

The Gnostic Gospels and Vedanta

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In Volume 2 of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* are two essays on the Sankhya philosophy. In the first, titled "A Study of the Sankhya philosophy," Vivekananda outlines the essential ideas of Sankhya and then makes the remarkable statement that "it is the basis of the philosophy of the whole world."¹ (Vivekananda, 1983). Speaking about Kapila, the founder of Sankhya philosophy, he then adds, "There is no philosophy in the world that is not indebted to Kapila. Pythagoras came to India and studied this philosophy and that was the beginning of the philosophy of the Greeks. Later, it formed the Alexandrian school, and still later, the Gnostic. It became divided into two, one part went to Europe and Alexandria, and the other remained in India, and out of this the system of Vyasa was developed. The Sankhya philosophy of Kapila was the first rational system that the world ever saw."² (Vivekananda, 1983) In his second essay, titled "Sankhya and Vedanta," he reiterates the same idea regarding the origins of philosophy of the entire world. Vivekananda's assertions are supported by noted scholars in their recent writings. For instance, Richard Garbe, who has written extensively about the Sankhya philosophy remarks, "In Kapila's doctrine, for the first time in the history of the world, the complete independence and freedom of the human mind, its full confidence in its own powers, were exhibited."³ (Garbe) Winternitz adds: "It seems to me proved that Pythagoras was influenced by the Indian Samkhya."⁴ Radhakrishnan writes:

If in ancient Greece we find doctrines similar to it, they may have had independent origin and growth, though modern scholarship is against such a view. On the question we may quote two authorities on Indian and Greek thought. Macdonnell observes that the 'dependence of Pythagoras on Indian philosophy and science certainly seems

to have a high degree of probability. The doctrine of metempsychosis in the case of Pythagoras appears without any connection or explanatory background, and was regarded by the Greeks as of foreign origin. He could not have derived it from Egypt as it was not known to the ancient Egyptians.' Gomperz writes, 'There is far closer agreement between Pythagorism and the Indian doctrine, not merely in their general features, but even in certain details such as vegetarianism; and it may be added that the formulae which summarise the whole creed of the circle and the wheel of births are likewise the same

in both. It is almost impossible to refer this identity to mere chance ... It is not too much to assume that the curious Greek who was the contemporary of Buddha, and it may have been of Zarathustra too, would have acquired a more or less exact knowledge of the religious speculations of the East, in that age of intellectual fermentation, through the medium of Persia."⁵ (Radhakrishnan, 2008)

In light of latest historical research, these statements are not exaggerations and we have written about the "Greek myth" and the "fabrication of ancient Greece" in our earlier work titled "What is civilization?" in this review.⁶ (Murty, 2014) This essay considers some "recent" archaeological evidence and brings it to the foreground to support Vivekananda's statements regarding the origins of world philosophy, especially in the context of the Gnostic Gospels.

In December 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi in modern Egypt, a remarkable archaeological discovery was made, quite accidentally, by two farmers. Digging around a massive boulder, the farmers excavated a large earthen jar almost a metre high that contained thirteen papyrus books bound in leather. Not knowing the value of the find, they showed it to a local historian, who suspected its importance and had them send to an expert Cairo. With all the intrigue and mystery of a spy thriller, the leather-bound books (called codices) finally reached Gilles Quispel, a noted historian in Utrecht. The codices, it turned out, were Coptic translations of earlier works and were dated at sometime between

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the second and fourth centuries. As he began the translation, Quispel could not believe what he found. The opening lines were, "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down."⁷ Immediately he recognized that this was the Coptic translation of the Greek Gospel of Thomas, discovered earlier in 1896. But these new gospels raised a host of questions — did Jesus have a twin brother and are the words recorded in these gospels the authentic words of Jesus — which became the focus of intense research for noted historians and scholars over the ensuing seventy years.

The discoveries made at Nag Hammadi were the Coptic translations

of earlier gospels that are not part of the traditional Bible. The New Testament contains only four gospels, those according to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The Nag Hammadi gospels — called the Gnostic gospels — have many passages that echo the traditional gospels, but many of these are set in a different background which transforms their meaning. There are also passages in the Gnostic gospels that are not part of the traditional Bible. Many of these resonate with the Vedantic tradition.

What emerges from the Gnostic gospels is the image of Jesus as an enlightened teacher, very much like the Buddha, who when asked who he was replied that he was simply “Tathagata” — “thus comes, thus goes”, a wanderer in the journey of life. In her introduction to the Nag Hammadi texts, Princeton University professor Elaine Pagels writes that the Jesus of the gnostic gospels “speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide who offers access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal — even identical.”⁸ (Pagels, 2003) For example, in the Gospel of Thomas, we find a remarkable teaching that echoes that of the Bhagavad-Gita. “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” The scholar immediately recognizes the similarity to the following verses from chapter 6 of the Gita:

Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself; for the Self alone is the friend of the self and the Self alone is the enemy of the self. For him who has conquered his (lower) self by the (higher) Self, his Self is a friend, but for him who has not possessed his (higher) Self, his very Self will act in enmity like an enemy.⁹ (Radhakrishnan, S. , 1973)

All these teachings suggest the equation of self-knowledge as knowledge of God, which is at the core of the Gnostic tradition. The teachings point to Indian sources. In fact, the title of one of the Gospels, “The Thunder, Perfect Mind,” sounds Buddhist, and its verses — such as “I am the first and the last, I am the honored one and the scorned one, . . . , I am the silence that is incomprehensible, I am the utterance of my name” — echoes the poetry of chapter 9 of the Gita.

Asking if Hindu and Buddhist traditions influenced early Gnosticism, Pagels writes,

The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, suggests that it had. He points out that “Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (that is, Christians who knew and used such writings as the Gospel of Thomas) in South India.” Trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East were opening up at the time when Gnosticism flourished (A.D. 80-200); for generations, Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria. We note, too, that Hippolytus, who was a Greek-speaking Christian in Rome (c. 225), knew of the Indian Brahmins -- and included their tradition among the sources of heresy: “There is . . . among the Indians a heresy of those who philosophize among the Brahmins, who live a self-sufficient life, abstaining from (eating) living creatures and all cooked food . . . They say that God is light, not like

the light one sees, nor like the sun nor fire, but to them God is discourse, not that which finds expression in articulate sounds, but that of knowledge (gnosis) through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise. Could the title of the Gospel of Thomas—named for the disciple who, tradition tells us, went to India—suggest the influence of Indian tradition?¹⁰ (Pagels, 2003)

In his book *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology and the Future of Belief*, John Lash corroborates the report of Hippolytus. He writes:

In ‘The Refutation of all Heresies’ (book 5), Hippolytus referred to ‘Brachmans’ (Brahmins) in Alexandria who ‘affirm that God is light, but not such as one sees by’. Hippolytus, who was centuries closer than modern scholars to the subject matter, took it for granted that Brahmins from India belonged to the widespread network of Mystery cells extending across Europe and deep into Asia. His comment suggests that the experience of the Mystery light (as I will call it) was universal within the network. Hippolytus also states the Gnostic view, shared by the Brahmins, that ‘Deity is discourse.’ This tacit statement affirms that the Mystery light is interactive. The ‘hearing and word’ were two-way. The ‘Infinite light’ is said to be alive. The purpose of encountering the light is to discover the sublime mysteries of nature. (Hippolytus)¹¹

The word ‘discourse’ here does not imply debate or discussion but rather an internal meditation and dialogue, an inner awareness of the kind spoken of in Advaita Vedanta. The word ‘gnostic’ comes from the Greek ‘gnosis’, which means knowledge. It is related to the Sanskrit ‘jnana’, which also means knowledge. But in neither case does it refer to intellectual knowledge; rather it refers to a deeper knowledge obtained through an inner spiritual journey and meditation. The life of Jesus and his core teachings are very much of the monastic tradition and reflect the view that the human body is only a vehicle for the spiritual journey and that both body and mind are instruments for the ultimate realization.

In one of the most recent and amazing archaeological discoveries made in 2006, we find support for this idea. The Gospel of Judas portrays a picture of Jesus who continuously taught about this higher awareness. Contrary to the historical view of Judas as the arch villain of the Bible, we find statements in this Gospel indicating that Judas was only carrying out instructions of Jesus and that, in many ways, he was the foremost amongst the disciples in his understanding of his Master’s teachings. Naturally, this runs counter to the orthodox view of Judas and it is not surprising that it was banned from the Bible.

So why is it that such teachings were banned from the Bible and why is it that today the official canon accepts only the four traditional gospels? How did the present view come to be? Apparently, the Gnostic gospels were well-known and in circulation up to the fourth century. It was only after Emperor Constantine had supposedly converted to Christianity, or at least when he decriminalized it, that Christian bishops convened in the Turkish town of Nicaea to agree on a common set of beliefs that later came to be called the Nicene Creed, which has come to define Christianity as we know it today. At the core of the creed is the

tenet that Jesus died for our sins, that he is the saviour, and that one must accept him as the “only begotten son”. If one accepts this creed, then, and only then, does one attain salvation. The message of the Gnostic gospels runs counter to this creed. In the Gnostic tradition, one must seek for salvation and exert oneself sincerely, with heart, mind and soul through spiritual practice. This is very much in line with most Eastern religious traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.

In fact, the idea that Jesus is the only begotten son occurs in only one place in the entire Bible. In the Book of John, 3:16, we find: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”. The Greek word being translated here is “monogenes”. In the 1534 translation of Tyndale, we find it is “the only son” whereas in the King James version of 1611 it becomes “the only begotten” and in the 1973 International Version of the Bible, it becomes “one and only Son”.¹² Some scholars have suggested that a more faithful translation of the word is “incomparable” or “one of a kind”. This would make the meaning of the verse less dogmatic.

It is also curious that the word “doubting Thomas” appears only in the book of John and not in the other three gospels. The story is told that Thomas did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus and that he had to see for himself. So we find in the Book of John that Jesus said “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed, but blessed are they that have not seen and yet believed.”¹³ There seems to be some antagonism towards Thomas in the Book of John. It would seem that the Book of John became the foundation for the modern view of Christianity and that rational discourse as well as meditative discourse and inner spiritual experience as proposed by the Gnostic tradition, including the Gospel of Thomas, receded to the background. The phrase ‘doubting Thomas’ has since been used in a disparaging way by some.

In her book *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, Elaine Pagels discusses the conflict between the Gospels of Thomas and John. After intense research, she writes,

I have now come to see that John’s gospel was written in the heat of controversy, to defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others. This research has helped clarify not only what John’s gospel is for, but what it is against. John says explicitly that he writes ‘so that you may believe, and believing, may have life in [Jesus’] name’. What John opposed, as we shall see, includes what the Gospel of Thomas teaches – that God’s light shines not only in Jesus but, potentially at least, in everyone. Thomas’s gospel encourages the hearer not so much to believe in Jesus, as John requires, as to seek to know God through one’s own, divinely given capacity, since all are created in the image of God. For Christians in later generations, the Gospel of John helped provide a foundation for a unified church, which Thomas, with its emphasis on each person’s

search for God, did not.¹⁴ (Pagels, 2003)

The opening lines of the Book of John describe creation as coming out of the word, which is an ancient Indian idea going back to the Krishna Yajur Veda. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”¹⁵ In the Krishna Yajur Veda, we find an identical passage. “Prajapati vai idam agra asit, Tasya vak dvitiya asit, Vag vai paramam Brahman”.¹⁶ “In the beginning was prajapati (Brahman) with whom was the Word and the Word was verily Brahman.” In Jnana yoga, a central thesis is that creation came out of the ‘omkara sabda’, and this primordial sound symbol has often been equated with Brahman, or pure awareness.

In his *Inspired Talks*, Swami Vivekananda opened his discourse with a discussion of the Book of John. Referring to the opening lines of

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John, he said,

The Hindu calls this Maya, the manifestation of God, because it is the power of God. The Absolute reflecting through the universe is what we call nature. The Word has two manifestations – the general one of nature and the special one of the great Incarnations of God – Krishna, Buddha, Jesus and Ramakrishna. Christ, the special manifestation of the Absolute, is known and knowable. The Absolute cannot be known; we cannot know the Father, only the Son. We can only see the Absolute through the “tint of humanity”, through Christ.¹⁷

The Book of John has more in common with the bhakti tradition of India that emphasizes worship through a symbol, word or image. Thus, if we view the Book of John as not being in opposition to the Gnostic Gospels, and in particular, the Book of Thomas, we see it as offering another route, perhaps a more practical one, to the Divine. For in the bhakti tradition, one finds the concept of the avatar, and what we find in John is the declaration of Jesus as the avatar.

In fact, the parallels between the Book of John and the bhakti tradition, especially as it relates to the story of Krishna as the Avatar, are striking. Apart from the obvious similarities in the words ‘Christ’ and ‘Krishna’, we find in the Book of Matthew the story of King Herod ordering the slaughter of all infants born on the same day as Jesus, which is identical with the story of Kamsa ordering the killing of all children born on the same day as Krishna. This story may have been transplanted from Indian sources along with other aspects we have already indicated. In the

Indian context, we find the Upanishadic tradition, with its emphasis on knowledge and meditation, overtaken by the personality of Krishna and the bhakti tradition. Something analogous seems to have taken place in Christianity, with the Gnostic tradition being supplanted by the bhakti perspective as pronounced by the Book of John and its assertion of Jesus as the Avatar. This analogy has one important feature, namely in the Indian context, the bhakti tradition is *complementary* to the jnana tradition, whereas in the Christian context, it seems to be *opposed* to it.

There is another image that permeates these early gospels. If we read them carefully, we find in them an impression of Jesus as one who is spiritually illumined, who lives with his disciples as one of them, joking with them, eating with them, and claiming no special divine status. For the modern scholar familiar with Sri Ramakrishna, the scenes look familiar. What must have attracted many to the teachings of Jesus was undoubtedly his towering spiritual personality combined with compas-

understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty.¹⁸

There is an old story from ancient India about a Brahmin scholar whom all considered to be a great philosopher. One day the local king asked him to come before him. Then the king said to him: "I have three questions that puzzle – even torment – me: Where is God? Why don't I see Him? And what does he do all day? If you can't answer these three questions I will have your head cut off." The Brahmin was terrified because the answers to these questions were not so simple and he didn't know how to respond. So the king ordered his execution. Then the Brahmin's son intervened and said that he could answer the king's questions, but first securing a promise from the king that if the king was pleased with the answers, then his father would be released. The king

agreed and the son then asked for a container of milk. The boy then asked that the milk be churned into butter. When that was done, he said to the king that the first two questions have now been answered. The surprised king asked for an explanation. The son replied, "Where was the butter before it was churned?" "In the milk", replied the king. "In what part

of the milk?" asked the son. "In every part of it", replied the king. The son then said, "In the same way, God is within all things and pervades everything." "Why don't I see him then" asked the king. "Because you do not 'churn' the mind" replied the son. "If you 'churn' your mind through reflection and meditation, you too will see Him." Then the king said, "What about my third question? What does he do all day?" Then the son replied, "For the answer, we need to switch places." This was a daring request but since the king's curiosity was piqued, he relented. When the son was seated on the throne, he told the king, "You see, one moment you are here and I was there. Now things are reversed. God perpetually lifts up and casts down every one of us. One moment we are exalted and in another we are cast down." The king was so pleased with all these answers that he released the Brahmin scholar and bestowed many honours on the son. The philosophical teaching embodied in this story can be found throughout the Indian lore, such as the opening verse of the Isa Upanishad. The message from this story can also be found in the Gnostic gospels. The answer to the king's third question reverberates in several places in the Bible. For instance, in Luke, we find: "He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree".¹⁹ Again, in Matthew: "But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first".²⁰ And in Mark: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first".²¹

Those familiar with the Katha Upanishad will recall its central message of the mystery of death. One transcends death by gaining spiritual knowledge and as a consequence attains immortality. Enlightenment

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sion and his message that the kingdom of heaven is within everyone. In an age of slavery, tyranny and persecution, especially amongst the poorer segments of society, Jesus offered a message of hope. It would seem many early Christians had practised this teaching even at the point of death, as Jesus had done when he blessed those who crucified him by saying, "Forgive them, Father, they do not know what they do".

Foremost amongst the Gnostic Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas seems to have been in wide circulation, since it was found in many places and copied onto the best quality paper. In this gospel, we do not find any biographical narrative, as we do in the four traditional gospels, nor any mention of the resurrection, but only a collection of teachings. The opening lines resonate with Upanishadic teachings:

These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. And he said, 'Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death'. Jesus said, 'Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all. [And after they have reigned they will rest.]' Jesus said, 'If your leaders say to you, *Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky*, then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, *It is in the sea*, then the fish will precede you. Rather, the (Father's) kingdom is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will

does not consist in knowing factual knowledge but in having spiritual experience. Yet some of the early disciples viewed the 'kingdom of heaven' as a physical place, and so we find that in the Gospel of Thomas, the disciples ask what the kingdom of heaven is like, and Jesus says, "It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."²² This is reminiscent of verses of the Chandogya Upanishad, in which the student asks the teacher about the nature of the Atman. The teacher then asks the student to bring to him the fruit of the nyagrodha tree. The student brings it. The teacher asks him to break it open and the student says, "It is broken sir". The teacher asks, "What do you see there?" The student replies "Extremely fine seeds sir". The teacher then asks the student to break open the seeds. The student does so and the teacher asks, "What do you see there?" "Nothing sir", is the reply. Then the teacher says, "My dear, out of that nothing all of this has arisen".²³

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus teaches,

If you do not fast from the world, you will not find the (Father's) kingdom. If you do not observe the sabbath as a sabbath you will not see the Father. ... I took my stand in the midst of the world, and in flesh I appeared to them. I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hearts and do not see, for they came into the world empty, and they also seek to depart from the world empty. But meanwhile they are drunk. When they shake off their wine, then they will change their ways. ... If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels. Yet I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty.²⁴

This reminds one of the story Vivekananda relates in his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras:

There is the story that the king of gods, Indra, once became a pig, wallowing in mire; he had a she-pig and a lot of baby pigs, and was very happy. Then some gods saw his plight, and came to him and told him, 'You are the king of the gods, you have all the gods under your command. Why are you here?' But Indra said, 'Never mind; I am all right here; I do not care for heaven, while I have this sow and these little pigs'. The poor gods were at their wit's end. After a time they decided to slay all the pigs one after another. When all were dead, Indra began to weep and mourn. Then the god ripped his pig-body open and he came out of it, and began to laugh, when he realised what a hideous dream he had had – he, the king of the gods, to have become a pig, and to think that that pig-life was the only life! Not only so, but to have wanted the whole universe to come into this pig-life!²⁵ (Vivekananda, 1983)

This passage again emphasizes the danger of complacency and the importance of seeking and practice in the spiritual realm. For later in the Gospel of Thomas, we find: "Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened".²⁶

However, the passage is striking for a variety of reasons. It gives

us a very human impression of Jesus the teacher, pining for sincere students. It reminds us of the exasperation of Sri Ramakrishna who went up to the rooftop and cried for suitable students who were eager to gain spiritual knowledge. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Nikhilananda describes the longing Sri Ramakrishna had for suitable aspirants who could follow his spiritual teachings. Sri Ramakrishna later related,

There was no limit to the longing I felt at that time. During the daytime I somehow managed to control it. The secular talk of the worldly-minded was galling to me and I would look wistfully to the day when my own beloved companions would come. I hoped to find solace in conversing with them and relating to them my own realizations. Every little incident would remind me of them and thoughts of them wholly engrossed me. I was already arranging in my mind what I should say to one and give to another, and so on. But when the day would come to a close I would not be able to curb my feelings. The thought that another day had gone by, and they had not come, oppressed me. When, during the evening service, the temples rang with the sound of bells and conch-shells, I would climb to the roof of the kuthi in the garden and writhing in anguish of heart, cry at the top of my voice, 'Come, my children! Oh, where are you?'²⁷ (Nikhilananda, 1984)

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says,

No prophet is welcome on his home turf; doctors don't cure those who know them. ... A city built on a high hill and fortified cannot fall, nor can it be hidden. ... What you will hear in your ear, in the other ear proclaim from your rooftops. After all, no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor does one put it in a hidden place. Rather, one puts it on a lampstand so that all who come and go will see its light. ... If a blind person leads a blind person, both of them will fall into a hole.

These passages suggest frustration and an awareness that the seeker must also be worthy of salvation and able to recognize the spiritual teacher. It reminds one of the verses from the Katha Upanishad, where Yama says to Nachiketa,

Abiding in the midst of ignorance, wise in their own esteem, thinking themselves to be learned, fools treading a tortuous path go about like blind men led by one who is himself blind. ... He who cannot even be heard of by many, who many hearing, do not know, wondrous is he who can teach and skilful is he who finds Him and wondrous is he who knows, even when instructed by the wise. Taught by an inferior man He cannot be truly understood as He is thought of in many ways. Unless taught by one who knows Him as himself, there is no going thither for it is inconceivable, being subtler than the subtle.²⁸

The image of the "blind leading the blind" appears in the traditional Bible too, particularly in Matthew.

Jesus continues, "Do not fret, from morning to evening and from

evening to morning, [about your food and clothing]. You're much better than the lilies, which neither card nor spin". This passage also appears in the other gospels of the New Testament and is couched in greater poetic beauty:

Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, not about your body, what you shall put on. ... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.³⁰

All of this supports the view that it was a monastic teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples.

Again in the Gospel of Thomas, we find that Jesus said, "Whoever blasphemes against the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against the son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, either on earth or in heaven." So what exactly is the "holy spirit" in the Gnostic tradition? It refers to the 'higher Self' of Vedanta. As noted earlier, the Bhagavad-Gita instructs us that if we purify our mind and harness its energies, then our higher Self becomes our friend; otherwise it will act like our enemy. This calls to mind the fundamental teaching of yoga and has been reiterated again and again by many spiritual exponents of the yoga tradition. For instance, in the teachings of Sri Sarada Devi, we find that

everything depends on one's mind. Nothing can be achieved without purity of mind. It is said, 'The aspirant may have received the grace of the Guru, the Lord, and the Vaishnava; but he comes to grief without the grace of one'. That 'one' is the mind. The mind of the aspirant should be gracious to him.³¹

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said:

It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.³²

This is similar to the Indian idea of the all-pervasive nature of Brahman. In chapters 7, 8 and 9 of the Gita, Sri Krishna conveys the omnipresence of the divine: "I am the taste in the waters, ... I am the light in the moon and the sun, I am the syllable Om, I am the sound in ether."³³

More historic research is needed to ascertain exactly what may have happened. The discovery of the Gnostic gospels is quite recent. However, to the Vedantic scholar, it is clear that the essential teachings of Jesus were monastic and emphasized inner reflection and meditation. This tradition parallels the Upanishadic and Buddhist traditions in India, as Edward Conze has already suggested. As in India, the philosophic approach to enlightenment, with its emphasis on knowledge and meditation, is not widely appealing; nor is it accessible without considerable mental preparation. Thus, the bhakti tradition evolved naturally in India, where one meditates on a spiritual personality in the form of the divine incarnation. This is how the Krishna tradition developed on the Indian subcontinent. The same must have happened with the life of Jesus several centuries after his death. It is easy for the human being to love and adore a spiritual personality and, through that adoration, grow in spiritual evolution. This bhakti tradition must have been absorbed and assimilated in many of the biblical texts, especially in the book of John. Viewed from the Vedantic tradition, the Book of John is not in opposition to the Book of Thomas or to any of the other Gnostic texts. Rather, John emphasizes the path of devotion whereas Thomas teaches the path of knowledge. These are not contradictory but rather complementary. It is not appropriate or desirable that an individual follow only one path to the divine; he should follow a combination of them since the human mind has many facets and must be developed harmoniously in all aspects. As taught in the Gita, the human mind has four aspects: thinking, feeling, willing and restraining. In the Indian tradition, these aspects are developed and trained through the four yogas, of jnana yoga (the yoga of knowledge), bhakti yoga (the yoga of devotion), karma yoga (the yoga of work) and raja yoga (the yoga of meditation).

We selected the Gospel of Thomas as exemplary of the Gnostic gospels and quoted liberally from it in the hope that other scholars will take up the study in earnest. From this short exposition, it is evident that further research is necessary. From such a study, it will emerge that there is some commonality between the gnostic and biblical traditions on the one hand and the Jnana and Bhakti traditions of India on the other. Such an inquiry and study will only help to hasten the progress of the spiritual seeker.

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NOTES

- 1 See page 445, Vol.2, Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.
- 2 Ibid., p. 445.
- 3 See R. Garbe, Philosophy of Ancient India, p. 30.
- 4 See S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Volume 2, p. 227.
- 5 Ibid., p. 210.
- 6 See Vivekananda Review, February 2014.
- 7 Judas Thomas should not be confused with Judas. Apparently, Judas was a common name in those days and Judas was also one of the given names of Thomas.
- 8 The Nag Hammadi Library, p. 4.
- 9 See S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgita, pp. 189-190.
- 10 The Nag Hammadi Library, p. 5.

- 11 See J.L. Lash, *Not in His Vision, Gnostic Vision: Sacred Ecology, and the Future of Belief*, p. 127.
- 12 See Richard T.A. Murphy, *Background to the Bible*, Servant Publications, 1978.
- 13 See John 20:29.
- 14 See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, p. 34.
- 15 See John 1, 1-4.
- 16 See Krishna Yajurveda, Kathaka Samhita, 12.5, 27.1. This is quoted and commented upon on page 276 of "A Commentary of the Upanishads" by Swami Nirmalananda Giri, which is available online at: <http://hinduonline.co/DigitalLibrary/SmallBooks/UpanishadCommentaryfulEng.pdf>
- 17 Complete Works, Volume 7, p. 3.
- 18 The Nag Hammadi Library, p. 74.
- 19 See Luke 1:52.
- 20 See Matthew 19:30.
- 21 See Mark 10:31.
- 22 Ibid., p. 75.
- 23 S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, p.462.
- 24 Ibid., p. 75.
- 25 Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works, Volume 1*, p. 248.
- 26 Ibid., p.87.
- 27 *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 46.
- 28 S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, p. 610.
- 29 See Matthew, XV, 14.
- 30 Ibid., VI, 25.
- 31 See *Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1983, p. 28.
- 32 Ibid., p. 87
- 33 *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 7, verse 8.

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