



# The Enlightenment



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## Christianity – A Series of Human Inventions

*By Don Hatch*

The June 2019 *Enlightenment* provided details about the various levels of Humanist organizations that came into being during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The members of these associations were rejecting a lifestyle influenced by belief in supernatural phenomena in favour of a secular non-theistic life stance, guided by the principles of rational thought, scientific inquiry, responsibility, ethics, compassion, fairness, and equality. This *Enlightenment* attempts to explain just what it was that was being rejected.

Why is it important for humanists to know what is being rejected? It is important because most people believe the Christianity being rejected is the supernatural Christianity preached from pulpits or the stories told in Sunday schools. But for humanists, I think it is important to know that Christianity is really based on a series of human inventions. We know Christianity, the largest religion on earth, is in decline in most Western countries as societies become more secular, so perhaps the decline can be accelerated if it became more widely known that Christianity is an invention and not the result of intervention from on high. Knowing this could also make it easier for Christians, who may be having doubts about what they have been asked to believe, to give up supernatural beliefs and adopt a humanist style of living. This composition will attempt to demonstrate how Christianity is not based on supernatural phenomena, but instead is the result of a series of human inventions. First, we will consider the invention of deities.

### The God Delusion

Christianity is based on the premise that Jesus was the divine son of God, born of a virgin via immaculate conception. But is this supernatural God real, or is it a human invention? Because, if the Christian God is an invention, then it must logically follow that Christianity is based on an invention, not a supernatural deity. We will examine Christianity in the next section, but first we need to briefly explore just how it was that gods and God came about.

It is virtually certain that the so-called pagan gods that appeared in ancient myths were human inventions. Early humans lacked the scientific knowledge we have today, and looked for explanations of what caused the seasons, earthquakes, and weather phenomena, as well as who or what was responsible for creating the wonders of nature that existed all around them. Consequently, a pantheon of gods was invented to explain these mysteries. These gods continued to be imagined right up to the era of ancient Greece and

Rome, but gradually faded away with the advent of monotheistic Christianity, at least in the Western world.

About the time that the Greek city states began to form around 500 BCE, a group of Jewish scholars, exiled in Babylon, began to assemble what became the earlier books of the Old Testament. These books were based on ancient myths, hand-me-down stories, as well as some ancient writings. The Jews rejected the many-gods concept existing elsewhere at the time, and centered Judaism on the one God they called Yahweh. The Jews believed that their monotheistic deity was far superior to, and far more powerful than the pagan gods. Later, this Yahweh became the all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent God of the Christians, and to this day many Christians believe their God answers prayers and is able to influence events on earth whenever the spirit moves him or her.

So, if it is agreed that the pagan gods were invented by humans, is it not logical also to conclude that Yahweh and his descendants, the Christian God and Islam's Allah, are also human inventions? The theodicy argument, I believe, substantiates this contention. If there exists an all knowing, all powerful, and benevolent God, why is there so much suffering in the world and so many natural disasters that often result in the loss of human lives? So, is it not logical to postulate that Christianity's God is a human invention, not a supernatural supreme being residing in some mysterious place in the universe?

## **The Christ Delusion**

### **How Did Jesus of Nazareth Metamorphize into the Christian Jesus-the-Christ?**

First, we need to establish to the best of our ability that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived. One would think that anyone who performed the many miracles detailed in the gospels, and who died on a cross to later rise from the grave, would have been front page news recorded by historians of the time. But since these supernatural events were apparently never recorded, it is most likely that they never actually did occur. Because of this lack of concrete evidence, there are those who reason that Jesus of Nazareth never lived and was an invented fictitious person.

Nevertheless, there appear to be a few non-biblical references to Jesus. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported the martyrdom of James in 62 CE., and James is referred to as the brother of Jesus. (He was really a half-brother). Also, there are historical accounts confirming that Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator at the time Jesus died, and the Roman historian Tacitus mentions that Pilate was the one who sentenced Jesus to death. These few non-biblical references appear to confirm that Jesus of Nazareth really did live. Also, it is hard to imagine that Christianity, the largest religion on the planet, was based on an individual who never existed. Therefore, I believe we can conclude, without too much fear of contradiction, that Jesus of Nazareth was a real human being born around the year 4 BCE as historians have stated. But the Christian Jesus-the-Christ was a clever invention, as we will show.

## **The First Thirty Years**

Christians know very little about how Jesus of Nazareth spent the first thirty years of his life outside of what is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Both authors describe the immaculate conception, and the virgin birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But then the stories differ. Mathew describes the comings and goings of the Magi, and Luke's version describes the comings and goings of the shepherds. Luke tells the story of a twelve-year-old Jesus sitting among the teachers in the temple in Jerusalem, but for the most

part all four gospels describe events occurring after Jesus was thirty. Whether or not a twelve-year-old Jesus met with authorities in the Jerusalem temple is questionable at best, but it is rationally unconceivable that the immaculate conception and virgin birth ever took place. It was an invention by the gospel writers to cover up the fact that Jesus was illegitimate. So, if a non-existing God was not the father of Jesus, and the gospels make clear that Joseph was not Jesus' actual father, just who was his real father?

To learn more about Jesus' early life we need to turn to the Jews. There are two sides to every story and the Jewish side is never revealed by Christians. There are apparent references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud and in other writings where it is claimed Jesus was illegitimate, with his mother being an unmarried woman named Miriam and his father being a Roman soldier, an archer named Pantera. Records show Pantera was transferred to Germany in 9 CE. His grave was discovered during railway construction at Bingerbrück Germany in 1859. According to his tombstone, which is in a museum in Bad Kreuznach and can be viewed on the internet, he died at age 62. If indeed Pantera was the father of Jesus, this tombstone may be the only physical connection to Jesus existing today. There is dispute among scholars who study these early writings as to whether they actually refer to Jesus of Nazareth, but the words Yeshu son of Pantera, with various spellings, come up frequently.

There have been various speculations as to what Jesus was doing before beginning his ministry at age thirty. One account suggests he was a carpenter helping to rebuild the nearby city of Sepphoris after it was ravaged by the Romans. Other accounts suggest he did a lot of travelling including a trip to Egypt to learn about sorcery enabling him to seemingly perform miracles. It has also been suggested Jesus studied in a Yeshiva to become a rabbi, but did not graduate. It is certainly possible Jesus did study to be a rabbi, because it is clear from the gospels that he was very knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures. As already stated, the foregoing is speculative, and some biblical scholars point out that none of this can be substantiated. But it surely is not unreasonable to believe that before starting his ministry, Jesus of Nazareth was cleverly preparing for it.

### The Last Three Years

Whatever may have happened in Jesus' early life, it is believed that at age thirty he formed a cult by assembling a small band of followers including twelve disciples. He preached a message contrary to the teachings in the temple. In fact, according to Luke 4:28-29, the first time Jesus preached in a synagogue, the Jews thought his message was so outlandish that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. But he continued on and in the process, he cleverly morphed himself into Jesus-the-Christ. He purported himself to be the promised Messiah come to save the Jewish nation. He preached a message of salvation, claiming those who believed in him would enjoy everlasting life. He promised to return soon after death to set up God's kingdom on earth.

The Jewish leaders in the temple would have none of this. They considered Jesus to be an impostor claiming to be the promised Messiah. After he upset the tables in the temple yard, the Jewish authorities convinced Pontius Pilate to sentence Jesus to death by crucifixion.

After the crucifixion, the Jesus cult attempted to carry on, promoting Jesus' messages to fellow Jews. It is believed that the first leader of these early Jesus followers was his half-brother James. Others in the group included Jesus' three other half-brothers and the apostles Peter and John. They were following Jesus' instructions in Matthew 10: 5-6. "Go **not** into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the majority of people in the house of Israel did not believe they were lost, and they made life difficult for the Jesus followers. In fact,

some of them were martyred. Stephen is believed to have been the first martyr, in 35 CE. In the long run, these early Jewish Christians and their successors, who became known as Ebionites, were unsuccessful at converting a significant number of Jews to their beliefs and they eventually died out. The demise of the Ebionites should have been the last we ever heard of Jesus, but something happened that helped change the course of Western history. That something was the apostle Paul. It was not Jesus of Nazareth, posing as Jesus-the-Christ, that founded the Christian religion, it was the apostle Paul and his associates.

## The Evolution of Christianity

Paul, a Jewish Pharisee (originally named Saul), was an educated Roman citizen who claims he had a vision on the road to Damascus. In this vision Paul asserted that Jesus exhorted him to carry his message of faith and salvation to the Gentiles. Paul met with James and his associates several times and became acquainted with the concepts of the Jesus messages that were floating around in those years among the Jewish followers of Jesus. He let the disciples know that he intended to take these messages of faith and salvation to the Gentiles. Apparently, the followers of James reluctantly consented, and Paul set out to establish Christian Churches in the eastern Mediterranean area. In this endeavor, he and his associates, including Silas and Barnabas, were amazingly successful. The apostle Peter was likely involved in some way as well, as he was martyred in Rome circa 67 CE. Paul was previously martyred in Rome 62 CE. According to the Catholic Church, Peter is the first pope and the rock upon which the Roman Catholic Church is built, (Matthew 16:18). Peter is reputed to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. But how was it that Paul and his helpers were successful in furthering the Christian cause with the Gentiles, when James and his cohorts were unsuccessful with the Jews?

To look for answers it is necessary to go back to the days of the Roman Empire. It was not the elite that accepted the Christian religion; it was the uneducated peasants. According to Edward Gibbon (1737-1794 CE), author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, "the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants, and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves....they mingled with the rude and illiterate crowd, and insinuated themselves into those minds whom their age, their sex, or their education is best disposed to receive the impression of superstitious terrors." They were "ignorant of the philosophers of the time who spent their time in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue." Instead, "they were obstinate and perverse enthusiasts who enacted an implicit submission to mysterious doctrines without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning."

One can easily imagine that the Christian promise of salvation or redemption through faith in Jesus Christ, plus an afterlife in an idyllic heaven, would appeal greatly to the downtrodden masses that were attracted to the early churches by Paul's straightforward message. The basics of the message are:

- Gentiles need not adhere to all the Mosaic laws. Salvation could be obtained by a profession of "faith," believing that Jesus died to atone for the sins of believers (Romans 1:16-17).
- Circumcision was no longer necessary in order to be a follower of Jesus.
- Paul softened Jesus' divorce laws.
- Believers would be guaranteed some form of life after death.
- Jesus was the son of God, the Messiah or the Christ, who would return in the near future to judge all humanity and establish God's Kingdom on earth.
- Paul promoted the celebration of the Eucharist (see the wording in I Corinthians 5:7-8).

But how did the churches survive after the death of Paul? The churches must have had leaders, and indeed there were enough dedicated early church fathers, sometimes called bishops, to keep the churches active, despite the fact that early Christians were often persecuted. These leaders were aided by the Epistles or letters that offered advice on righteous living to church members and promoted the necessity of possessing faith in the redemptive power of Jesus to forgive sins and subsequently guarantee an afterlife. It is worth noting that seven of the twenty-one Epistles in the New Testament, believed to have been authored by Paul, are the only books in the whole Bible of which the author is definitely known. And there were also the four biblical gospels and other gospels, written to assist in promoting the early churches. Two of the biblical gospels (Matthew and Luke) included the virgin birth and the resurrection, adding supernatural characteristics to Jesus of Nazareth, aiding in his metamorphosis into Jesus-the-Christ. More on this later.

And then something truly fortuitous happened to help solidify Christianity. In 312 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine reputedly had a dream suggesting that if he fought under the banner of the Christian cross, he would win the battle of Milvian Bridge the next day. He did win the battle, and sometime afterwards, Christianity was declared the exclusive religion of the Roman Empire. In 325 CE, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea at which time the Trinity and Nicene Creed were **invented**, and Jesus was declared to be the divine son of God, as opposed to being fully human. With this, the invention of Jesus-the-Christ was complete. Then, the Catholic Church, organized along military lines, grew and became wealthy throughout the "Dark Ages" and beyond. The Catholic hierarchy knew how to use the system for all it was worth by convincing the masses that by following all the sacraments and contributing money, Catholics, and only Catholics, would be admitted into heaven. As Pope Leo X is reputed to have said around 1000 CE, "It has served us well, this myth of Christ."

After the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestantism became well established in Northern Europe and also spread to North America. Being less rigid than Catholicism, Protestantism allowed both science and democracy to evolve during the Enlightenment as the West began to pull away from the rest of the world. From about 1750 onward, advances in science and technology enabled progress in ways that had never been achieved before. Contributing to this progress is what became known as the Protestant work ethic, as Christianity continued to thrive. And thrive it did! What started out as a small band of Jesus' followers grew into the largest religious faith on earth, today claiming as many as two billion members and adherents, most believing in a supernatural God and a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, who was portrayed to be a pillar of virtue and a role model worthy of worship and emulation.

Before moving on, it must be noted that the Christian religion might never have evolved and survived without two fortuitous legendary events: the vision of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, and the dream of Constantine at Milvian bridge. How uncanny or ironic is this? The propagation of Christianity relied upon a vision and a dream, if in fact these events actually happened. Talk about a house built on sand; Christianity is a prime example. It is not really built upon a rock as stated in the Bible (Matthew 16:18) but on two visions or dreams.

Despite what may be described as an unsteady beginning, the Christian religion did thrive and has played a major role – both good and bad – in the lives of devout believers in the Western world and elsewhere. But before concluding the story of the evolution of Christianity, we must go back to the gospel writers, some of the greatest inventors of questionable beliefs that ever lived.

## Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

The biblical gospels were written fifty or more years after Jesus died and about twenty-five years after Paul's last Epistle. Mark's Gospel is believed to be the first written, just after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Matthew and Luke followed. John followed later, probably early in the second century CE. Many biblical scholars believe there existed a lost gospel referred to as Q that the writers drew on for information about the life of Jesus. They also had some of the early Epistles available as well as hand-me-down stories.

All early Christian writings were in Greek, the language of educated scholars of the day. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that at least some of these writers, as well as Paul, were familiar with the Greek classicists including Plato, who postulated about a soul and an afterlife, helping to shape the contours of Christianity.

I don't believe it is too much of a stretch to claim that gospels were intended to be propaganda to help promote the early Christian Churches. One of the devices they cleverly used was the fulfilling of prophecies in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was translated into Greek around 200 BCE into a volume known as the Septuagint, so the gospel writers had the prophecies readily available. Perhaps the most famous prophecy fulfilled in the New Testament is the one from Isaiah 7:14:

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

In Matthew 1:23 we find:

*Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*

The similarity is striking. So, is this a prophesy being fulfilled, or is the writer of Matthew cleverly using the prediction of a virgin birth in Isaiah as a means of disguising the illegitimacy of Jesus? I submit it is the latter.

The above quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible. It is interesting to compare the wording of the same passages in the New Revised Standard Version. Isaiah 7:14 states:

*Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*

Matthew 1:23 we find:

*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*

Again, there is similarity, but also differences. In Isaiah the word virgin has been changed to young woman but not in Matthew, and the spelling of Immanuel in Isaiah has been changed to Emmanuel in Matthew.

The words "young woman" merit special comment. The word used in the original Hebrew is *almah*. Apparently, this word is difficult to translate into English, but scholars now seem to agree that young woman is a better translation than virgin. The Hebrew word for virgin is *parthenos*, so young woman would

seem to be a more accurate translation, again suggesting Matthew deliberately used the virgin birth to deflect the illegitimacy of Jesus.

Mary the mother of Jesus is also described as a virgin in the first chapter of Luke. It was not unusual to hear about virgin births in the years the gospels were written. There were virgin births in Egyptian myths, and Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar were both claimed to be born of a virgin. So, whether Luke got the concept of a virgin birth from Isaiah or from elsewhere is unknown, but like Matthew, he probably used it to cover up the illegitimacy of Jesus.

In any case, an apparent mistranslation of *almah* in Isaiah may well have been at least part of the reason Christians came to believe in a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, born of a virgin, for the past two millennia. This demonstrates the importance of translating ancient manuscripts accurately.

And there are many more connections to the Old Testament in the New. I have counted at least fifteen uses of the words "it is written" in the Gospels referring to Old Testament events or sayings.

I have a King James Version of the Bible in which all the words ascribed to Jesus are printed in red. Were all these words actually spoken by Jesus, or were many of them put into his mouth by the gospel writers? The members of the well-known Jesus Seminar, based in California, have concluded that possibly only a fifth of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were actually spoken by him. In particular, I want to highlight the words spoken by Jesus after his supposed resurrection. All three synoptic gospels have a resurrected Jesus advising the disciples to spread the gospel to all nations. These are the words in Matthew 28:18-20. (NRSV). The other two are similar.

*"All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the Son and of the holy spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you to the end of the age."*

If indeed there was no resurrection, a resurrected Jesus never told the disciples to go and preach to all nations. While alive he was only interested in reforming his fellow Jews as was mentioned earlier. It was the apostle Paul who believed through his vision that not only Jews, but also the Gentiles needed redemption and forgiveness of sins. The gospel writers were likely aware of this from reading Paul's Epistles and it is suggested they invented the above words supposedly spoken by a resurrected Jesus. We do not know who invented the resurrection of Jesus, but the idea must have been floating around after his death. Paul mentions it in his Epistles.

Now we come to Gospel of John, from which evangelical Christians get much of their ammunition, flaunting John 3:16 whenever they have an opportunity. In this gospel an entirely new perspective appears. It is a perspective in which Jesus comes across as very egoistic because the pronouns I and me appear over and over again. For example, John 12:46, "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth in me should not abide in darkness," and John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me." If Jesus actually spoke these words, he was either deluded or he was a conniver or both. This helps confirm, I submit, that the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, *was invented by Jesus of Nazareth himself* and then embellished by Paul and the gospel writers.

Thus, we come near to the end of a long diatribe about the elements of Christianity that, as a non-believer, I suggest were inventions of humans, not the result of influence from a deity on high. These include:

- The invention of a pantheon of mythical gods by early humans to help explain what was going on around them.
- The invention of a monotheistic God by the Jewish writers of the early books of the Old Testament. This invented God was later picked up by Christians and Muslims.
- The invention of an immaculate conception to hide the illegitimacy of Jesus.
- The invention of the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ by a human Jesus of Nazareth.
- The gospel writers doctoring their accounts to convince readers that the Old Testament prophecies had come true.
- The gospel writers putting invented words into the mouth of Jesus to help the early church fathers promote Christianity.
- And finally, the invention of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed at Nicaea in 325.

Before concluding, I wish to stress that I do not profess to be a scholar thoroughly trained and versed in the history of religions. The foregoing is the result of a prodigious amount of reading and this article outlines my conclusions from what I have read. It is certainly open to scrutiny and comments are welcome.

An essential reason for publishing the *Enlightenment* is to conform to CRA's mandate for HALA to educate members and others about the advantages of secularity. It is hoped that readers of this issue will find it to be of interest and educational as well.

## **Atheism and Islam on the Rise in Britain: Poll**

Christian belief has halved in Britain in 35 years, with just one in three people now identifying as Christian – while atheism and Islam continue to rise. Figures published by the British Social Attitudes survey reveal the widest ever margin between staunch atheists and believers who are certain that God exists. Of almost 4,000 people polled by the National Centre for Social Research, 38 percent described themselves as Christian – a fall from 50 per cent in 2008 and 66 percent in 1983. Those identifying as Muslim increased from one percent in 1932 to three percent in 2008 and six percent in 2018.

The survey shows that the biggest change is in the number of people who define themselves as “confident atheists,” which rose from 10 percent in 1998 to 18 percent in 2008 and 26 percent in 2018. *The Daily Telegraph* – London.

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