common body of all life. Only from that depth of sympathy with all beings can you understand what’s being said. ***You’re not being called to be a sectarian Christian...not sectarian Hindu, not sectarian Christian.*** This is the one religion of the world; it’s not a relativistic teaching: ***there is one true religion in the world, and it is the religion of universal love.*** Jesus reveals it for many of us here in the States...nothing wrong with that. But we need to hear this same love when it’s spoken to a different tune.

When I returned to the church...I guess I should say when I returned to Christian teachings; it took a while before I could go back to church again...quite a while, actually...it all felt a little different. Same words, same water, but much broader, much deeper. Now when I heard the transfiguration story, I heard it differently. It wasn’t this magic show. It wasn’t fireworks; “Look how strong I am. See? I’m God. This is my kid, my favorite kid. This is what the rest of you bums need to be like, this kid. He can walk on water.” That always bothered me. And when this loving, compassionate heart says only through *Me*, it’s not an ego speaking. This is not Jesus speaking, this is Christ speaking. We always need to realize that there’s a difference. Jesus is the person, the human being, Christ is the universal love.

So to be “In Christ” does not mean to meet the standards of the church, it means to enter into the universal body, and to feel the compassion that Christ had for all beings. That’s why when Jesus says, “I am the only way, you have to do this and this,” he adds the second part, ***“but what you do to the least of these, you do to me.”*** That’s the other side of the “I am” sayings. That’s fifty percent of the “I am” saying, and the church lifts up the first part and hides the second part. “I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes to God except through me, ***and what you do to the least of these, you do to me.***” ***How we treat each other is how we treat God.*** When we look in each other’s faces, that’s where we see God. That’s why he says, “If you don’t believe in me, that’s fine, but believe in the one who sent me. Believe in the good that I’m doing. My family are those who live in Love.

There is one religion in the world. I’m not a relativist. It’s a religion that you see all around the world, in the depth of every true religion. It’s universal love. And when you’re called to be “in Christ”, you’re being called to love that way and to live that way. We will never know the depths of Christianity if we stay in sectarian Christianity. In the Bhagavad-Gita, it says that the love that was revealed through Krishna was like ten thousand suns. I would say that the love that we see in Christ is like ten thousand oceans, but we will never find that depth and that breadth if we stay in the bathtubs of sectarian training.

Where is God hiding in you, and in your neighbor, and in every being you will ever meet?

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

*Around the World in 40 Days Series*

Part I: April 11, Hinduism, Luke 9:28-36, passages taken from the Bhagavad-Gita

Part II: April 18, Buddhism, Matthew 14:22-36, Jataka Tales, The Flower Sermon

Part III: April 25, Taoism

Part IV: May 2, Confucianism

Part V: May 9, Native American

Part VI: May 16, Judaism

Part VII: May 23, Islam

Part VIII: May 30, Can Atheism be “Spiritual?”



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