

This short paper invites those who profess to being Christians to a reality check

My own theological debates have generally involved discussions with those who share a similar religious heritage – even though our cultural backgrounds encompass China, the Mediterranean, the Teutonic lands, the UK and South America.

What we all shared in early life was teaching that we could rely on a book, a book that told of a Saviour who loved us and would always look out for us. The book told of his amazing life and his message. As young children we learned his birth was miraculous, fathered by God but born in poverty. That he matured for three decades and then preached for three years terminated by a cruel killing but miraculously rose again, revealing his divine power.

This, in essence, was the religious foundation of our beliefs absorbed when we were children. Our lives have been lived in communities and with friends who mostly shared this upbringing and accepted it as true – some more passionately than others but everyone knew the main stories, which are constantly featured in celebrations, entertainments and festivities.

Most who profess to being Christian know the main biblical details and participate to some extent in the rituals – however, many of us are CEO Christians (Christmas and Easter Only). People feel good when they attend church and uplifted when they hear a good sermon or are cheered by stunning architecture and soaring canticles. Few contemplate the core principles of faith and few dare to question or challenge them – such is the relentless repetition establishing conformity. It is also true that many nominal Christians have concluded it is all very well but the whole thing is old fashioned and no longer a relevant part of human existence – many say they are atheists.

Some, like those in my debating group, are interested in the ‘big’ questions – is there a God?, where did our universe come from?, how did humans originate?, what happens when we die? These are questions that the Christian handbook claims to answer. How simple life would be if one could rely on the bible – indeed, it seems many do and find it comforting. But if Christians base their faith solely on the bible, the bible is carrying a heavy responsibility – the assumption is that it is reliable.

Christians start by assuming their bible is an accurate record of what Jesus’ apostles and Paul wrote, and is well translated. They tend to ignore the little academic looking footnotes admitting certain passages are not in the earliest manuscripts.

The accuracy of canonical texts is obviously of paramount importance – but when examined the accuracy is far from reliable – the oldest complete texts date only from the 4th century (Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus c 325 and c350) and these stunning artifacts prove key sections of texts (which support dogma developed later) were added to biblical canon at a later date. Texts included in NT canon were almost exclusively authored originally in Greek. We hold over 5,800 ancient Greek manuscripts and nearly 20,000 early translations into Latin, Syriac, Slavic, Gothic, Ethiopic, Coptic and Armenian. However, no two manuscripts are identical, over 700,000 textual variations have been identified in the Greek manuscripts alone. To put this in perspective the entire NT contains only 138,162 Greek words (this is the average of the 5800+ which are all now digitised). Of course, many variations are obvious copying errors such as repetition or omission of a line when being copied, spelling mistakes, etc. But many are much more fundamental and show clearly the various ways texts were edited to follow or establish new doctrinal rules. For example, we have over 70 different versions of the Lord’s Prayer in Greek – none of the oldest include the doxology or the pagan ending; we know the current version of Matthew 28:19 was created in the late 4th or 5th century – the best and oldest manuscripts all have this page torn out!! The Johannine Comma was a very late edit – it does not appear in any documents at all until 1215. Matthew 28:19 and the Johannine Comma are the key verses advanced to support the Roman idea of a trinity.

We know the oldest texts all refer to Jesus “adoption to sonship” being written as an event at his baptism and see it was changed to support the assertion of divine involvement in his conception. Human knowledge now shows conception dogma to be unsustainable – Jesus is supposed to be wholly man (i.e. with DNA from a human male and human female) to support the argument that he fully understands us whilst his divinity is based on the idea he was fathered by God (masquerading as *Espirito Santos*). In retrospect we can now see the original story of God adopting Jesus to ‘sonship’ at his baptism is far more credible – maybe a future pope will correct this obvious distortion of the truth.

The key issue for most Christian churches is the resurrection – if Jesus did not rise again after death, then they claim there is nothing to ‘hope’ for. Actually, the early manuscripts do not support this at all. We know the earliest and best manuscripts do not include either John chapters 20 and 21 nor Mark 16:9-20 – by far the more detailed explanations of the claimed resurrection. Again, this points to authorship in the late 4th or 5th centuries – i.e. under the auspices of Roman political oversight. This is even delicately acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI, who in a publication when pope, i.e. writing *ex cathedra*, referred to John 20 & 21 as the “*appendix to the Gospel of John*” – what are the faithful to make of that? The accounts in Luke and Matthew are meagre and contradictory, date from at least 4 decades after the event, written by persons who never met Jesus. On the other hand, when we look at the texts condemned as heretical, of the 117 that I have identified (see Part Four), only two even mention the resurrection – one adds a bit to the conventional story but the other warns the faithful not to fall for the fake story of a resurrection!

So, based on the hard facts outlined in the above paragraph, is there much of a foundation upon which to base the entire belief of conventional Christianity? At least ponder why only two out of 117 heretical books even mentions it? One must conclude that in the early centuries, Jesus resurrection, *even if it happened*, was not something anyone thought important. Anyone may easily check what I have written in this and the previous paragraph – so nobody who wants to know God can justify to themselves just dismissing these facts or glossing over them. Once these facts are known to you - you will never forget them. So, if resurrection was not central to Christian belief for maybe 500 years after Jesus was teaching – what was?

The answer to this lies in the message Jesus gave to humanity. We now have evidence that a significant part of his message was suppressed by the Roman church. You may ponder why any part of Jesus message would have been suppressed by “his own church”? The answer lies in the power that did the suppression and in the utter ruthlessness with which the suppression was carried out. For the critical three centuries after its adoption, the Roman church was firmly under the political control of the Roman emperor. Christian beliefs were defined as a set of dogma set down in state law and enforced by military power, church officials were empowered by law to torture and kill whomever they judged had broken the law. Priscillian, a Spanish bishop, is recorded as the first executed on the orders of the church, in 385, soon after the church itself was granted authority to carry out capital punishment. Many millions were to follow his fate.

Generally the evil perpetrated by the church is waived aside or relegated as ancient history – but in truth the behavior is not that dissimilar to Putin. The church sought to kill anyone who held views differing from its own ‘laws’. Such people were sought out using military forces. Indiscriminate slaughter was justified – e.g. the regular practice of herding the entire populations of Cathar villages into their church and burning the lot to death, the justification being that if any were innocent ‘God would know his own’!! Just as Putin acts to seize lands belonging to others, anyone declared heretical also suffered seizure of all their assets by the church. For most of their existence, from 756 to 1870, law in the Papal States (a large part of central Italy and enclaves in France, e.g. Avignon) required individuals to bequeath a major portion of their estate to the church. If it was judged insufficient or negligible, Church authorities would rule that the will was invalid and take whatever they wanted.

Therefore, one should seek to understand what Jesus may have originally taught and what has been adopted, mainly during the 3rd to 6th centuries, for political purposes to reinforce control over the population. I like to think that we would all want to know what Jesus actually taught as distinct from what was thought up by Roman politicians.

The first step on this journey is to discover the truth of the formation of conventional Christian dogma and then you may hunger for Jesus original teaching. I have two master works to help with the search of how dogma was developed – one document was produced recently by a Catholic university; the other document is my own work tracing Catholic records indicating when elements of dogma were devised, justified and reinforced. For the elements of Jesus teaching suppressed by the church for the past 1700 years it is not easy – but the best place to start is with the Gospel of Thomas.

As you will see, the Gospel of Thomas (“GoT”) is far from a complete answer – if Jesus ever set out a clear manifesto it was lost long ago. But, with the GoT, we have a document that seems devoid of any obvious editing, a manuscript hidden immediately after Nicaea in 325, as early as our oldest extant NT. References to the GoT in other surviving manuscripts date back further any references to any text included in the NT. Although some do not agree, I think there is a strong indication of Paul quoting from the GoT in an epistle generally dated to 49 – i.e. very early indeed, certainly prior to any gospels being written. Thus we may consider that we hold an authentic early record of Jesus teaching unsullied by later editing – this makes it very exciting!!

A serious seeker of truth will also want to read the following texts:

The Epistle of Barnabas

The Didache (*aka* Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)

The Epistle of Ptolemaeus to Flora

The Shepherd of Hermas

The Apocalypse of Paul

And the surviving fragments, some only 2nd hand quotations of these:

The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles

The Gospel of the Ebionites

The Gospel According to the Egyptians

The Gospel according to the Hebrews

The Gospel of Judas Iscariot

The Gospel of Mary

The Gospel of the Nazareans

The Gospel of the Saviour

Glyn – 22.03.04