



The Enlightenment



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The Selling and Marketing of Christianity

How does he do it? How does televangelist Joel Osteen fill a former basketball stadium with over fifteen thousand people on a Sunday morning, and also attract a TV audience of up to seven million in one hundred nations? Why do his books top the *New York Times* bestseller list for extended periods of time? And there have been many others like him including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert, and Ted Haggard, with the latter three being involved in scandals. Then there is Billy Graham who for years filled ballparks and arenas with his crusades. Others have resorted mainly to books to get their message across. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over thirty-five million copies worldwide and Tim La Haye's *Left Behind* series, based on the end times, has also been widely read. Just why is it that these individuals are so successful at selling their dubious messages at a time when attendance at mainline churches is declining?

There are at least two reasons. First, these individuals are slick promoters using their considerable persuasive powers and all the latest promotional techniques at their disposal. Second, it is the message itself. The message of salvation and a promised afterlife in an idyllic heaven for those who have been saved by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, is the heart of the message. Billy Graham was a master at this, using his famous altar calls. And would you believe, the nub of Joel Osteen's message seems to be that God wants you to be rich. And of course in the process, many of these guys get very rich themselves.

Now none of this is particularly new. Before the era of TV there was radio and even today radio is widely used in the Bible belt. If you drive through Tennessee on a Sunday with the radio on, the airways are saturated with fanatical preachers promoting messages of salvation and hope. And in the early 1900s there was the beginning of the mega churches such as the one in California led by Salford Ontario native Aimee Semple McPherson. Back in the late 1800s there were the tent revival meetings and evangelical preachers like Dwight L. Moody. All of the above are, or were, super salespersons and expert marketers promoting their bogus ideology and messages of false hope.

An earlier successful promoter was Martin Luther. He observed the spurious practices of Catholicism, particularly as it related to indulgences, and instigated the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe. This was a positive move, aiding in the establishment of the Enlightenment that furthered the spread of scientific discoveries, technology and democracy. This was a refreshing change from top down dictatorial Catholic Church that had become exceedingly wealthy from successfully marketing their brand of religion.

Going back still further, another remarkable marketer was the apostle Paul who successfully established a number of Christian churches in the pagan eastern Mediterranean area. His message was based on a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ who supposedly possessed the power to forgive sins and guarantee an afterlife. But just who was this Jesus-the-Christ? Who first promoted and marketed him? The following discourse entitled "The Christ Delusion," attempts to answer these questions.

The Christ Delusion

Introduction

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins presents a convincing case that the God portrayed in the Judaic and Christian scriptures does not, nor never did, exist. It is virtually certain that this God was an invention of human kind, and that he or she can genuinely be described as a delusion. So having put the God question to rest, at least for non-believers, perhaps it is time to critically examine the other pillar of Christianity, Jesus-the-Christ. Did he actually live, or was he a delusion as well?

According to the New Testament gospels, about two thousand years ago a baby named Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem. He was reputed to be the Messiah, the son of God, grew up and preached a message of forgiveness and compassion, died to atone for the sins of those who believed in him, rose from the grave on the third day, and later ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. Furthermore, he promised to return at some time in the future to set up “God’s Kingdom” on earth. Many devout Christians, especially biblical literalists, possess the “faith” required to believe that all of this is true. But in reality, is all of it true, is part of it true, or is none of it true?

Having established that the chances of the Judeo-Christian God existing are infinitesimally small, a good portion of the above cannot be true. Jesus-the-Christ cannot be the son of a non-existent God. If there is no God, Jesus-the-Christ cannot be sitting on his right hand in a non-existent God’s heaven, and he cannot return at some future time to set up God’s Kingdom on earth. Regarding a virgin birth and a physical resurrection, these supernatural phenomena, based on ancient myths, were inserted into the gospels of Matthew and Luke by their authors in order to help promote early Christianity in the emerging churches.

After considering these realities, there is only one obvious conclusion; Jesus the supernatural Christ could not possibly have existed, except as a fictional character. He had to be an invention, but who was the inventor? How did the human Jesus of Nazareth, who most likely did live, get transformed into Jesus the fictitious Christ, one of the pillars of Christianity? We will begin looking for answers by exploring how Christianity evolved from a small sect led by this human Jesus of Nazareth, into the most populous religion on earth.

The Evolution of Christianity

First we need to establish to the best of our ability that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived. One would think that if anyone performed the many miracles detailed in the gospels, and later died to rise from the grave, these sensational events would have been mentioned by historians of the time. But apparently these happenings were never recorded, or if they were, no trace of them has been found. In contrast, the life and death of Jesus’ supposed cousin John the Baptizer, was definitely mentioned in historical records.

Nevertheless, there does appear to be a few non-biblical references to a human Jesus of Nazareth, as opposed to a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported the martyrdom of James in 62 CE, and James is referred to as the brother of Jesus. 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 would seem to confirm that a human Jesus of Nazareth actually did live. The well-respected New Testament scholar E.P. Sanders agrees, and he believes the following facts about Jesus to be authentic:

- Jesus was born circa 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great.
- He spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village.
- He was baptized by John the Baptizer.
- He called twelve disciples.

- He taught in towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (apparently not in cities).
- He preached the kingdom of God.
- He left Galilee and went to Jerusalem for Passover.
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area.
- He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priests.
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate.

Why did the Jews (and possibly the Romans) want Jesus crucified? For one thing, according to the gospels, Jesus was very critical of the Scribes and the Pharisees and they probably considered him to be a threat. Also they must have considered Jesus' message was spurious, because, 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. They probably looked on him the same way some of us look upon televangelists today. No wonder they wanted him crucified after listening to his diatribes for a year, and after he upset the tables in the courtyard of the Temple. And according to Tom Holland's recent book, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, 400-500 years after the death of Jesus, rabbis in Mesopotamian yeshivas (rabbinical schools) taught students that Jesus was, "in fact the 'the son of a harlot,' a failed student who had been dismissed by his rabbi for assorted sexual misdemeanors. Far from reigning in heaven as the Christians claimed, the truth was that he had been consigned to hell, where he would spend the rest of eternity in a plunge bath of boiling excrement." And other Jewish accounts suggest Jesus' father was a Roman soldier named Panthera. No doubt both are biased observations, but nevertheless are indications of the feelings of at least some Jews about Jesus of Nazareth. Did Jesus train to be a rabbi? It is possible.

Regarding the claim that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the precise definition of a Messiah is not entirely clear, but in any case the Jews, who are clever people, to this day have not accepted Jesus as any semblance of a Messiah or king who would at some later time set up God's Kingdom on earth. There have been many Messiah claimants before, during, and after the time of Jesus. All the others faded away, so what was so special about Jesus that enabled Christianity to grow and prosper? To look for answers, we must go back to the years immediately following the death of Jesus that occurred circa 30 CE.

Many scholars attempting to discover the true nature of the historical Jesus do not go back that far. Instead they look to the gospels that were written some forty to eighty years later. This in my view is a mistake. The gospels were written primarily as propaganda to promote the early churches by portraying Jesus as the risen Messiah who died to atone for the sins of believers. And they were cleverly written in a manner that made the Old Testament prophecies about a coming Messiah appear to be fulfilled. These gospels have been copied and reinterpreted so often that it is virtually impossible to determine which words the human Jesus of Nazareth actually spoke, and which were put into his mouth by the gospel writers. The well-known Jesus Seminar scholars have relied on the gospels to try and arrive at a realistic picture of the historical Jesus, but certain other scholars are very critical of their methodology and conclusions. Queen's University professor Donald Harmon Akenson, devotes several pages in his book *St Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (2000) arguing, quite convincingly I believe, that the Jesus Seminar methodologies and conclusions are seriously flawed. Maurice Casey, emeritus professor of New Testament languages and literature at the University of Nottingham, UK, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (2010) similarly refutes the Jesus Seminar's work.

Instead of utilizing the gospels, professor Akenson reasons that the Pauline Epistles can give us a better picture of the real historical Jesus of Nazareth. He points out that it is more logical to concentrate on the period stretching from the time Jesus died circa 30 CE, until the start of the Jewish-Roman wars in 66 CE, rather than relying on the later period. It was in this earlier time frame that Paul's letters, the only books in the Bible whose author is definitely known, were written. Whereas the gospels were written during a period of turmoil, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Eventually, Temple worship was replaced by Rabbinic Judaism.

After the death of Jesus, a small group of his followers attempted to carry on his mission and convert fellow Jews to the Christian faith. It is believed that the first leader of these early Jesus followers was his brother James. Others in the group reputedly included Jesus' three other 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 as noted above, the 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, circa 35 CE, and James himself was martyred in 62 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. Under these circumstances, the Jesus or early Christian movement should have faded away, but something happened that helped change the course of western history. That something was the apostle Paul.

Paul, a Jewish Pharisee (originally named Saul), was a Roman citizen who according to Acts 9:3-6, had a vision (possibly an epileptic seizure) on the road to Damascus. In this vision, Paul asserts that Jesus exhorted him to carry his message of faith and salvation to the Gentiles. Paul met with James and his group several times and became acquainted with the concepts of the Jesus messages that were floating around in those early years among the Jewish Christians. He let them know that he intended to take this message of faith and salvation to the Gentiles. Apparently the group reluctantly agreed and Paul set out to establish Christian Churches in the Diaspora. In this endeavor, he and his associates, including Silas and Barnabas, were amazingly successful. The apostle Peter could have been involved as well. Peter was martyred in Rome circa 67 CE, as was Paul in 62 CE, both during the reign of the Emperor Nero. 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

Paul's letters to the churches that he established in the eastern Mediterranean area are thought to have been written between 50 and 60 CE. It is also believed that Paul's vision and conversion occurred circa 33 CE so it seems logical to assume that whatever Paul learned about Jesus of Nazareth was being promoted amongst the early Jesus movement adherents at that time in Palestine. Then, after he assimilated his thoughts about Jesus, he spent ten or so years establishing the churches before he sent them his letters advising or reinforcing what they should believe and how they should act. And it is from these letters that professor Akenson claims we can get a realistic picture of the historical Jesus. Here are his conclusions using the Aramaic name Yeshua for Jesus:

- Yeshua was born by normal human process. (Romans 1:3)
- He was particularly worried about the matter of divorce. (I Corinthians 7:10-11)
- Yeshua had a last meal with his disciples, which was not set at the time of the Passover. (I Corinthians 11:24-25)
- He was crucified and buried. (Galatians 3:1 & I Corinthians 15:4)
- Yeshua's mission was to those of the Jewish faith, not to the Gentiles. (Romans 15:8)
- Yeshua believed that holy men (preachers of Yahweh's truth) should be supported by their followers, rather than work for a living in the ordinary way. (I Corinthians 9:14)
- Yeshua had brothers, one was named Yacov or James. (Galatians 1:19)
- Yeshua had 12 special followers. (I Corinthians 15:5)
- Yeshua's death occurred because he was betrayed or at a minimum "handed over" to the Roman authorities. (I Corinthians 11:23)
- Yeshua was considered by his followers to be the Messiah or the Christ, and the redeemer and savior. (I Corinthians 15:12-17).

Note that there is broad agreement between Akenson's list and Sanders' list shown above. Jesus of Nazareth was fully human, led a small band of disciples, was handed over to Roman authorities and was

crucified and buried. No virgin birth and no physical resurrection. But also note that there is little indication of any actual words spoken by Jesus, only narrative about what he did. So what did Paul glean about Jesus of Nazareth in regard to his teachings or message? As a minimum, he appears to have assimilated the following:

- 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 also softened Jesus’ divorce laws. In respect of Jewish laws, Paul differed significantly from James and his group.
- Believers would be guaranteed some form of life after death.
- Jesus was the son of God or Messiah or the Christ (Romans 1:4-6) 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)

The most important attribute of Jesus for Paul seems to be that through his grace it is no longer necessary to obey all the Jewish laws to the letter. Jesus is his hero and possessing faith in him offers salvation or redemption or atonement for sins. This is the heart of the message that he feels compelled to take to the Gentiles. But how was it that Paul and Peter 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 heady days of the Roman Empire. It was not the elite that initially accepted the Christian religion, it was mainly 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 mingle 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 produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning.” Now the foregoing may be an exaggeration, because Gibbon was sometimes criticized for his scathing views of Christianity. Nevertheless, one can easily imagine that the Christian promise of salvation or redemption through faith in Jesus-the-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. But who was it that kept the churches alive after the death of Paul? The peasants must have had leaders, and indeed there were enough dedicated early church fathers or bishops to keep the churches active, despite the fact that the early Christians were often persecuted. Some of these men were:

- Saint Clement of Rome, first Pope after Peter.
- Saint Ignatius of Antioch (35-110 CE) wrote six Epistles and was martyred in Rome in 110 CE.
- Saint Polycarp of Smyra (69-155 CE).
- Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (115-202 CE).
- Saint Clement of Alexandria (157-216 CE).
- Origen of Alexandria (185-254 CE) was never made a Saint.
- Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (293-376) participated in the Council of Nicaea, and later was involved in selecting the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament.

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. And there were other Epistles not included in the Bible. A book

entitled *The Lost Books of the Bible*, published in 1926 and revised in 1979, lists fifteen epistles authored by the early church fathers that carried on the mission of Paul, utilizing the theme that Christ came to save humankind. Among these Epistles, six were written by St. Ignatius, two by St. Clement, one by Barnabas and one by St. Polycarp. And there were also the biblical gospels and other gospels, written to assist in promoting the early churches. Two of the biblical gospels included the virgin birth and all four included the resurrection, adding supernatural characteristics to Jesus of Nazareth, aiding in his metamorphosis into Jesus-the-Christ.

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 as claimed by the Arians, Copts, and Gnostics. With this, the invention of the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ was complete. Then, the Catholic Church, organized along military lines, grew and became wealthy throughout the "Dark Ages" and beyond. The Church hierarchy knew how to milk the system for all its was worth by convincing the masses that by following all the sacraments and contributing money, Catholics, and only Catholics, would be admitted into heaven. All others would roast in hell. As Pope Leo X is reputed to have said in the early 1500s CE, "What profit has not the fable of Christ brought us?"

After the Protestant Reformation in the 16th 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 period as the "West" began to pull away from the "Rest." 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, Christianity claims as many as two billion members and adherents, most believing in a supernatural God and a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, who is portrayed as 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 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 that? The propagation of Christianity amongst the Gentiles, 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). Both a supernatural God and a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ are rather shaky pillars and raise two very important questions. How did a human Jesus of Nazareth become transformed into a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ, and what possessed the apostle Paul to undergo hardships and establish Christian churches among the Gentiles, leading to the successful founding of a new religion that has played a major role – both good and bad - in the lives of citizens in the western world and elsewhere?

These questions are not new. Starting as early as the 1600s, doubts about the supernatural characteristics of God, the Christian faith and the divinity of Jesus began to appear and set in motion a quest by certain philosophers, biblical and religious scholars and some theologians, to try and determine the truth about the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the Christian faith.

Raising Doubts

After the Protestant Reformation and during the Enlightenment period, certain scholars began to question the validity of traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. One of the earliest was the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) who rejected belief in a supernatural God and thought of God as the natural laws and forces of nature. The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) was one of

the first Enlightenment philosophers to reject belief in God. In France, the philosophe Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) published anonymously, a very enlightening short treatise entitled *Christianity Unveiled* in 1761. In Germany the Deist philosopher Herman Samuel Reimarus (1649-1768) authored *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, in which he called Christianity a fraud and reasoned that the Gospel of John should be seriously questioned, partly because it is so different from the other three. And there were other eighteenth century notables who were highly critical of Christianity. King Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786) who aspired to be among many other things, a Platonic philosopher king like the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, stated that, "Christianity was stuffed with miracles, contradictions and absurdities, was spawned in the fevered imaginations of the Orientals and then spread to Europe, where some fanatics espoused it, some intriguers pretended to be convinced by it, and some imbeciles actually believed it." Voltaire (1694-1778), who for a time was a close friend of Frederick, put it this way. "Our religion is without doubt the most ridiculous, most absurd and most bloody to ever infect the world." He also told Frederick he believed that the Christian religion would likely disappear before the end of the 1800s. How wrong he was.

During the 1800s in Germany, David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835-36, questioning many of the proverbial Christian beliefs. The works of Strauss and other German scholars are well documented in Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* published in 1906. Being a recent graduate in theology, Schweitzer set out to disprove Reimarus' conclusions, but after studying the works of various nineteenth century German philosophers, particularly those of David Friedrich Strauss, he concluded that Reimarus was right. He stated, "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work final consecration, never existed." As is generally known, Albert Schweitzer is one of the most remarkable multi-talented men who ever lived. Perhaps best known for his work as a medical missionary at Lambaréné in what is now Gabon, he was also an accomplished organist, a theologian and a philosopher. He was astute enough to realize that the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ portrayed in the gospels could not possibly have been a reality. He did, however, believe that the human Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet, did in fact, exist.

After the publication of Schweitzer's book, there was little interest in exploring the nature of the historical Jesus until the latter part of the twentieth century. In that era, a number of books were published by various scholars and liberal theologians, suggesting that it is time for a fresh evaluation of the man who has had such a profound influence on the course of western history. Among these are Bishop John Robinson and Don Cupitt in the U.K., Lloyd Geering in New Zealand, Bishop John Shelby Spong and Marcus Boyd in the United States, and Tom Harpur and Greta Vosper in Canada. And of course there were also the Jesus Seminar people in California including Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan. In general, they all concluded that Jesus was a fully human Jewish teacher who was not born of a virgin, and not bodily resurrected. They also reasoned that the Bible was a human construct rather than the divine word of God. Some did not believe in God or an afterlife, while others hedged on these issues. On the other hand, they all appeared to believe that Jesus was a compassionate teacher with a credible ethical and moral message, and that he was a role model worthy of emulation. As the aforementioned Queen's University professor Donald Harmon Akenson states in his book *St. Saul: The Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus*, "Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man of the Second Temple era: one who had only one truly distinguishing characteristic, but that one so intense as forever to defy description: an incandescent holiness that burned beyond his burial."

This was the conventional wisdom, but this perspective is being seriously challenged now that the English-speaking world is aware of the *Testament* of Jean Meslier (1664-1729). Meslier was a French curate who composed his *Testament*, outlining his radical views on Christianity and the Catholic Church, over a ten-year period ending in 1728, a year before his death. In 2009, Paris translator Michael Shreve published the *Testament* in English in its entirety for the first time. (See the October 2011 *Enlightenment*).

Meslier did not want to become a priest, but became one to please his parents. Once inside the priesthood, he saw the spuriousness of the Catholic faith and beliefs and also observed the corruption. He

was well versed in the classics as well as the Bible, and over a period of ten years he prepared his *Testament* that was understandably not to be published until after his death. In the *Testament*, Meslier dismisses the incarnation right away by stating that Jesus was just a man, a mortal man like other men. He then calls Jesus low born, a wretched fanatic, and a host of other derogatory terms. He says Jesus was a lunatic who imagined he was the son of God, born to deliver the Jews from captivity, become king of the Jews and after death would return to rule over God's Kingdom eternally on earth, where justice would reside. Meslier says the visions and wild thoughts of the famous fanatic Don Quixote, were never as crazy as those of Jesus. He calls Jesus mentally deranged because he so vainly imagined and predicted so many great and beautiful things that never happened. Regarding the teaching of Jesus he says, "I feel safe in saying that even the fables of Aesop are certainly more ingenious and instructive than all those crude and low parables that are told in the Gospels." Meslier also notes that, in the beginning, Christianity was considered to be nothing but a madness and a vile and despicable fanaticism. He mentions too that in the early days of Christianity there was a saying in Italy that, "you have to be crazy to be a Christian." (This coincides with Gibbon's assessment stated above). In addition to these damning remarks about Jesus, Meslier averred that there was no God, and no heaven or hell, and that the Catholic Church was corrupt and fraudulent. Meslier's assertions may well be overstated, but he forces one to consider that Jesus was really not the paragon of virtue commonly accepted in Christian circles.

To look at this from another perspective, I have analyzed the synoptic gospels eliminating all aspects of the supernatural including God, angels, Satan or the devil, demons, miracles, heaven, a virgin birth and a resurrection. When you do this, there is very little left. There are the sayings of Jesus, some inspirational, some containing wisdom, some contradictory, the confusing Beatitudes, the Golden Rule (it did not originate with Jesus) and the parables, a few of which make little sense. But overall, there are enough good things that cause believers to consider Jesus as a unique paragon of virtue and a role model worthy of worship, providing one ignores the contradictions and the ambiguities. By cherry-picking the New Testament, it is not difficult to portray Jesus as a truly saintly and wise teacher worthy of emulation.

Regarding John's gospel, mention is made above that Reimarus was very skeptical of the Gospel of John, partly because it is so different from the other three. After reading about Reimarus, I reread the Gospel of John and an entirely new perspective appeared. It is a perspective in which Jesus comes across as a deranged egomaniac 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, again substantiating Meslier's assessment of Jesus.

Now back to the question. How did Jesus of Nazareth morph into Jesus-the-Christ? For me the best explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth must have been one incredible promoter. He appears to have been remarkably successful in convincing a relatively small number of Jewish people into believing he possessed supernatural powers. In the same way that evangelical preachers have always been able, and still are able, to convince people by the thousands to believe in a message of salvation and eternal life, Jesus of Nazareth was able to convince the disciples, and enough other followers, to believe his message, and believe that he was indeed the promised Messiah. His followers then promoted his teachings after his death. Conclusion: *Jesus-the-Christ was a **delusion** invented by Jesus of Nazareth himself, not the supernatural being revered and worshipped by devout Christians!* Considering the final outcome of his activities, Jesus of Nazareth was one of the greatest salespersons of all times,

And what about the apostle Paul, another successful salesperson and marketer? What prompted him to so avidly promote the Christian message in spite of enduring many hardships? This is one of the most puzzling questions in all of Christianity, for it is doubtful whether without him, Christianity would have survived, much less become the major religion of the western world. One possible explanation for Paul's enthusiasm to promote Christianity that came to light in the last century is that he was a homosexual. The reasoning goes like this. Paul was aware that according to strict Jewish law, homosexuals were to be stoned to death. This supposedly is the "thorn in the flesh" that he spoke about. With the atoning death of

Jesus, the law no longer had to be followed to the letter, and as a result of this relief from Jewish law, Paul was extremely grateful and felt obligated to preach this new message of salvation by *faith*, and establish Christian churches in the Diaspora. This contention is supported by none other than well-known Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. In his book *Rescuing the Bible From the Fundamentalists*, Spong devotes five pages to the possibility Paul was a homosexual. He states, “although it is strictly speculation, of all the possible reasons for Paul’s avid promotion of Christianity, the homosexual explanation is the most plausible.” There is no shame in being gay, and if it were ever widely accepted that Paul was homosexual, gays and lesbians might be more readily integrated into western society.

One final question: Both Reimarus and Meslier considered the Christian religion to be a fraud. Is this accusation credible? I believe it is. In the introduction to this discourse, it was stated that both the supernatural Judeo-Christian God and the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ are fictional entities. Therefore, I submit, any religion based on characters that never have existed, has to be regarded as a hoax.

Admittedly, much of the foregoing is a stern condemnation of the Christian religion. But this is not to say that Christianity has not had positive contributions to make to western society. One attribute often cited is that Christian teachings have been a steady source of moral and ethical instructions for adherents of the Christian faith. Also, many people have received great comfort from their beliefs and from consoling passages in the Bible, often in times of grief and sadness. But there have also been well-known negative consequences due to Christian actions in the past, and today there are serious threats to the separation of church and state in several areas, suggesting that it is time to move away from out-dated religious practices and work toward a more secular society. This is one of the challenges facing all secularists.

It is realized that the foregoing brief account of Christianity history, and the conclusions proposed herein, may appear to be simplistic, but this distillation is the result of twenty years of reading and studying. Hopefully it bears some resemblance to reality. It is the only scenario that makes any sense to me.

Summary and Conclusions

From the foregoing, I believe we can assume the following with a high degree of conviction.

- Since there is not, nor ever has been, an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God, capable of answering prayer and controlling events on earth, Jesus of Nazareth cannot have been the son of a non-existent God. He was fully human.
- Since no fully human person could be born of a virgin, perform miracles, possess the power to forgive sins and rise from the grave, Jesus the supernatural Christ had to be an invention.
- But who was the inventor? It is postulated that the inventor was Jesus of Nazareth himself, who was able to convince a small number of Jews that he was indeed the promised Messiah. Then after his death, the small band successfully converted more Jews to the Christian faith.
- Although these Jewish Christians had to have believed in Jesus’ supernatural powers, the majority of Jews did not, lending credence to the conclusion he was in fact an imposter. Furthermore, to this day, Jews do not believe Jesus was the Messiah. The early Jewish Christians were a spectacular failure at converting fellow Jews to their brand of Christianity. They could not find naive converts in significant numbers.
- On the other hand, the apostle Paul and his associates were amazingly successful at converting significant numbers of naive Gentiles. These early leaders were also great salespersons and marketers, and in spite of hardships and persecutions, were able to establish and maintain a number of Christian churches.
- Then with Constantine’s edict, the Council of Nicaea, and the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, another formidable marketer, Christianity grew into the most populous religion on earth over a couple of millennia. Luther’s Protestantism also assisted in the proliferation.

- Conclusions: Jesus-the-Christ was a **delusion** concocted by Jesus of Nazareth, who was himself either deluded or a clever imposter.

If there were ever agreement amongst secularists that the representations of Christianity cited above are reasonable and credible, what should they do about it? Should secularists be trumpeting the news that Christianity is a hoax and that the fictitious invented Jesus-the-Christ never existed? I am not sure. While some liberal Christians might accept these postulations, the Religious Right will just dig in their heels and call secularists agents of the devil, so perhaps proselytizing these concepts could do more harm than good. On the other hand, Susan Jacoby in her book *Freethinkers* says, “secularists must stop pussyfooting around the issue of the harm religion is capable of doing, if they wish to mount an effective challenge against these harms.” Suggestions as to effective strategies are welcomed.

But one thing is certain. It is foolish to think that organized religion can be pulled up by the roots any time soon in America or other places, and be replaced with a rational secular passion for morality. In his book *Nonbeliever Nation*, David Niose notes it took the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender movement (LBGT) thirty years to come out of the closet and be more or less accepted into today’s societies. He says secularists need to come out of the closet in mass and get the ball rolling, because the fight will be lengthy. He also notes that secularity is most prominent in the prosperous social democracies of Europe, confirming that the fast track to a secular society is the creation of a prosperous economy. Under prosperous conditions, religiosity gradually fades away.

But outside of secular northern Europe, there are two formidable obstacles. One is the inflexible Roman Catholic Church that still opposes artificial birth control, abortion and gay marriage. Opposing artificial birth control is particularly damaging in countries where AIDS is prevalent. The other problem is the Religious Right that is detrimentally influencing politics, especially in the United States. These two predicaments pose major challenges for secularists of all stripes. How can secularists become better marketers of a secular philosophy and life stance? Again suggestions from readers are welcome.

Finally, in his recent book, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson states, “surely there exists ways to find spiritual fulfillment without surrender and enslavement to religions. With an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.” This is what we must aim for. (DAH).

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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