

Reviews of Books on the Historical Jesus, by author's last name.

(Originally posted on Amazon.com Note: some of the best are at the end, like N. T. Wright and John Stott – but so are Pagels, Spong, and Wilson.)

Karen Armstrong, *The History of God* *The Autobiography is Better* **

A century ago, a man named Grant Allen wrote a book called "The evolution of the idea of God." G.K. Chesterton reviewed it by noting, "It would have been more interesting if God had written about the evolution of the idea of Grant Allen."

Armstrong's book is fascinating at times, but she was hindered in her story by three encumbrances: first, she did not appear to be looking for God, but running from Him. Second, what she wrote was a history of purely human ideas and ideologies, from a Christian perspective, a history of idolatry. Her book is like looking at the moon under the assumption that its light is native. Third and most damningly, Armstrong has ignored all the actual evidence that God is not merely an idea, but a Person who acts in history. (Such as the universe itself, the prophets, and miracles.)

One aspect of that evidence which most people are unaware of, and that relates to the theme of this book, is the fact that monotheism is not solely a "western" concept. One finds an awareness of the Creator even in countries where all the institutional and pedagogical institutions have been hostile to Him for hundreds of years, and the native religions appear to have no use for him, such as here in Japan. This is just as the Bible predicts: as Paul said, in our hearts, we know God is and that we are not Him, though we suppress that knowledge. The history of organized religion, east and west, is largely a history of men and women running from God. Armstrong's book is in a sense a kind of well-written and gossipy history of that flight, which is why it earned an extra star from me.

I would like to suggest four books which give an aspect of the "history of God" Armstrong and her fellows routinely ignore: how the God of the Bible reveals Himself to non-Christian cultures. The first is Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*. The second is *Eternity in Their Hearts*, by Don Richardson, which in my opinion may be the most eye-opening book on religion published this century. The third is a book I wrote after reading Richardson's theories, and finding out that, in China at least, they rang true: *True Son of Heaven: How Jesus Fulfills the Chinese Culture*. I also recommend the book God wrote on the evolution of the idea of Karen Armstrong, especially the first half of *Romans*.

Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Concise History* Quakers in a Hurry **

The core of this book is a competent, moderately well-written (but never eloquent) account of the central events, figures and movements of Islamic history. Take the word "short" in the subtitle seriously, rather than by analogy to H. G. Wells' infamously long "Outline of History." The book is 180 scrawny pages. Despite the length, or lack thereof, and the vast history it presumes to abbreviate, Armstrong does seem to manage to cover the most critical happenings in a concise manner.

The main stylistic problem I found was that the book tends to become top-heavy with names and Arabic words. Armstrong introduces terms, then uses them on another page, maybe three in a sentence. In the early going you begin to wonder if, by the end, the whole book won't be in Arabic.

Several readers have commented on Armstrong's agenda. She wants to prove that Islam is not inherently uncivilized or dangerous. Every religion allows for a variety of interpretations, and the best way to read Islam is in terms of the brotherly, open lifestyles that she proves Mohammed and his early followers followed.

Actually, she doesn't prove this, or anything else, not having room for serious argument in this "short history." She claims it. We're apparently supposed to deduce that she knows what she's talking about from the fact that she's famous, and that there are a lot of references in the back of the book. (We're left to find out for ourselves that not all of them agree with her thesis.) If one could parody the message of the book as, "Islam is Quakerism in a hurry," then one can summarize her style by saying Armstrong is a "historian in a hurry."

(...) Armstrong argues that the pernicious idea that Islam is a religion of war, is based on a "stereotypical and distorted image of Islam" that is actually a reflection of Western vice. "It was when Christians instigated a series of brutal holy wars against the Muslim world that Islam was described as an inherently violent and intolerant faith." Oddly, however, it was also described that way before the Crusades -- which is why the Crusades were launched in the first place, in frank imitation of Muslim Jihad. (See Pope Urban's speech in *The First Crusade*, edited by Edward Peters.) Is Armstrong suggesting, as some mystical fans of quantum physics have, that sometimes result precedes cause?

At times Armstrong's selection of facts and interpretation of them borders on overt

dishonesty. Many of the evils she puts down to later imperialists -- such as making it a capital offense to criticize Mohammed -- were in fact initiated by the prophet himself. Armstrong should have known that if she read the books she recommends in her bibliography. (See, in particular, Rodinson's Mohammed.)

While Armstrong's post-hoc, self-indulgent arguments verge on the inane at times, fortunately most of the book is straight history. (Though sometimes even there Armstrong oversimplifies terribly.) You might find it useful, as an outline, if you supplement it with a books that cover specific aspects of Islamic history in more depth and honesty. A few I'd recommend are Jihad, by Paul Fregosi, (really amazing), the Crusades Through Arab Eyes, (for the Muslim side), and God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam. There's a interesting chapter in the Oxford History of Islam on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, though even more than Armstrong, the authors of that book tend to look the other way when Muslims are doing things that would reinforce the alleged "stereotypes." I'd also like to find a good history of Islam in India, if anyone has any recommendations.

Dan Barker, Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist

★★★★☆ **Preacher to atheist . . . and back again.**

The best and most persuasive parts of this book are (in good evangelical tradition) the "personal testimony" portions. Barker's own story of how he spent nineteen years in various Christian denominations, as singer, preacher, and itinerate evangelist, certainly turns the tables on the typical Christian testimony. He talked about how for five years, he tried to retain his faith in Christianity, but God didn't seem to hear or answer. That touched me, and seemed real. At times, he did manage to effectively challenge my faith, on an emotional level.

Another part of Losing Faith that flowed well was his "low-down" on pastors he knew. As he says, "They are not all Elmer Gantry;" most were, like himself, sincerely mistaken, in his view. Still, he begins to show a pretty heavy hand at this point: a few pastors are con men, and the rest, it seems, are all clowns. Those of us who know intelligent, compassionate and humble ministers -- and I know many, and missionaries who are simply heroic -- may begin at this point to wonder either how broad Barker's experience was (and he says it was very broad), or how honest he is in reporting it.

When Barker verges onto verifiable issues, a knowledgeable believer may conclude, "We need to improve Christian education, if only to improve the intellectual reach of our infidels." I wouldn't call Barker's arguments "straw men," only because people who hold to the views he attacks really can be found. But he is often attacking a kind of American folk religion, rather than Christianity as it is held by knowledgeable adults.

Barker's letter from "God" to a "theologian" is a clever idea, and he pulls it off well rhetorically. But I couldn't help remember (as I read it) the replies real Christian theologians, and philosophers, have given to these very same questions. (Including some by C. S. Lewis, whom Barker weakly attempts to refute in this book, but obviously does not know or understand well.) Barker's complaints are often not just wrong, but show a fundamental misunderstanding of Christian views on things -- he should read Lewis' explanation of worship in *Reflections the Psalms and Weight of Glory*, and begin his argument against it from square one. (If possible.)

Another major problem with this book is Barker's misunderstanding of "faith." Christian faith, in the orthodox (as opposed to folk) understanding, has nothing to do with believing what you know isn't true, or forcing yourself to believe ten impossible things before breakfast. I think Lewis actually corrects this error in *Mere Christianity*, as have numerous other Christian thinkers. Barker ought to read more attentively.

This error gets him into trouble in his reply to "Pascal's Wager." I think his reply to Pascal's argument (which I never much cared for) is actually pretty interesting, otherwise. (Though see Peter Kreeft's expanded version of that argument.) But Barker betrays the fact that he probably has not actually read Pascal for himself, when he assumes that the Wager was his only or primary argument for Christianity.

Most of the rest of Barker's arguments will be familiar to most educated Christians, and replies will likely spring to mind. Barker tries to automatically rule miracles out with his definition of history. ("A criterion of critical history is the assumption of natural regularity over time. This precludes miracles.") This is, of course, simple dogmatism.

"Christianity is harmful. More people have been killed in the name of a god than for any other reason. The Church has a shameful, bloody history . . ." Barker's understanding of history is highly questionable, but an even greater problem is that he seems as credulous in accepting the "authorized" skeptical version of history

(ignorant, it seems, of the enormous positive accomplishments of Christian faith) as he once credulously his parents' Christianity.

His arguments against the historical Jesus, the resurrection, and so on, are simply lame.

All in all, despite its weaknesses, I found this book interesting, readable, and sobering. While a bit egotistical (Barker loves to highlight his own witty replies to Christian challenges), on a personal level I found him often likeable. He has trod a well-beaten path, from what M Scott Peck describes as the first three stages of spirituality. I hope he is as honest and open-minded as he claims. While he rejects a childish and unexamined form of Christianity, it seems clear to me that he has yet to honestly perceive, let alone consider, the Christian faith as it is understood by mature and knowledgeable adults. Perhaps he will move beyond the adolescent reaction represented in this book, and learn to be skeptical about skepticism, as well. It'd be something to have a heart-to-heart talk when that happens.

Per Beskow, *Strange Tales about Jesus* ****

In this little book, Swedish scholar Per Beskow takes on some of the most influential stories about Jesus of our time: the Book of Mormon, Life of Saint Issa, Aquarian Gospel, Gospel of Barnabas, Gospel of the Holy Twelve, and others. He describes how each was produced, and shows why each is clearly a fraud. He knows more about European tales than American, and skips over stories that fall outside the boundaries of his chosen subject matter. (His approach is mostly historical, so in general he does not deal with channeled revelations.) Also, the book was written about 20 years ago, so of course he gives no mention of more recent strange story-tellers like Elizabeth Claire Prophet, Richard Paton, or Neale Walsch. (Though he hardly needs to.) But within those parameters, his analysis is effective and persuasive. Beskow is fair-minded and dispassionate, and tends to give his subjects the benefit of the doubt when he can. At the same time, he cuts through smoke screens and malarkey with precision and efficiency.

While his approach is mostly historical, at the end of the book Beskow also remarks on the astonishing "freshness, power, and ability to move" of the N.T. Gospels, in comparison to these works. For interesting arguments related to that point, I recommend the second half of Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*, and essays by Machen (*History and Faith*) and C. S. Lewis (*Fernseed and Elephants*).

Also my own new book, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*. In it, I add the scholarly "historical Jesus" and a few other Hindu and Buddhist figures, to Beskow's list of strange tales. Just as Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, and New Agers recreate Jesus in their images to protect their view of life, so Humanists like Funk and Crossan betray scholarly principles by "projecting" their ideals onto First Century history. I argue that this inability of people of various ideologies to write Gospels that match the original, suggests that the disciples not only would not but could not have made up "their" Jesus.

I bought several copies of *Strange Tales* from the publisher several years ago, so even though the book is out of print, it may still be available.

Marcus Borg, *Meet Jesus Again for the First Time* ***

Marcus Borg is the most sensible and sympathetic of the Jesus Seminar scholars I have read. I found many worthwhile insights in this book: the way he links the Gospels and Paul's teaching on grace (though Jesus and Paul also call us to radical moral purity, and Borg sometimes makes meaning slave to etymology), his discussion of meta-narratives, parables, and aphorisms, and the contrast between "conventional wisdom" and "unconventional" wisdom, for example.

But the criteria by which Borg judges whether or not a given teaching really is from Jesus are shaky. Does the "Gospel" of Thomas have anything of value to say about the life of Jesus? I doubt it. Why does Borg assume that only material from the Christian "tradition" before 60 A.D. can be trusted? If I were to write about the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, at a chronological distance equivalent to 93 AD, I could easily find eyewitnesses. Why should it have been so much harder for the Gospel writers in 70 AD?

Borg's chief weakness may be his habit of working alternatives into what look like false dichotomies, or trichotomies: holiness versus compassion, individual versus political virtue, "belief" versus "action" versus "becoming." (Why not all three? "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength!") Borg's method of exegesis is often to exaggerate one element in Jesus' teaching, then make that a principle by which to exclude other elements.

Borg identifies JS pronouncements with the "scholarly consensus." But many first rank scholars (Wright, Hays, Johnson, Meier, Jenkins, and others) find the JS way of working quite flawed.

Borg writes of "pre-critical" and "post-critical" naiveté; but he shows a great deal of what might be called "unidirectional" naiveté. He explains how, as a young man, he discovered Biblical criticism and lost his faith. He later recovered a faith, which, like John Blofeld's faith in the bodhisattva Guan Yin, seemed to have "nothing to do with belief." The problem is, while he learned to treat the Gospels critically, his seminary professors did not seem to teach him to treat their own ideas the same way. Thus, he makes little mention of another kind of Christian that might be called the "post-critical believer" -- the Christian who has read Borg, Crossan, Pagels, Mack, and more radical critics, and come to the conclusion that their methods and conclusions are badly mistaken -- not on theological, but on historical grounds.

We post-critical believers can only feel marginalized and a bit ghostly, not finding ourselves among Borg's typology of believers.

Borg also attempts to tie the radical compassion of Jesus to his alleged identity as a "spirit person" who experienced mystical unity with God: "There is an intrinsic connection between the boundary-shattering experience of Spirit and the boundary-shattering ethics of compassion."

As a student of world religions, I think not. "All we shamans know that the spirits are happiest when we kill people," one Yamonamo Indian is quoted as saying; and certainly the most active spiritism can coexist with the most brutal denigration of women. East Indian vedic gurus and tantric Buddhists often rigidly oppress their followers, and a rich heritage of mystical science did not prevent India from sinking into a sinkhole of caste and gender oppression. In fact, the true source of reform and breaking down of social boundaries has far more often come from a strict monotheism -- among the Jewish prophets, Chinese sages like Confucius, the anti-slave movements in the Middle Ages and the Modern West, and even in India and Japan.

In the end, as Dr. Borg shares his own story, he seems rather lost to me, following a "Jesus" who is a worthy enough sage, but incapable of inspiring the joyous songs he recalls with tears from his childhood. I feel for him. I think he is quite mistaken about the Gospels. The more I study world religions, the more I am persuaded that Jesus is

the Lord of life, who died for the sins of the world, and rose from the dead. I think an honest assessment of the evidence leaves that as the most realistic assessment. I am tempted to echo Dr. Borg's own words, and say, "Dr. Borg, come home, and meet Jesus again, for the first time."

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* "Popcorn Poppycock" **

The premise of *Da Vinci Code* shows promise: grisly murders, a secret set to shake the foundations of Christendom, and a series of (sometimes too easy) puzzles -- a "Whereisit" grafted onto a "Whodunit" connected to a "Whatreallyhappened." While Brown has no stylistic or descriptive talent whatsoever (you'd never want to read this book twice, that's the test), he did keep the juices flowing for me one time through. (So long as I pushed the "suspension of disbelief" meter up to its highest setting.)

The book's many inanities and historical blunders are hard to overlook, however. Brown doesn't know (what one embarrassed pagan historian pointed out) that fear of witches was a traditional part of European paganism, that this fear was squelched by the Church during the "Dark Ages" and then revived during the Renaissance; that tens of thousands, not "five million" witches were killed; or that these crimes occurred mostly in small towns on the margins of State and Church power, not in the shadow of the Vatican. Ironically, Brown himself exploits the psychological mechanism that launches witch hunts in his choice of villains. I myself am neither Catholic, albino, nor physically handicapped; but I find Brown's inability to rise above such pernicious type-casting unfortunate. And his attempt to get inside the minds of his characters is marvelously shallow. One half expects them to jump out of the book and cry, "Hang on! If I were this stupid, how did I get to be a Harvard professor / Catholic bishop / successful criminal?"

As for Brown's chatter about early Christian history, lost Gospels, Church conspiracies, and the cover-up of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene, which he and some rather breathless reviewers manage to take seriously, I admit I found his historical blundering mildly entertaining. For the record, though, the Dead Sea scrolls do NOT contain any Gospels (one scholar claims to have found a few words from the Gospel of Mark in one cave, but that is disputed). As for the so-called "Gnostic Gospels," Philip Jenkin's *Hidden Gospels* is a good place to start. Discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents rather proves the wisdom of the early Christians in dumping these bogus 2nd and 3rd Century writings: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John show every sign of

historicity (as well as socially constructive thinking), and these rather spacey New Age works show no more of either than the Da Vinci Code itself.

Still, in a mindless mood, it is possible to enjoy this book.

Richard A. Burridge ***What Are the Gospels? : A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series), Careful and persuasive.***

What are the Gospels? Biography? Myth? A unique genre of literature, otherwise unknown to the ancient world?

Richard Burridge begins by discusses genre, how it develops and evolves. He offers a dozen or so characteristics by which we can judge the genre of a book. No one item by itself proves that a given book belongs to a certain genre, he argues.

Following a few longish sections that establish his methods of analysis, Burridge introduces ten works that belong to the category of Greco-Roman *bioi*, five from before the time of Christ, five from shortly after. Applying the criteria he mentions earlier to these works, he establishes what an ancient biography was really like. Then he considers the Synoptic Gospels, concluding that they clearly fit into this category. Next he performs the same operation with the Gospel of John, and concludes that it is also an example of ancient biography.

I think Burridge proves his case, that the canonical Gospels do belong to the category of ancient *bioi*, or biography. (Be prepared for a few words of Greek in the text.) But what does that mean to call the Gospels "biography?" Among the examples of *Bioi* he considers are Tacitus' *Agricola*, a sober account of a Roman general written by his son in law a few years after his death, and Apollonius of Tyana, a tall tale loosely based on a New Age guru that talks about various breeds of dragon in India, and was written more than a hundred years after the alleged life it portrays. So the simple fact that a work belongs to the category of *bioi*, does not prove that it is true.

Burridge notes however that Apollonius is rather on the fringe of the genre. In some ways, the Gospels are closer to *Agricola*. Having closely compared these two texts with the Gospels on my own, I came to the conclusion that in terms of historical

reliability, the Gospels are closer to Agricola, and hardly resemble Apollonius of Tyana at all. In fact, in some ways the Gospels seem more historical than Agricola.

But Burrige does not discuss the historicity of the books he reviews directly. Instead, he conducts a somewhat plodding, but careful, convincing, and I think useful argument that helps one better understand literary genre, ancient literature, the Gospels, and how they all fit together.

Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*: **Frank, gabby, open-eyed, and insightful *******

Thomas Cahill is attempting something very difficult here. He is trying to tell the story of the person about whom everyone else has already told the story. He is trying to stand in the cataract of Jesus scholarship and grab out a few choice coins (not rocks), without getting drenched by a spray of technical verbiage. He is trying to write a biography that is chatty and colloquial, but also based on clear reasoning and sound scholarship. He is trying to write in a fair-minded manner about someone everyone either loves or claims to like in a deconstructionist manner that, finally, amounts to something resembling fear.

I have read quite a few similar attempts by non-scholars, or by scholars on Sunday afternoons, to do something like this, and I feel this one comes off pretty well. Probably the closest comparisons might be A. N. Wilson's skeptical *Jesus, A Life* (inferior), or Philip Yancey's mushy-evangelical *The Jesus I Never Knew* (not bad).

As you can see from reviews below, Cahill manages to offend a lot of Christians and secularists. Considering all the chances he is taking, both with style and substance, one might call that an accomplishment.

My advice would be to read a chapter before deciding if this is your style, if possible. I almost always found his arguments reasonable and informed, and I have read a lot of these books, on all sides. For me, the fact that he has literary pizzazz, and is not afraid to make a joke, maybe even a pun, does not hurt. This is not a book written by a robot. Cahill treats the text with the respect of relating it to the world of our experience, even if he is sometimes a tad groan-ish in doing so. Furthermore, while not a scholar, Cahill relies on a few fairly reasonable ones -- no, that does not include anyone in the Jesus Seminar, but unfortunately, neither does it include N. T. Wright, in my view the best -- and he brings a fair amount of eclectic background knowledge

to the texts. (I was shocked to find him referring to the Chinese philosopher Yuan Zhiming, for example, who I thought was my secret.)

If some disrespectful comment here on John or another Gospel bothers you, try Craig Blomberg's *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. If you are attracted to the subtitle, "The World Before and After Jesus," but find too little about Jesus' impact on history, I might recommend *Christianity on Trial*, the fascinating works of Vishal Mangalwadi, or the relevant chapter of my own *Jesus and the Religions of Man*. If you're offended by Cahill because he makes bad jokes, I can't help you there. But I think he is ultimately serious about Jesus, and on that we agree.

John Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* A Useful Myth, With Footnotes ***

This book comes in an unusual long, narrow shape, as if to emphasize the unorthodox character of Crossan's approach. His argument is well-written and adorned with interesting background details, and even some good insights. But as a whole, I found that argument far more of a stretch than the book itself.

Crossan begins by begging the question. Suppose, he asks, you wanted to go behind the "screen" of "credal interpretation" that are the Gospels for an impartial account of the historical Jesus "as distinct from the confessional Christ?" (Yes. But what if we first ask if the two are distinct, before we ask how they are distinct?) Crossan dismisses academics who come to orthodox conclusions as phony scholars. But if, on that account, you expect a dispassionate and scholarly approach from Crossan, don't hold your breath.

Crossan makes two assumptions in regard to Biblical material. 1) Don't trust materials from after 60 A.D. 2) No argument should stand on the strength of only one independent attestation. With that, unfortunately, a vast amount of non-Jesus seminar history slides into the abyss. The life of Confucius, for example, has only one near source, the Analects. Yet the vast majority of scholars believe, on the grounds of internal evidence of that source, that we have a basically reliable record of Confucius' life and teachings. (For reasons that apply even more strongly in the case of the Gospels.) Furthermore, the Mencius, written more than a hundred years later, is thought to contain accurate information about his life.

Unlike Confucius, Jesus died young, and his followers were no doubt younger, and could easily have lived well past Crossan's arbitrary date. If my grandmother, who wrote poetry to the age of 95, had been the little girl Jesus raised from the dead, she could have written a first-hand account of the incident in 105 A.D. Living here in Nagasaki, Japan, were I to write an account of the nuclear holocaust 55 years later (=80 A.D.), I wouldn't even have to look for eyewitnesses, still in perfect health and with perhaps decades left to live. So it seems to me these two assumptions are fine pieces of nonsense.

Crossan also commits gross fallacies of classification. For example, he says most Galilean peasants were illiterate. Jesus was a peasant; therefore he believes (despite Gospel accounts to the contrary) Jesus was illiterate. Consider what we can do with this method. Mohatma Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln were lawyers. Most lawyers are dishonest. Therefore Lincoln and Gandhi were untruthful. It staggers me to think a respected professor could call such an absurd piece of reasoning "scholarship."

Crossan also liberally employs the age-old method of "reading between the lines" that C.S.Lewis so crushingly rebuked in his classic (and still devastating) essay, *Fernseed and Elephants*. Josephus and the Apostle John both wrote about John the Baptist. Crossans adds the two accounts, psychoanalyzes the principles, assumes they were lying about whatever facts they relate that fit their theologies, then fills the resulting holes with what he thinks they must have been covering up. Based on no real evidence, and denying what evidence we have, he concludes that John the Baptist was "not talking about Jesus at all" but was an "apocalyptic preacher" announcing the arrival of an "imperial conqueror." "We can almost guess what John must have been doing by reading between the lines." Of course we can, if we are endowed with such powers as John Crossan. We can even deduce "a huge web of apocalyptic expectations, a network of ticking time bombs all over the Jewish homeland" that was the following of the Baptist, whether they leave trace in the historical record or not. Come on, John. At least Joseph Smith had peep stones to work with.

Such are Crossan's usual methods of reasoning. Were I to give all such examples, to paraphrase the apostle John, the World Wide Web itself might not contain all the evidences of Crossan's preternatural powers. I cringe to think what my professors in grad school would have said if I had turned in arguments of the sort Crossan habitually employs.

But in one sense, Crossan deserves his audience. He has created a useful myth with footnotes, a well-written and resourceful Humanist apocrypha that can be hugely useful to those who share his creed.

Revolutionary Biography fits into a long tradition of religious spin doctors who sanitize Jesus for their various constituencies. For those who are interested in that tradition (and it is a very interesting story) my new book *Jesus and the Religions of Man* discusses the Humanist "historical Jesus" in the larger context of Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Marxist, and Mormon tall tales about Jesus.

A few reviewers below argue that "No one can know what Jesus really said or did." I think, on the contrary, everyone can know. I do not think anyone would have made up the Gospel accounts as we have them. I don't think anyone could have made them up. Not everyone likes the Jesus who appears in them, but then, not everyone liked Jesus in person, either. Everyone had reason to disbelieve. Books like Crossan's are evidence that the world has come a long way since then in dealing with the problem of Jesus, in terms of scholarly refinement.

John Crossan, William Lane Craig, Will the Real Jesus Stand Up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominican Crossan Pretty Good, Soar Grapes Aside ****

It is true that Crossan did not substantially engage many of Craig's arguments for the resurrection. Instead, he offered orthodox Christians (who presumably have been sheltered from such ideas) a paradigm shift: "It's metaphorical, the Gospel writers didn't really mean it that way." True, the debate and essays following do create more of an all-star, rather than world series, atmosphere. Yet the book does bring together some real stars, and they do put on a good display, in my opinion, baring on the most important spiritual questions we can ask.

Not all of the complaints below need to be taken seriously. "Buckley was biased. He called Crossan a puff of smoke." Who were you expecting, Barbara Walters? The man calls his show *Firing Line*: where there's fire, there's bound to be smoke. Crossan is a big scholar; he can take care of himself. "Craig got to go first, and last, too." Life is indeed unfair. Still, what you get here is three top scholars on both sides, each given time to develop their ideas. Not exactly a kangaroo court. "They spoke past each other. Crossan said the Gospels are metaphor, and Craig failed to reply." Not so. Crossan advanced his argument explicitly, and Craig even more explicitly refuted it. Not that it

took much refuting. With the Gospels, it is obvious we're not dealing with Homer or Bunyan: precisely why they continue to cause such a fuss.

Miller wrote an interesting essay on how different an apologetic appears to those "inside" a group as opposed to those "outside." I did not find the particular example he gave, of Islamic apologetics, that strong, for the simple reason that from earliest times Islam has held that conversion "out" was deserving of death. (The day before I first wrote this, I got an e-mail from a friend in Nigeria about a student of his whose uncle tried to knife him for converting to Christianity.) In a closed society, your apologetic doesn't have to carry all the weight of persuasion. (Can you imagine publicly debating the credibility of Muhammed in a Muslim country?) But even in the case of Humanism, it is striking to me that this debate, in which top scholars attacked a core belief of Christianity, was held in a church, and published by a Christian publisher. It is also striking that, as Blomberg points out, Crossan shows little or not familiarity with "evangelical" scholarship. (Unlike, to his credit, Lowder and his Internet Infidel friends.) Yet the secular media and academic worlds go to the likes of Crossan for expertise, or reassurance, as the case may be. In which direction, then, should the force of Miller's argument about tunnel vision and self-referential apologetics be turned?

In these discussions, comparative religion is usually brought in as an ally by the skeptical side, as here by Borg and Miller. But I think it actually offers powerful arguments for the truth of the Gospel. Those interested in the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and its implications for this discussion, might take a look at my recent book, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*.

Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ? Challenging the Evidence of a Historical Jesus, Twelve Infallible Proofs that the Moon is Square* *

Doherty wants us to believe that Jesus never lived. He offers twelve pieces of the puzzle to establish this fact, none of which, however, are both true and relevant, still less fit together to establish his claim. What the whole argument really establishes is how desperate and hopeless skeptical criticism is in dealing with the Gospels.

Doherty's main argument is that the epistles hardly ever speak of Jesus in historical terms. Why not? Because he hadn't been invented yet. Doherty spends chapter after chapter asking why Paul or James didn't mention this or that useful detail from the life

of Christ, calling up rank after rank of melodramatic rhetorical questions like armies to disconcert the ranks of believers.

I find myself singularly un-disconcerted. First of all, Doherty explains away, or ignores, passages that do speak of the historical Jesus. Secondly, even if the epistles never mentioned details from the life of Jesus, so what? There are few details about Jesus' life in Acts, either, even though it is written as a sequel to Luke. This fact alone shows the absurdity of the whole book.

As a student of world religions, the fact that the epistles seldom mention Jesus does not surprise me. I don't expect that from practical polemicists. I don't expect Xun Zi to quote Confucius when he wants to make a point, or Lenin to show the workers baby pictures of Marx. Doherty does expect such things. He tells us, "If a Christian writer is urging a certain course of action . . . and the founder was known to have taught that very thing, this would almost guarantee" that the writer would mention that. Yet Doherty himself fails to quote or mention any of the positivists and Humanists who taught him this historical "law" -- raising the question of whether he believes it himself.

When Doherty writes of "critical modern scholarship," he is generally referring to the Jesus Seminar. (Like the thief asking the robber for a character reference!) He builds his house of cards on their houses of cards. The result is, not surprisingly, wobbly. For example, following the Jesus Seminar, he writes in emphatic detail of what the Gospel of "Q" does not contain. "It is a cold, hard fact that none of the elements of the Jerusalem phase of the Gospels appear in Q." But it is an even colder and harder fact that he hasn't got Q, and neither has anyone else. We don't know what was in it, or even if it ever existed. The Jesus Seminar reconstruction he so confidently bases his arguments on, gives one very wild reconstruction, popular in some circles in the U.S., contradicted in Europe in favor of other wild reconstructions. On the subject of Q, and many other things, a few pages of a real scholar, like N. T. Wright, (*Jesus and the Victory of God*) scatters whole chapters of Doherty to the wind, to await the resurrection of broken toys and silly ideas in the last day.

As for Josephus, fellow skeptic Jeff Lowder is superior, and comes to more reasonable (if still slightly mistaken) conclusions.

The biggest problem with this book is not its many fallacies, however, but the positive and overwhelming evidence to the contrary it ignores.

Doherty claims, "Those who derive their view of Jesus from the Gospels might be startled to realize the highly elevated nature of the Jesus preached by the early Christians." On the contrary, I am always startled by the combination of utter realism and incredible authority of Jesus in the Gospels themselves. As one scholar put it, we could not have invented him if we wanted to. Many have tried, in vain. (See, for example, Per Beskow, *Strange Tales About Jesus*.) All the epistles do is translate the extraordinary picture the Gospels paint into the metaphysical images of which Doherty admits (when convenient) the people of the day were so fond.

The argument in this book is more hopeless than claiming the earth is flat: more like arguing the moon is square. You don't need a space ship to see the curvature of the moon; just open your window. In the same way, open the Gospels, and open your mind, and no amount of sophism (and there are tons of it here) will allow you to un-see the reality of whom you find there. Unless you try really hard.

Eighty years ago, J. Gresham Machen prophetically noted that materialist dogmas force skeptics into taking absurd positions. Similarly, the Jesus Seminar strains and struggles to find a merely human Jesus in the Gospels. But there isn't one. There is only a supernatural, miracle-working, sin-forgiving Jesus who rises from the dead. And so Crossan and Funk deny the undeniable, and reject accounts of an obviously historical kind that are accepted in all other contexts (for example, the life of Confucius.) Then even more radical skeptics like Doherty, with a weak understanding of how to reason historically, but a few specious arguments, launch out into the void and think they are standing on the moon, when really they are just standing on the flats of their own hard heads.

Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God?* Complete Nonsense *

To put it bluntly, this was one of the silliest books I have ever read. To disentangle the whole web of fallacy, error, and pure nonsense that is Freke and Gandy's argument, would be like putting a bowl of spaghetti back into the package, minus meatballs and sauce. Let me just straighten out a few of many messes:

1. First, the authors call the Nag Hammadi manuscripts a "whole library" of Gospels, and ask, "Why hasn't every Christian rushed out to read these newly discovered words of the Master?" The obvious answer is, those of us who have read some of them, find nothing like the Gospels, or words of Christ at all. Rather, we find weakly disguised didactic fiction. (Very much like the alleged sayings of Confucius in the Daoist anthology called the Zhuang Zi.) As for the Gospels themselves, it is obvious to any experienced and sensible reader that at their core, at least, they are quite unlike Gnostic or any other ancient fiction. In reference to ancient Near Eastern literature, skeptic A. N. Wilson calls them "a unique literary genre." In reference to ancient and medieval fiction, C. S. Lewis ("The best-read man of his generation") wrote of John, "I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths, all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this." In my reading of Eastern religious texts, I find the same. This book is based on the inability of Freke and Gandy to even notice the most obvious qualities of the books they attempt to refute -- the flare for reality in the Gospels.

2. To maintain their skepticism, the authors stack the deck relentlessly. They appear to have read no modern Christian writers at all. When the text reads, "scholars think," check end notes, and you find someone like Pagels or Wells. They've probably never heard of William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, or N. T. Wright. John Crossan is too reactionary to grace the pages of this masterpiece.

Jesus Mysteries is kind of a geological column of arguments against Christianity from bygone eras. No, the Dark Ages were not caused by the victory of Christianity, but by a centuries-long decline in population that early Christianity began to reverse before the barbarians invaded. (See Stark, the Rise of Christianity.) (The author's fantasize that, apart from Christianity, the Mysteries would have encompassed the Roman empire. More likely, I think, we might have wound up with something like the bhakti (devotional) cults of India, amidst a sea of Advetic (or neo-Platonic) philosophy -- and then invasion and lights out.)

The authors' treatment of Augustine is symptomatic. Augustine is universally acknowledged as one of the great thinkers in human history. The translators of the Upanishads quote his insights. Steven Hawking and Paul Davies describe him as the first person to realize that time was created with the universe. Many find in his writings "a depth of psychological insight unsurpassed in the Western world." But to Freke and Gandy, Augustine was just another of the bigots and simpletons of the 4th

Century Orthodox church. Freke and Gandy are like men who go into a mine of diamonds and rubies, and come out with lumps of coal. No, check the end notes, and I find out they never went into the mine at all. They've been panning other peoples' tailings, never read Augustine for themselves. Amazing.

3. Using the methods of Freke and Gandy, I could "prove" that Christianity arose from Vedic Hinduism, Chinese tradition, or Southeast Asian minority cultures like the Jiang, Wa, or Dai, or that Lincoln or Gandhi never lived. (See *Jesus and the Religions of Man*.)

4. Freke and Gandy sort early Christians into two simple groups, literalists (black hats) and Gnostics (white hats). Paul and Clement go in the Gnostic camp. People may have been reading them for centuries without realizing they rejected the historicity or physical resurrection of Jesus. But Freke and Gandy have a special flare for such breakthroughs, like a magic lantern that cuts through all the scholarship.

5. Finally, Freke and Gandy attack a Christianity they simply don't understand. They take Justin Martyr's argument that similarities between Christianity and paganism were invented by the devil as the definitive Christian solution. They never honestly deal with what I call the "fulfillment model," or the Catholic church calls "semina Verbi," (From Justin Martyr! The one thing of value that I gained from this book, was that it encouraged me to read him for myself. Don't accept anything in this book as true until you've checked original sources -- or at least real scholars!)

Jesus said, "I have come not to do away with the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill." John, Paul, Justin, Clement, Origin, Augustine, Dante, Michaelangelo, G. K. Chesterton, the present Pope, even the Brothers Grimm, all describe Christianity not as a repudiation of the best things in paganism, but as myth and dream become reality. In Lewis' words, "The question was no longer to find the one simply true religion among a thousand religions simply false. It was. . . 'Where have the hints of all Paganism been fulfilled?'" This is the orthodox Christian paradigm. The authors never substantially engage it, and seldom show they have so much as heard of it.

In relating Christianity to mystery religions, the authors have got hold a bit of the truth. But they are like the blind men who feel the trunk of the elephant and think they have a snake. Mohammed described Jesus as the greatest prophet. Buddhists see him as a Zen teacher or bodhisattva, Marxists as a revolutionary, Jews, a teacher of

wisdom, and Hindus, the Sanatan Sadguru or an avatar like Krishna or Ram. What do you get when you add all the pictures together? Let me recommend three books that consider this question from a broader perspective: *The Crown of Hinduism*, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, and my own book, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*.

The authors say of early Christianity, that it would accomplish things no one "could have imagined at the time." Yet the early Christians did imagine it. When it was still a minor Hebrew sect, they imagined it changing the world. Isn't it just possible they knew something Freke and Gandy don't?

Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennia*

Violins, Anyone? **

Robert Funk is a knowledgeable fellow, and some of his points about aphorisms, translation, early texts, and parables are pretty good. I wouldn't give Funk the lowest rating just because I disagree with him; I have reviewed Crossan and Borg more positively. But honestly, I couldn't appraise this book any higher.

For one thing, about half the book is an ill-tempered rant against Christians, Funk's students, and his colleagues. Some is positively maudlin. "I agonize over their slavery as opposed to my freedom. I have a residual hankering to free my fellow human beings from that bondage (of orthodox Christian belief), which can be as abusive as any form of slavery . . ." (Of Raymond Brown and John Meier!) "In their hands, orthodoxy is safe, but critical scholarship is at risk. Faith seems to make them immune from the facts." "I found myself playing the role of an academic John the Baptist."

Funk reminds me a bit of Karl Marx. He has lost his faith, but retains a Messiah complex. He has nothing good to say about anyone -- his former students, Christians, fellow academics -- who deigns to disagree with him. He sees himself as a revolutionary. "Throw off your faith in a God who answers prayer, in a Christ who conquered death! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" But Marx could at least be poetic. Funk's weaknesses as a writer and a scholar make his exalted view of his role in history hard for me to take seriously.

The scholarly weaknesses are many.

For one thing, there is that talk about the "evolution" of the "sayings tradition." By 70

AD, young disciples of Jesus (and mostly would have been young) would only be 50 or 60 years old. What was to stop them from giving direct input? Why must we assume that only second or third hand reports were available by that time?

Also, like all the Jesus Seminar material, *Honest to Jesus* bases its argument on taking the "Gospel" of Thomas seriously. I find I can't do that. Perhaps it would help if Funk answered the powerful arguments against Thomas levied by Meier, Wright, Sanders, and other top-notch scholars. But he opts out, evidently preferring ad hominem attacks to rational debate.

Funk does better on parables and aphorisms. Surely, as he says, it is highly unlikely that any early scribe invented the peculiar and remarkable sayings of Jesus. It does not however follow, as Funk assumes, that any "conventional morality" in the Gospels must be a transplant, because Jesus must be unpredictable. A person who only offers exotic teaching is a smart-aleck or a sophist, not a true sage. Great literary critics, like Chesterton, Lin Yutang, or even Thomas Cahill, recognize in the Gospels a higher synthesis of obvious and subtle truths, rather than playing those levels of truth off against one another as Funk does.

"Physician, heal thyself." Here's another problem. Funk praises metaphor, but speaks almost exclusively in clichés. He commends kindness, but then savagely attacks everyone around him. He derides dogmatism, but is himself remarkably dogmatic.

The basic message of this book can almost be summed up thus: "Jesus taught wonderful things, but his disciples misunderstood him completely. Fortunately, a crack team of scholarly experts, led by yours truly, has advanced in scientific understanding far beyond their hapless peers, to say nothing of the disciples or ordinary pew proles. We few experts are able to see through Christian lies about Jesus to the truth: Jesus not only rode donkeys, he also voted for them. Repent and be saved."

Politics aside (as far as possible, please), why should we care what Funk's deconstructed, human Jesus would want, or "demand?" He does not explain.

And in the end, Funk offers no very strong historical argument for his skepticism, but a lame philosophical prejudice. "In the wake of the Enlightenment . . . we presumably

know better." As he put it in another book, how can people who have "seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope" believe in miracles?

Skeptics are going to have to do better than that.

I just read books by NT Wright and Rodney Stark on related topics. That's how to do scholarship! They set their ideas out in clear, dispassionate, and sometimes witty phrases, without undue polemic, fairly explaining opposing positions and why they chose to differ. Crossan and Borg can also be read with pleasure, and a measure of respect. But as with Marx, the combination of flaky theories, self-righteous self-promotion, shrill invective, and stilted prose that I found here, made reading this book a painful chore.

Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really Say?* **Weird Scholarship ****

This translation of the Gospels makes use of some good linguistic ideas, and is often fresh and lively. Some of the historical principles from which the fellows operate are reasonable.

Mostly, though, this work is arrogant and silly.

The arrogance is directed first towards those thousands of scholars who do not share JS views, whom they dismiss in insulting and unfair terms, secondly, towards the general public, whom they casually assume to be uninformed, or misinformed, fools (why else would we doubt the JS?), and most of all, towards the authors, editors, and compilers of the canonical Gospels. I do not share their contempt in any case. And I ultimately find the scholarly argument made here not only mistaken, but absurd, for at least five reasons.

First, it is absurd to call Thomas a Gospel. Etymologically, Gospel means "good news;" Thomas introduces no news, good, bad, or indifferent. Historically, Gospel refers to the canonical four. Thomas does not resemble them in any way, other than borrowing some material and the name of a guru. (I listed 45 characteristics that the Gospels shared, and found that Thomas shared only half a dozen or so -- fewer than any other ancient work in my study.) Why, then, call Thomas a Gospel? Other than using the work as a "sharp stick to beat orthodoxy," the term does not fit.

Second, some of the methods adopted here for determining if a saying is accurate are, as other reviewers have pointed out, clearly fallacious. "Sayings and parables expressed in 'Christian' language are the creation of the evangelists or their Christian predecessors." What would result we adopted that rule for the works of JS writers? We would have to conclude that none of the JS books, this one included, were written by their purported authors! This is not a rule that scholars use in any other case, because it would render all scholarship absurd, as it does here.

"Only sayings and parables that can be traced back to the oral period, 30-50 C.E., can possibly have originated with Jesus." This is silly. My grandmother wrote poetry at age 95. If she were 15 years old in 33 A.D., she could have written a first-hand account of the resurrection in 113 AD! Why is it impossible that first-hand accounts of Jesus' life -- to say nothing of oral tradition -- could have been written 63 years before that date?

Third, the fellows display a naive and ill-informed scientism. "The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope." Yet Galileo himself affirmed that creed. Many astronomers (not all Christians) have even found the cosmos they saw through modern telescopes an aid to faith.

Fourthly, the JS editors have a bit of a martyrdom complex. They complain about "inquisitors," "witch hunts" and "public attacks (criticism?) from those who lack academic credentials." But what about "attacks" on their methods and assumptions from leading scholars? (See John Meier, N. T. Wright, and E.P. Sanders, for powerful examples of such criticism.) They seem under the curious assumption that the "scholarly" method of dealing with informed criticism is to accuse one's critics of being in the thralls of "neo-orthodoxy," then treat the substance of the criticism with haughty silence.

Fifth, the scholars find it "difficult to imagine" Jesus claiming to be Messiah, since he also taught humility. But it is possible to be both humble and believe one is called by God to accomplish great things -- Confucius is one example. Thus, for want of imagination, (or psychological reach, perhaps) they throw out a third of the evidence. For unwillingness to consider the supernatural, they throw out another third. And this is the "open-minded," "unbiased," and "dispassionate" way to do scholarship.

I am honestly amazed that so many intelligent scholars can convince themselves that Thomas is a Gospel, and is similar in important ways to the canonical Gospels. It reminds me of C. S. Lewis' comment on a similar blunder by Bultmann, "After a man has said that, why must we attend to anything else he says about any book in the world?" If anyone has an answer to either question, please enlighten me.

Phillip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way*

Good, fair, persuasive ****

Hidden Gospels is like a bowl of split pea soup: nourishing, filling, but not what you would order at a fancy French restaurant. This bowl of history soup is just the cure if you have bought into radical Jesus theories. With caution, balance, fine judgment, and scholarly courtesy, (qualities often missing from works of the Jesus Seminar, still less the even more fringe stuff) Jenkins writes an excellent general survey of modern errors in the "search for Jesus." He concludes (rightly, I think) that the Gnostic and other "new gospels" have little if anything to say about Jesus, and that they are inferior to the canonical Gospels, both as historical sources and in terms of social merit. (Actually I think he goes too easy on Thomas, but that is another story.)

Probably the greatest contribution of this book is its discussion of the radical Jesus theories as modern myth, and the social forces that create that myth. He discusses not only scholars, such as Crossan, Funk, Mack, Pagels, and King, but also how their ideas "filter down" to the masses through junk novels, television, and movies. (A pity he didn't write this book after The Da Vinci Code and Pagel's new Thomas book; though it is always interesting to see people blunder into a trap publicly laid and waiting.)

Jenkins argues that the Gospels are superior to the Gnostics in terms of historical believability and social value. It is indeed ironic that the very people who blame Christianity for being misogynist, distrustful of the body, and hierarchical, prefer Gnostic writings that (he suggests, and I also suspect) were probably the source of these qualities in later Christianity.

Elaine Pagel's best-selling new book, *Beyond Belief*, could almost have been written to illustrate Jenkins points. Jenkins reads hundreds of scholars with whom he disagrees, and carefully, politely points out their errors. Pagels, by contrast, could not be

troubled to name a single scholar who dissents from her views, even such respected and careful historians as John Meier, N.T. Wright, or Jenkins himself. Nor do the Jesus Seminar' popular "Five Gospels" or "Complete Gospels" answer their critics. Radical biblical "scholarship" seems to be a hothouse phenomena, flourishing in a highly protected environment. Hidden Gospels is in part an explanation of this odd phenomena.

The main defects of this book have to do with Jenkin's methodological conservatism. The book is sometimes repetitive, the style sometimes ponderous. His refutations of Crossan and company are not as witty and fun as, say, N.T. Wright. Also, while Jenkins is wise to appeal to "consensus scholarly views," I wish he would have discussed the Gospels and Gnostic writings directly more than he does. (A fault he shares with Pagels.) Personally, I think the best argument for the Gospels, and against the Gnostics, is the works themselves. I can't see how anyone who has read both sets of documents can confuse them.

Hidden Gospels, despite its stylistic flaws, is a vitally important and high-quality historical study. I hope future skeptical historians, and their publishers, will carefully consider the points Jenkins makes before throwing intellectual cotton candy like "Hidden Gospel of Thomas" or "Complete Gospel" at us, 99% air. The soup is healthier.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* Diamonds or Coal, Take your Pick *****

As a young man trying to decide whether or not to believe the things I grew up in, this book was very helpful to me. I remember reading the chapter on pride, "The Great Sin," one night at a camp in Alaska where I was counseling. The Holy Spirit showed me myself in that chapter. I poured over this book in those days, internalized it, even learned Chinese hoping to translate it.

I have since "moved on" to more detailed and empirically-oriented books by Christians, skeptics, and followers of other religions. Many of these offer interesting facts and insights. But the only place I have found as much wisdom as here (outside the Bible) was G. K. Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*, which influenced Lewis to faith. (As for *Conversations With God*, the inane "revelation" one reader recommends instead, a single paragraph of Lewis or Chesterton contains more wisdom than the whole first volume.)

Lewis has a marvelous gift for explaining things in simple terms without patronizing or talking down. Some may find his argument difficult, and others, too simple. In that case I recommend further reading; Lewis is not trying to be thorough.

I agree with the skeptic below that Lewis does not offer "proof" of God, or even logically-compelling evidence. He dismisses atheism with amazing abruptness. "Atheism is too simple. . . If the universe has no meaning, we would never have found out." (How does he know that? Does he have a control universe in his pocket?) But don't misunderstand. Lewis does not really offer "proof" of God. Notice he calls section one, "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." Lewis views our relationship with God not in scientific but in personal terms. God does not force faith on His wayward children, but drops hints for those who are seeking, is his assumption. Life is not an equation, but an adventure, even a romance with truth.

Some also suggest a loophole in Lewis' famous "Liar, Lunatic, or Lord" argument for the deity of Christ. Jesus' words were misrepresented by his followers, they say: he didn't really make the claims the Gospels say he did. Here again, remember that Lewis is trying to be concise. If you want his answer to that objection (still a very devastating answer, if you are familiar with Jesus Seminar material), you'll find it in his essay, Fernseed and Elephants. The argument is also more fully developed in the first chapters of "On the Man Called Christ," in part two of *Everlasting Man*, where I guess Lewis found it in the first place.

There are books with a more empirical approach to the existence of God; Hugh Ross' book on the Anthropic Principle, *Creator and the Cosmos*, for example, or Don Richardson's *Eternity in Their Hearts*, that shows how God has worked in cultures around the world. My new book, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*, argues for the existence of God from comparative religion and miracles. It also discusses the divinity of Jesus in relation to other religions. But I don't know any modern popular author of any viewpoint who can hold a candle to Lewis or Chesterton in terms of expressing deep truths in simple words. Reading *Mere Christianity* and finding only "a mess of holes," would be like going into a mine full of precious jewels and coming out with bucket of coal. There are truths here that will enrich you the rest of your life, if you lay hold of them.

Burton Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, *Shakes My Faith—in Skeptics* **

I tried to find a reason to give this book more than one star, really I did. It is moderately well-written, I told myself. But why must Mack be so pompous? Why the wildly inflated view of himself and other Q critics, and contempt for the common sense of ordinary readers? Some of the background facts about Greco-Roman culture and cynicism were mildly interesting. But why, since Mack wants to make the case that Jesus was a Cynic, do none of his Cynic quotes sound at all like anything in the Gospels?

Mack raised a lot of questions in my mind, but never answered them. For example, if the early Christian church evolved so radically and mutated so dramatically as Mack claims in the first thirty years, (only as long as I have been a Christian!) why didn't the people who had known Jesus (many of whom must have still been very much alive) say something? And why did this only happen in Palestine? Why did Paul and the other apostolic writers all buy the Gospel story about the death of Jesus for our sins, and resurrection from the dead? Why do most scholars reject Mack's argument? (N.T. Wright more recently dispatched of Mack in about eight pages (Jesus and the Victory of God, 35-44), with a thoroughness that would drive "all the king's horses and all the king's men" to despair. But he couldn't have been the first.) What does Mack say to such criticism? On all this and much more, he offers not a peep.

Actually, there is no evidence here Mack has even read any arguments against his position. Instead, he speaks like an oracle from on high. There is no trace of scholarly dialogue in this book, instead what you get is a monologue in an echo chamber. This is, to put it mildly, an odd approach for an allegedly scholarly argument.

As for positive criticisms, where should I begin? With the title? The word "Gospel" means "good news," not "good ideas." Q is not, therefore, a Gospel, and the title is itself a bit of a fraud.

More seriously, Mack writes in the book too much as if he held a copy of the hypothetical Q in his hands. But he hasn't got Q. Worse, for Mack's theory, we do have a large and varied number of writings from the early Christian church, written within the lifetimes of the first disciples, that DO speak of the crucifixion and resurrection. All of these agree with the real Gospels that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead.

To argue from the silence of one lone document, and that a document nobody has seen, or was even mentioned by the early church, and attempt by that imagined testimony to overthrow the positive testimony of dozens of documents we do have, has got to set some kind of record for the stretching of logic. It is like accusing someone of murder based on an invisible psychologist's interview of a ghost who refuses to answer questions. Mack is clearly a man of great faith. But why should any honest reader buy this malarkey? I haven't got a clue.

Why did Q not contain an account of the passion? Maybe it never existed. Maybe the author forgot to take notes during the crucifixion. Maybe a goat ate the last chapters. The truth is, we don't know. That so many people seem willing and eager to buy into such wild, almost self-parodying speculation (see print reviews, in particular) badly shakes my already weak faith in the desire of skeptics to find truth.

Michael Martin, *the Case Against Christianity* Nice Try, but no Cigar ***

This book is a well-written and systematic argument against the Christian faith, mostly from the point of view of Biblical criticism and philosophy. Martin's his writing is disciplined and readable, though not as lyrical as, say, Bertrand Russell. Unlike some skeptical writers, he has done a bit of homework, quoting Plantinga, Habermas, and Kierkegaard, for example. (Though he seems to have missed some others that he really should have read.) His tone is fairly genial.

Martin's argumentative method is to throw lots of arguments up and see what sticks. (Could the resurrection be caused by the indeterminacy principle of quantum physics? Or by Resurrecting Finite Miracle Workers (RFMW)?) The more you know about the subjects he covers, however, the less seems to stick. And the more slides off, the more you wonder if Martin has got some of the mud in his own eyes.

Martin's first main argument, against the historicity of Jesus, is so weak, and Martin appears to be unconscious of that weakness, that it undermines his credibility. He'll start an argument with, "Some scholars believe. . ." and end it (same sentence) "clearly, then. . ." What kind of argument is that? An argument is not as strong as the sum of its dependant clauses! A piece of speculation (often very wild) by an unnamed "scholar" seems to set up like concrete in Martin's mind in the space of a few clauses into fact. If my father built houses that way, he would have gotten into a lot of trouble during the recent earthquake in Seattle!

Argument

from silence is another of Martin's favorite weapons. "Surely if X believed or knew Y he would have said so." Generally speaking, though, the argument from silence is a logical fallacy, because you cannot infer that an event did not happen because someone failed to mention it! Also, the epistles to which Martin appeals in this regard, are short and on other subjects. (Such as Christian living.) In any case, the Gospels do relate Jesus' life. Many wise and literary Christian scholars (Lewis, Polkinghorne, Chesterton, Per Beskow) and even many non-Christians, have repeatedly pointed out the characteristics of the Gospels that mark them as historical. But Martin does not seem aware of these arguments, or of the qualities in the Gospel that make them credible, at the least.

Martin believes that the differences among the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are a strong argument against it. What do you think skeptics would say if they agreed on all points? "Conspiracy!" And rightly so. As prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi said of the Manson case, when the killers prepared beforehand what to say, "The stories tallied perfectly," But when you have honest witnesses, "There will always be left over evidence that just doesn't fit." And the prosecutor in the Columbine case said, "Any time you have a traumatic situation, even if only one person is killed, every testimony is different." So it appears to many that the superficial differences, but underlying agreement, of the NT records, are very impressive evidence for the truth of the resurrection. But Martin does not even consider this possibility.

Martin's argument against Paul's testimony that 500 witnesses to the resurrection were mostly still alive, was breathtaking. "The fact that 500 people reported seeing a resurrected man would surely have attracted wide attention and come to the attention of. . . historians." Therefore, since we didn't have any clear secular references to that, this report must be false, and Paul an unreliable witness! This is only a touch less ludicrous than Jesus Mysteries, that argues against the existence of Jesus since Roman historians don't mention him much, and then turns around and notes that they don't say much about Christians at all until 250 A. D.! But if the community itself was ignored when it had hundreds of thousands of members, why should a single incident within that community be recorded when the membership was still just a few thousand? In fact, from my studies in China I know that remarkable things can happen among a disfavored group (Christians, again) with little or no mention of those events in the press. From many such specious arguments, Martin proves to his

own satisfaction that the Gospels are unreliable, but to mine that (at least) he is out of the loop when it comes to evidence about historical matters.

If you want philosophy, Martin might help a bit more, but even here I think some of his arguments rather contrived. For example, I guess the tension Smith describes between Scripture and theory of salvation arises because he is concerned with philosophizing about salvation for others, rather than gaining it for himself. But the Bible explicitly limits itself to aiding in the latter, not the former, enterprise. And Martin has overlooked other Scriptural principles on this topic, such as that we are judged by the light given us, and that God, not man, is the judge. Martin might have come to a better understanding of the issue by reading C. S. Lewis' *Great Divorce*. It is a pity that he nowhere mentions the most influential Christian thinker of the 20th Century, and unfortunate for his argument. If you're in the market for arguments against Christianity, what you get here for the most part is quality in terms of style, but mostly just quantity as to substance.

Stephen Mitchell, *Jesus: What He Really Said and Did*

Money for Nothing *

Stephen Mitchell begins by telling how he was conflicted, as a child, between the loving and harsh passages of the Gospels. It was only after years of Zen practice that he finally "got it." He went back and "studied all the scholarship that seemed to me intelligent and open-minded." But it was only during a trip to Israel that things clicked for him, when he met a Bedouin in the Sinai desert who seemed to personify the "Abba" of timeless Middle Eastern tradition, "And a voice inside me said, 'Aha!'" and he went home to write this book.

I was wondering, at this point, which scholars would he rely on? How would he define "intelligent" or "open-minded?" What evidence would he offer for his conclusions?

It turned out there were a few "facts" in the rest of the book, mostly wrong ones. "Forty years is a long time . . . (Some) stories and reports were made up much later, by disciples of disciples." (But how many of us could not rely on first-hand accounts by ourselves or close relatives to write about events of forty years ago?) "All reputable scholars agree that the stories of Jesus' predictions were added by later disciples." (No, they do not. But even if they did, the evidence does not support that claim.) "The legend of the resurrection would have surprised Jesus. He himself never taught about

a resurrection from the dead, because he wasn't afraid of death." This book is for adolescents; but I have to wonder if even a child could read such a silly and presumptuous bit of mind-reading with a straight face.

But then I had a thought. Was I being had? Could Mitchell be simply cashing in on interest in Jesus?

What could be easier than writing a book like this? Scan the Gospels. Read a few (carefully selected) scholars who share your views. Tell a story about yourself to warm up the audience. Quote liberally and freely, so half the book is someone else's words. Use short words to market it to the young and gullible. Leave plenty of white space. End in 150 pages with a few rambling notes, and -- heh, presto! Insta-book.

Maybe my suspicions are incorrect. But in any case, this book is not much good. If you're looking for a book about Jesus with a literary tint, and without too many technical details, try Thomas Cahill's *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, instead. If you absolutely need a book like that by a skeptic, then even A. N. Wilson, with all his flaws, is far better and more interesting than this. For more serious study, I recommend NT Wright; and he has a couple really good books on Jesus that can be easily be read by teenagers, too.

Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* Well Beyond Belief
**

Elaine Pagels is a delightful writer, and one of the more reasonable of the skeptical Bible scholars I have read. Call the latter "damning with faint praise," however.

Here, Pagels compares the Gospel of John, emphasizing faith in Jesus, to the "Gospel" of Thomas, that stresses realizing truth within oneself. She argues John was written to refute Thomas. She reconstructs how and why the former became "orthodox" Christianity, and the latter, banned and forsaken of all but Zen Buddhists. Emphasizing differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels, she traces the rise of "orthodoxy" through Polycarp to Iraneaus and Tertullian, who made Christianity the dogma friendly religion it remained.

I found much of Pagel's creation myth interesting, and her tone personable. (She is willing to admit good qualities in the dogmatism she opposes, for example.) But she

does two things that make it hard for me to take the first part of her story seriously. First, she places John in a faith ghetto, apart not only from the other Gospels, but also the works of Paul, etc. I think that he agrees with the other writers of the New Testament on practically everything. Secondly, she makes the "Gospel" of Thomas the cornerstone of her thesis. This is a wobbly and insecure foundation, however.

The idea that John was written to disprove Thomas is untenable for at least three reasons. First, (as Pagels herself admits here), John shows many marks of familiarity with the time, events, and persons of First Century Palestine, while Thomas (as I think she admits of the Gnostics in general, in the Gnostic Gospels) shows none. It was therefore entirely reasonable for early Christians to accept the obviously historical John and reject the even more obviously unhistorical Thomas: where is the mystery?

Secondly, many Biblical scholars believe, for what seem excellent reasons, that Thomas was written in the Second Century. Oxford scholar Tom Wright suggests that Thomas is not only unhistorical, it is even anti-historical: "Thomas did for the parables in the second century what Julicher, Dodd and Jeremias did in the twentieth, and perhaps for similar reasons, namely, the attempt to get away from their historical and very Jewish specificity." Pagels never mentions discouraging words like this from competing scholars, still less refutes any of the evidence on which they are based. We are supposed to accept her early dating for Thomas on blind faith, it seems. I wish she had been inspired by the Thomas who was full of doubts, rather than the Thomas who is simply doubtful.

Thirdly, John resembles the Synoptic Gospels much, while Thomas resembles them little. I recently went over what the Jesus Seminar calls the "Five Gospels" with a fine-toothed comb, and narrowed it down to four again. First, I listed 45 characteristics of the Synoptic Gospels, 43 of which John strongly shares. I then compared Thomas and other ancient literature, and found that of six documents I compared with the canonical Gospels, Thomas resembled them the LEAST. (And two of the other documents were from China!) I found Thomas flagrantly a-historical, formulaic, lacking in developed, convincing characters, unconnected to space or time, un-Jewish, and platitudinous on occasion. Pagels claims that John, unlike the Synoptics, has no moral teaching. Actually John contains rich moral teaching of the highest caliber: it is Thomas (surprisingly, for a sayings "Gospel") that has none!

In short, I find NO reason to take the "Gospel of Thomas" seriously as a source for the life of Jesus, or to call it a Gospel. John, on the other hand, is intimately related to the Synoptic Gospels in dozens of vital ways, and shows many signs of being a trustworthy account of something that happened. The early Christians chose these Gospels because they knew their work -- better than some modern scholars, it seems to me, who are making absolute fools of themselves by pushing such wares, when they ought to know better.

I rather like Pagels, and I think she is trying to be honest. Some of the points she makes about the psychology of martyrdom and orthodoxy make sense to me. I find more sense in that argument than in Crossan's invention of the "Cross Gospel," Mack's fanciful sociological studies of imagined Q communities, still more the "Jesus Conspiracy" theories of Doherty, Freke or Gandy. But really, isn't it time skeptical historians defined what they mean by "Gospel," instead of using it as a prop to make unlikes sound the same? Isn't it time they argue for their beliefs historically, rather than making casual jumps to skeptical assumptions by saying, "Many of us can no longer believe all that," and thereafter simply ignore evidence that points to "all that?" Until skeptical historians bring their arguments out of the hothouse and face criticism squarely, it is hard for me to see why those arguments should be taken seriously.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* *Buddhists are Christian, too!* ***

I thought this story fairly balanced and enlightening, and less angry than some politically animated attacks on the early Christians. Pagels generally identifies speculation as such. She gives many quotes, and her scholarship seems pretty reliable. Her main animus seems to be against Tertillian and Ignatius. They must be flattered by the attention -- I hope I'm still being refuted 1800 years from now. All in all, I found this volume well worth a read.

But it's an odd book in some ways.

First of all, there are, of course, no Gnostic Gospels. Gospel means good news, and as Pagels admits, the Gnostic texts hardly even pretend to relate historical events. They are phony as the wild tales told about Confucius in the Zhuang Zi (and less funny), or the Jesus of Muslim Sufis. They make Jesus sound like Apollonius of Tyana or Sai Baba. There is obviously a market for making Christ a less lonely figure in world religion.

Pagels presents the orthodox and Gnostic faiths as equally legitimate. "Without denying the resurrection," the Gnostics "reject the literal interpretation." What does that mean? "Without denying that I ate all my dinner, I do not claim to have done so literally. Now, can I have desert?"

Pagels wants us to think that the "orthodox" believed in the resurrection because it provided the basis, somehow, for apostolic power. "What we do know as a historical fact is that certain disciples -- notably Peter -- claimed that the resurrection had happened." But actually, the Gospels credit a group of powerless women with seeing Jesus first. All four Gospels, almost every sermon recorded in the Book of Acts by Peter or Paul, and quite a bit of the writings of Paul, focus on the resurrection of Jesus. This claim got many of them killed. Pagel's argument that, since a rag-tag group of esoteric mystics who lived elsewhere a hundred years later doubted those accounts, therefore there was "controversy" on the subject, and early Christians could only have been motivated by desire for power to believe the people who were actually near the event, is exceedingly odd.

Pagels justifies her view by downplaying the historicity of the Gospels. She claims that few modern Bible scholars "believe that contemporaries of Jesus actually wrote the New Testament gospels." This is not so. Jesus' contemporaries could easily have lived well past the time at which even many skeptical scholars say the Gospels were written.

"Can we find any actual, historical reasons why these gnostic writings were suppressed?" Pagels asks. Sure, just read the things. "For the first time, the heretics can speak for themselves." Not a moment too soon, from the orthodox perspective. Giving the Gnostics air time is the best way to demonstrate the wisdom of those who excluded them from the canon.

In a comparative study I made of Thomas, the Gospels, and other ancient literature, I found far fewer marks of historical authenticity or similarity to the Gospels in Thomas than any other documents. Of 45 characteristics the Gospels shared, many having to do with historical reliability, Thomas shared only 5; less than almost any other text I studied, even texts from China. Pagels herself notes a few of the differences between the real Gospels and the Gnostics. She admits the Gnostics are late, distant, and a little spacey. So why didn't those darn Christians publish their manuscripts? Must have been a political conspiracy!

Pagels might more reasonably have arranged the facts here into an argument like this. Religions evolve. They sometimes split into competing lineages, exaggerate differences, attack one another, and lose valuable elements from their original formulation. Both 'orthodox' and Gnostic should have listened to Jesus more carefully, since their errors arise from disobedience to the Gospels, their wisdom in following the Gospels. (Something similar happened to Confucianism after Confucius.)

'Orthodox' Christians, however, held on to a belief in historicity and in the genuine words of Jesus, rather than diluting them with shamanistic additions that would have made Christianity indistinguishable from a bhakti cult of Hinduism. This had useful consequences. For however misogynist or authoritarian some early Christians may have been, it was the Christian church that began developing institutions of pluralistic freedom in the Middle Ages, and ultimately democracy. Similarly, the status of women is highest in the world today precisely in countries with an 'orthodox' Christian heritage. So some part of Jesus' message must ultimately have sifted through.

John Spong, Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile *

When it comes to religion, I have a prejudice. I like to read books by people who know something. I respect Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or atheists who care about evidence, and go to the trouble of reading intelligent Christian writers before setting out to publicly refute our faith.

By that test, this book is an embarrassment.

The problem is clear in the end notes. Almost all of the books Spong refers to are by other critics of orthodox Christianity: Pagels, Armstrong, Tillich, Strauss, Campbell, Sagan. He does quote page one (did he get any further?) of a book by Richard Swinburne. He also lists Christian physicist, John Polkinghorne, in his bibliography, but makes no mention of his arguments.

The meat of the book consists of a long string of skeptical assertions, with little corroborating evidence, and no reference to responses by Christian or fair-minded secular scholars. "Almost every medical breakthrough has been opposed by Christian

leaders." (What about the many medical breakthroughs made by dedicated Christian physicians? Or historians of science, non-Christians like Landes, Davies, and Whitehead among them, who relate the rise of Western science to elements of Christian teaching?) "The problem of evil simply cannot be solved." (What does Spong say to arguments by top-notch philosophers like Plantinga, Wolterstorff or Swinburne, to the contrary?) "The masculinity of the deity . . . has been used for thousands of years to justify the oppression of women . . ." (Has Spong heard of sociologist Rodney Stark, who shows that Christianity was popular among Roman women because it liberated women? Or historians Gu Weiming, J. N. Farquhar, or philosopher Vishal Mangalwadi, who show how Christianity freed Asian women from widow-burning, foot-binding, and other forms of social oppression?) The Gospels "Do not appear to be historical at all." (Can Spong refute N.T. Wright, Craig Blomberg, or John Polkinghorne, who defend the reliability of the Gospels on historical grounds? Does he even have good reason to challenge the skeptics in his own bibliography, who admit that much of the Gospels do appear historical?) "Nor does a cure result from prayers for God's intervention." (I have heard hundreds of stories to the contrary, many first-hand; has Spong refuted them too?) "The God I know can only be pointed to; this God can never be enclosed by propositional statements." (Uh -- isn't that itself a propositional statement about God?) Spong even spends four pages trying to resurrect Sigmund Freud's hoary old theory of the origin of religion.

Both the Spong books I have read so far have been an uncritical, ill-informed expurgation of the most unbalanced attacks on Christianity since the 19th Century, adopting the tone of that century, and making no allowance for Christian responses. Spong risks everything on the gamble that his readers are unaware of contrary arguments, as he himself appears to be. As you see below, even some non-Christians find this mode of argument embarrassing.

In Spong's view, Christians are not merely fools, we are victims of a "mental lobotomy."

Spong reminds me of the cleric on the bus-trip from hell to heaven in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*: "When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk." His friend responds: "What risk? What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came -- popularity,

sales for your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric?"

I wish Bishop Spong well. I hope that some day, perhaps on a bus somewhere, we can talk about serious matters in a serious manner.

John Spong, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks Scripture Has Skepticism Come to This? *

John is a man with an unusual combination of jobs. During the day he is a bishop in the Anglican church. At night he writes polemics against Christianity. Thus his books satisfy a certain Jeckyl & Hyde or man-bites-dog itch for the abnormal. There are skeptics who write better, and there are Anglicans who write a whole lot better; but Spong appears to have cornered the market for Anglican skeptics at present.

Generally I enjoy reading books written by skeptics and people of other religions who want to disprove Christianity. I usually learn something, and I find the experience enhances my faith. As Churchill said, it is exhilarating to be shot at without effect. From that point of view, the problem with this book is, Spong's argument is so far off, I hardly got the feeling he was shooting at me to begin with. I felt like a bungee jumper forced to jump off a coffee table.

A great deal of Spong's argument is based on very simple philosophical and historical mistakes. For example, it never seems to occur to him that one cannot refute a doctrine by refuting the imagery in which it is (inevitably) couched. This distinction is as true of modern physics as of First Century religion. One does not refute the existence of subatomic particles by poking fun at Styrofoam balls. But that is the level on which Spong lives, moves, and usually maintains his rhetorical being.

A clue to the biggest problem with this book can be found in the index. I could not find a single reference to any intelligent modern Christian. Spong doesn't appear to have the slightest idea what educated Christians think, or why. It is hard for me to take seriously the argument of a man who has not even troubled himself to read what the other side has to say, still less to respond. Skeptics like Spong, Martin, Russell, and Armstrong almost seem too angry to think clearly, or to listen to contrary arguments.

If you're looking for arguments against Christianity, there are books that pack a wallop. Elie Wiesel's *Night*, for example, *The Plague* by Camus or *Silence* by Endo trouble my faith more deeply, (though Camus' caricature of Christianity was almost as

bad as Spongs, and Endo was a Christian). Those books get to the heart of my own doubts, without embarrassing me by so many contrived arguments and so much shoddy reasoning.

If what you're looking for is truth, however, then I suggest you consider the argument for Christianity as presented by intelligent Christians. C.S.Lewis, G.K.Chesterton, Vishal Mangalwadi, Richard Wurmbrand, Gary Habermas, R.C. Sproul, John Polkinghorne, Hugh Ross, Don Richardson, would be a good place to start. Lewis' essay Fernseed and Elephants, for example, ravages the whole foundation of Spong's approach to Scripture in four pages. (Spong rather resembles two comic characters in Lewis: the Cockney skeptic in That Hideous Strength, and the hymn-humming clergyman on the bus from hell in The Great Divorce.)

Besides refuting many of Spong's errors, these thinkers present positive evidence for the faith that Spong appears never to have noticed. They show that, in many ways, the case for Christianity has become stronger in the modern era.

I also have a new book out, Jesus and the Religions of Man. Among other things, the book seeks to put skeptical arguments like this one in the larger context of the approach other non-Christian religions take to the problem of Jesus. I think skeptics may find the evidence I give in that book a stronger challenge than I, as a Christian, found here.

John Stott, the Incomparable Jesus One of the Best *****

This is the first book I have read by John Stott, and am impressed. I quickly came to the conclusion that here was an author whose opinion carries weight. No hackneyed collection of classic quotes and tired connect-the-dots reasoning, the book exhibits rich scholarship, broad range, and a wise combination of boldness and caution. He discusses both Jesus as a historical person (and I agree with him that the "historical Jesus" is the "Christ of faith"), and the influence of Jesus on history, through intermediaries not unlike you and I.

Some of the people Stott discusses,(offering mostly positive but I think balanced critiques of Wilberforce and Gandhi, for examples, and a deservedly negative review of the Jesus seminarians) have been written about often enough elsewhere. But Stott makes the story fresh because he thinks for himself, reads a lot, and has a depth of background knowledge such that his evaluation carries weight. Others of whom Stott

writes, Justin Martyr, N.T. Wright, and Toyohiko Kagawa, I agree ought to be better known. Some (St. Benedict) were new to me. Whether famous or forgotten, Stott establishes himself as a trustworthy and wise guide from page one to the end.

Not that he is necessarily right about everything. I disagree with his view of the Crusades. Certainly Stott does not cover everything worth covering. (The Clapham Sect also deeply influenced India, for example. See Farquhar, *Crown of Hinduism*, and Mangalwadi, *Missionary Conspiracy*, etc.) This is only one book, and Christ is not only incomparable, but also incomprehensible, in the historical sense: a river of influence whose channels and depths and end no one standing on our side of the bank can fully know. But Stott generally notices what is important in those topics he does discuss. Even his take on that mysterious, strange book of Revelation does not overlook the obvious, as so many do: that in some sense at least, the book is certainly inspired.

Yancey, Wright, and Polkinghorne are also worth reading on the "historical Jesus." There are some good books out there on the influence of Christ on history. But all in all, and combining both, this may be the best of the Jesus books I have read so far. (Apart from my own, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*, which naturally I also recommend.) I will be looking for more books by this author.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* Good in Spots ***

The Case for Faith is a simple and readable book based on a good idea: interview top Christian thinkers about questions that many people see as roadblocks to faith. Strobel begins with just the right tone, an empathetic and poignant interview with elderly skeptic and one-time evangelist, Charles Templeton.

Some of the interviews are pretty good, and all of them have something of value, for those who are looking for it. I doubt most of the interviewees would call themselves "fundamentalists," as one reviewer describes them; certainly not Catholic philosopher, Peter Kreeft! Kreeft is generally good on the Problem of Pain, though some of his solutions may seem a bit post hoc to those who do not share Christian assumptions. Sometimes the honest bewilderment of Job seems preferable to clever philosophical answers. Not that Kreeft's answers are merely clever; it's a tough question, and there is a lot to what he says. William Craig is, as always, sharp (on miracles, here) informed about contrary positions, and accustomed to fielding questions in the environment of debates with top skeptics, not just Christian pep rallies, qualifies himself appropriately. Walter Bradley's discussion of the difficulty of life emerging from non-life was

excellent. I only noticed one lapse. But it was a major one: he didn't mention the idea of molecular evolution, and Strobel didn't ask. I'm not sure that's a very good solution, and Bradley's arguments may largely answer it anyway, but not bringing the question up I found rather galling. Ravi Zacharius did better than I expected on Jesus being the only way to God. But while Zacharius gave good general theological answers, and he seems to know Western philosophy fairly well, I didn't see much evidence of deep and sympathetic knowledge of non-Christian religions.

The chapter on church history was, in my opinion, weaker than it should have been, though for a different reason. John Woodbridge may be an excellent historian, but he doesn't appear to be an apologist. He relates the conventional version of what happened, rather than putting events in philosophical and spiritual context. For example, he mentions the Crusades without explaining the background of Muslim conquests or the reality of Turkic rule, the makeup of the "Christian" troops sent to the Middle East, or contextual facts such as that Pope Innocent's promise of salvation to fallen warriors was an echo of the Muslim promise, half a millennia earlier, that "the way to Paradise is lit by the flash of swords!" The "Christianity" of the era, in other words, had itself become partly Muslim.

I found Geisler quite disappointing. His argument that God was being nice when he ordered genocide on the Palestinians was unsatisfactory, to put it mildly. Better to say you don't understand, and admit perplexity, than to give lame explanations like that. At least say "maybe" or "the way I see it." (Richard Wurmbrand, a Christian pastor who was tortured by the communists, writes briefly on the subject with more authority, and empathy. See *In God's Underground*.) Then Geisler claimed that the Fall of man was responsible for animal suffering. Strobel didn't even ask, "What about the millions of fossils of animals we find in layers of rock untroubled by any footprint of man? Were the effects of the Fall retroactive?" The question glares from the text like a flare. These lapses were unfortunate, because other things Geisler said could be helpful, if the whole were packaged a little more carefully, and critiqued more thoroughly.

While this book is entitled "The Case For Faith," in fact it does not mention a lot of the best evidence for the Christian faith, and is largely defensive in nature. (Answering objections as much as giving positive arguments.) While I disagree with some arguments, I think it may be helpful to many people. As other readers said, it is a generally good introduction to the subject.

A. N. Wilson, *Jesus: A Life Brilliant Balderdash* **

This book succeeds admirably in capturing its primary subject: its author, A. N. Wilson. As for Jesus, try another book.

Wilson frequently adjusts facts to fit his story line. Paul's "as though I were a child abnormally born" processes through his imagination and comes out as a confession that Paul's Gospel "is quite different from the beliefs and practices of Jesus' own friends and family." (Never mind that he said just the opposite.) He discovers that Jesus had a home, after all, and that Peter "made a substantial profit" in his fish business. (Perhaps he found a scribal copy of his W-2 form?)

Wilson shows little feel for the available evidence from First Century Palestine. Paul reports that hundreds have seen the risen Christ. Roman historians do not mention these witnesses, therefore, Wilson deduces, Paul is making it up. By contrast, when real historians speak of the period, they point out that even for central facts about mainstream Jewish religion, they may need to rely on reports that are 150 years after the fact. In such circumstances, making an argument from ignorance ("No confirmation, therefore it must not be true") is like asking why none of the apostles appeared on Oprah.

At times Wilson appears to be competing with Bertrand Russell for who can shock people by saying the silliest bon mot. "One could name dozens of figures who have been of far greater influence on the human race than Jesus," Wilson says. Then he names one dozen, four of whom were deeply committed followers of Jesus, four of whom reacted against Jesus, and all of whom together may or may not have equaled the influence of the Sermon on the Mount.

Wilson plays Sherlock Holmes. "It is a curious number, 500." "The devils didn't go out of the demoniac and into the pigs. No, clearly, his shrieks frightened them," and they all rushed down the hill and plunged into the lake. At times like that, he reminds me a bit of Inspector Cleauseau negotiating his way across the lobby of a Swiss hotel. He doesn't quite know the language, his credentials are mostly bluff, and he asks questions (in a pretentious tone) that are over-clever and under-wise at the same time. But I grant the spectacle is entertaining.

Not that Wilson is a stupid man. Despite himself (as he says of the Gospel writers), on occasion a snatch of eloquence or even good sense peeps through the bluster. He

speaks of "another layer in (John's) endless layers, another ingredient in its inexhaustible richness and fascination as a literary text." "No saying or story of Jesus can be taken to its logical conclusion without being contradicted by some other saying or fact." But then the sun drops behind another cloud of subjectivity and wild imagination. Perhaps his atheism is partly to blame. Trying to find a historically and psychologically explanation for the birth of Christianity that fit the materialistic paradigm was one of the great cottage industries of the 20th Century. Wilson seems to hope that he'll be the lucky one to hit the jackpot.

But he lacks the scholarly tools, or temperament, to make a serious attempt. I read this book just after finishing N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which is a genuine work of scholarship. By contrast, scholars call Wilson's NT works "wrongheaded and muddled" (Luke Johnson) and "silly and pretentious" (Richard B. Hays). Wright is also patronizing, but he has some excuse: he really knows something about 1st Century Israel. The difference is extraordinary. If you want to learn something about history, read Wright. If you want a poetic interpretation of Jesus, this book has its moments, but Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* is superior.

My first Wilson biography was of C. S. Lewis. An acquaintance of Lewis noted that for all Wilson's literary talent, his portrait of the man was "almost unrecognizable." Both men were Oxford grads, Anglican and atheist at different times, and talented writers whose native language was English. Jesus, of course, was different on all counts. This biography is subjective and mistaken to a corresponding degree -- unless, of course, you read it as an autobiography.

[N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Is There a Historian in the House?](#)

[Right Here!](#) ****

When I read A. N. Wilson on Jesus, I closed the book and thought, "That's a pretty good book, about Wilson." When I read Crossan, I thought, "Here is the man who should have written the Book of Mormon." Wright first suggested to me the hope that historical criticism might actually have something of value to say about Jesus.

Wright's approach has many virtues. He is intimately familiar with an incredible amount of scholarly literature on the subject, and refers to it in a way that is always thoughtful. He seldom arbitrarily discards evidence merely because it doesn't fit his theory, as many do. His favorite critical device is what he calls the principle of "double similarity, double dissimilarity." He shows that, while most of the synoptic material

makes sense both within the Jewish community, and as the template for the new Christian religion, it also differs from both traditions in ways that strongly suggest the marks of individuality, that neither ordinary Jews nor Christians would have invented for Jesus.

This is a helpful approach, in my opinion, though not so unique as Wright seems to think. Readers with literary or psychological sensitivity have been making similar, less systematic but sometimes even more insightful, observations for a long time. See, for example, G. K. Chesterton (*Everlasting Man*), Philip Yancey (*The Jesus I Never Knew*), M. Scott Peck, Per Beskow (*Strange Tales About Jesus*) or C. S. Lewis (*Fernseeds and Elephants* -- an essay Wright scoffs at, but that grows in my estimation the more I read of modern Biblical criticism). I think any reader can discern the unique style of Jesus in the Gospels. To a certain extent, Wright is just approaching the unique character of Jesus' sayings in a more formal, and less intuitive, manner.

As a scholar who studies the (often amazing) ways in which Christianity fulfills Asian cultures, I especially appreciated Wright's deep insights into the relationship between the Jewish tradition and the life of Christ. Wright argues that these elements were not retroactively inserted in the narrative, but most probably derive directly from Jesus. I don't recall that Wright places much emphasis on it, but in a sense, much of the argument here could be summarized by Jesus' statement: "Don't think I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets . . . I have come to fulfill them." I believe that applies to more than Jewish culture, but that is another story.

The greatest drawback of this book is that Wright takes himself and his colleagues too seriously, in my opinion. When Wright says, "All agree that Jesus began his public work in the context of John's baptism," he means, "all we scholars." The fact that billions of other readers usually come to the same conclusion, is, to Wright, irrelevant. The same, when he tells us, "It is apparent that the authors of the synoptic gospels intended to write about Jesus, not just their own churches and theologies," (really!) that "one of the chief gains" of the last 20 years of scholarship has been to link the crucifixion of Jesus to his cleansing of the temple, (my grandma could have told them that) and that when Jesus cursed the fig tree, he was acting out a parable against the Jewish religious rulers. Biblical scholars resemble the emperor's fashion experts, who, after decades of involved debate, and several fads in nudity, make the astonishing discovery that the emperor has no clothes. They pat themselves on their backs and

complement one another for their brilliance, as the little boy, who first made the observation decades before, rocks in his chair in a retirement home nearby.

Chesterton said, one of the ways to get home is to stay there. Wright allows that Biblical criticism is taking a more circuitous route, (he himself uses the metaphor of the Prodigal Son), and he almost makes me think the view along the way might be worth it. But if he chooses to lecture about the layout of the family farm when he returns, he ought to acknowledge that some of his hearers have been on that ground for a while already. Wright seems less kind to his conservative Christian "elder brethren" than to younger (separated) brethren still sowing wild oats in the far country of historical speculation. This attitude troubles me.

After hundreds of pages of argument, Wright rather abruptly asserts that "Jesus did not know he was God," at least not as one knows one "ate an orange an hour ago." He thinks such self-knowledge would be unbecomingly "supernatural." (Though he doesn't quibble with multiplied loaves or the resurrection.) At this point one gets the feeling that Wright's conclusion (or guess) is based less on historical evidence (which, as another reader points out below, ought to include John, Paul, and other Jewish Christians), but on a desire to keep a souvenir from the far country -- perhaps to show other scholars. Or maybe he just doesn't want to sound too conventional -- publish novelties ("discoveries") or off with your academic head. In any case, one wonders if his own dogmatically expressed opinion about Jesus' sub-divine mode of consciousness itself has a supernatural origin. He offers no other sources, in this case.

There seem to be two ways to "see" Jesus. One is the scholar's approach, which is that of blind men touching an elephant -- each connecting with that which communicates, with special vividness, a focused reality. The other method is that of the unwashed masses, who see the whole, though dimly at times, as through a fog. To see Christ as he is, yet without reductionism, has not proven an easy task for anyone. I do not know if it is the holiest, wisest, humblest, or just the most desperate, who come closest. Wright shows that, if a blind man touches the elephant in enough places, and takes scholarly theories for the narrow simplifications that they tend to be, he may begin a fairly recognizable and systematic mapping of the shape before us, which, in the end, may help see the elephant once again. It is a brilliant and insightful work. And, I am beginning to think, one very patient elephant, to put up with modern criticism, and not step on anyone.

N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* Lemonade from Lemons *****

At first glance, this seems a rather odd book. What is a first-class historian like N. T. Wright doing, refuting the likes of Spong and Thiering? Does one need a bulldozer to squash ants? (Wilson, I personally find more intelligent, and thus perhaps rising to the dignity of being run over.) Yet Wright gives their arguments a fair hearing, then a fair and gentle hanging.

But there seems to be method to Wright's mildness. As an alternative to the fumbling and bumbling of his protagonists, he offers a simple and readable description of who he has found the historical Jesus to be. Their errors prove a useful foil for explaining the methods and conclusions of legitimate New Testament scholarship. Wright's critiques of those with whom he disagrees are always a delight -- he shows a sincere appreciation for what is worthwhile, then refutes errors with wit and the gentle precision that comes of great intellectual power matched to thorough knowledge of the subject.

The subject here is Jesus, a fox in pursuit of whom academic hounds have banged their heads on many trees. Wright rightly follows him to the cross. "The Christian doctrine is all about a different kind of God -- a God who was so different to normal expectations that he could, completely appropriately, become human . . . To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God."

I think Wright over-emphasizes the genius of Biblical scholarship. He tends to give the impression that nobody knew anything worth knowing about Jesus, until the question was brought to the attention of modern academics. Having read many "Jesus Seminar" books, I think credentialed scholars like Crossan, Borg, Mack, and Pagels, are often as foolish as Wilson -- and less truly knowledgeable about the historical Jesus than the average Pentecostal grandmother.

Wright also knocks C. S. Lewis for his "odd" criticism of the "quest for Jesus" as "the work of the devil," in the Screwtape Letters. Aside from the unfairness of ignoring the humor in a satire, I think the substance of Lewis' arguments, made more seriously in *Fernseed and Elephants*, is entirely sound, and makes an excellent critique of many recent historical Jesus reconstructions. I think Wright's historical reconstruction, and

Lewis' literary critique of shoddy skeptical arguments, complement one another nicely.

In sum, I recommend this book both for people who have been bamboozled by the particular works it refutes, and also as an antidote to recent works of a similar nature, like the *Da Vinci Code*, *Jesus Mysteries*, *The Jesus Puzzle*, or perhaps Elaine Pagel's new book, *Beyond Belief*. I am working on a book that will combine Wright and Lewis' approaches, to answer recent attacks on the Gospels.