

CHAPTER ONE

A Mystifying Origin

Roman Catholicism, one of the oldest faith traditions, had a mystifying origin. Its founder was purportedly a carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus who preached a message of brotherly love and salvation for only three years before he was accused of insurrection by Roman authorities and crucified. His immediate followers were illiterate and failed to leave any written record of their experiences. Jesus himself wrote nothing — zero.

We know very little about Jesus' youth, education or travels. Yet, in the taxonomy of men who have influenced history, Jesus of Nazareth stands distinctively apart from all the others. His preaching was the origin of Christianity.

Some think his life was only a myth, but whether he lived or not is not as important as his impact on the world. The significant issue here is not whether or not Jesus was a real person, but the impact of his existence — alleged or not —on subsequent generations.

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The entire history of the planet was once separated into two periods, before Christ was born (BC) and after Christ was born (AD, for Anno Domini). We now use BCE (before common era) and CE (common era), but the dividing point is still the reckoned time of the birth of Jesus.

I believe his message was more important than the man. The global influence of Jesus' message is unmatched in human history. He presents a smorgasbord of images, the meaning of which depends on the perception of the viewer. He was a self-proclaimed messiah who allegedly cured the sick and raised the dead. But for the major influence he has had in the universe, almost nothing is known about him. His is an indistinct presence that is difficult to visualize, understand or imagine.

According to the story, the carpenter from Nazareth was born in Palestine in an undistinguished, unassuming and unpopulated desert setting. His message gained traction with the primitive people of the time — and continues to attract followers 2,000 years into the current era. He was viewed as having a double identity — both human and divine, mortal and immortal. He preached a message of love and forgiveness and claimed to be the son of the one true God. He spoke of a God who was never born and would never die, but gave few further details that would help us understand this God. He promised a second coming when He, as God, would come down to Earth in glory and splendor and save the righteous and condemn the sinners. Two thousand years have passed since that utterance, and the odds are long that it will ever happen.

English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) described human life in the 16th century as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. This description can also be applied to life in the first century. They too led marginal, disenfranchised lives. Jesus' message of a better life ahead resonated with a poor, uneducated, superstitious people living insignificant existences. In a life filled with uncertainty, misery, anxiety and ignorance, the powerful imagery of Jesus' message was a welcome alternative to the drudgery of daily existence. The longings and hopes of those people would have been buoyed by the concept of a better life awaiting them in the beyond — the theology of expectation.

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Jesus' astonishing claim that he was the son of God sent to save the world has reverberated throughout history with countless positive and negative consequences. Jesus portrayed a miraculous world unlike the one his audience was enduring. It may have been a dubious promise, but it offered eventual escape to a better world, a belief that present lives would improve at the end. Even though Jesus offered no evidence whatsoever for his claims, uneducated people living at that time were easily seduced by a charismatic prophet who promised a superior life in the future — a life after life.

Real life presents us with a wealth of unknowns and an abundance of things to fear. Fear and uncertainty lead many to embrace religion to assuage emotions, diminish anxiety and make some moral sense of the world they live in. Religion can act as a psychological lubricant. Sharing a collective experience like religion with others validates our existence and gives us a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. However, religion can be a net negative in our lives. We need to ask some nettlesome questions about the value of religion.

Who is God? Did He create the world? Does He matter in our lives? Does religion make us better or worse human beings; does it add value to our lives? Why would God create human minds that are incapable of understanding Him? Do God's creations really have a reasonable expectation of salvation — a heavenly afterlife? Has Christian ideology been beneficial in the progress of humankind? Does conformance to the rigid rules and regulations of Christianity help humans cope with their lives? Is religion an essential component of our culture worth preserving? Do we need a sense of the Divine to exist? Is God a useful concept?

The broad theological framework of Christianity is that God was revealed to humans in Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity introduced the idea of Jesus as man and divine being and the concept of a triune God — Father, Son and Holy Ghost. However, the formative history of the Catholic religion has a porous foundation based on superstition, fable and a primitive knowledge of the universe. It is wholly dependent on unknowable, supernatural phenomena for explanation.

If one is committed to a particular philosophy of life, it should be supported by robust principles, prominent moral values and convincing

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scientific evidence that conforms to the existing laws of nature and undergirds solid epistemological assumptions. Religion does not meet any of these criteria. Religion and reality collide at the intersection of myth and reason. Seeking the rational view involves searching for a truth supported by evidence, experience and observation.

Religion is the sublime art of stating a myth authoritatively and repeatedly until it slowly acquires the status of fact. It creates an intricate web of myths loosely hung together (by human craving for immortality). It blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Faith is something that cannot be rationally established, so religion dazzles the imagination with images and concepts of ineffability and mystery.

Christianity can easily be described as a “cult.” Cults are described by sociologists as movements that have a charismatic leader, a convincing message — true or not — and fulfill the needs of the followers. Reality, on the other hand, can be determined as truth with a dogmatic assertion of certainty.

Shermer defines religion as: “...a social institution that evolved as an integral mechanism of human culture to create and promote myths, to encourage altruism and reciprocal altruism, and to reveal the level of commitment to cooperate and reciprocate among members of the community.” Religion is a gateway drug to a long-term dependency on a delusional belief in the supernatural.

Jesus and his followers were bound together by their primitive culture and his promise of a future improved life. Jesus intimated that he and his Father lived in an alternate universe where everything was perfect. He promised his listeners they could go there after death if they believed in him, payed him homage, obeyed his commandments and were respectful of each other.

Jesus’ message was substantial in concept but crumbly, suspicious and sketchy in detail. He did not say where this extraordinary place was, what it was like or how you traveled there — just that you had to die before you could begin the journey. He never described God, although God allegedly was his father.

“God...is this kind of a living question mark — a wholly prospective character. He has no history, no genealogy, no past that in the usual way

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of literature might be progressively introduced into his story to explain his behavior and induce some kind of catharsis in the reader." (Miles)

Let's objectively examine the origin and core elements of the Catholic religion. Jesus of Nazareth was, according to the story, an illiterate carpenter turned prophet. Almost nothing is known about his early life. At about age 30, he began preaching peace and good will among people on Earth. He believed he was sent by God, whom he proclaimed was his father. He said for those who believed his message there would be a celestial reward after death and a corresponding punishment for those who failed to adhere to God's commandments. After three years of preaching, Jesus was crucified by the Roman authorities for insurrection — at the behest of the Jewish hegemony, whose power he challenged.

The emotional and inescapable implication of Jesus' redemptive death — "there is no redemption except by blood" — and subsequent alleged resurrection were the beginnings of Christianity. The ghoulish scene depicting Jesus' crucifixion has been rendered a powerful, emblematic abstraction over time by the conspicuous usage of the cross as an iconic symbol of Christianity.

History does not reveal any information about Jesus' life between his birth in Bethlehem and the beginning of his public ministry at the age of 30. What was he doing and where was he for 30 years? I am surprised that his physical appearance has never been described. Why don't we know how tall he was, his weight, color of hair and features? Those facts should have survived the oral transmission to the Gospels. Why would a loving God — originator of the universe — create followers who couldn't understand Him and have His son speak in obtuse parables to an uneducated audience? Jesus' message revealed a certain degree of intelligence. Where did he receive his education? Who influenced him? Why did his supernatural father allow him to be crucified for sins that were never committed?

Jesus and his followers were illiterate and left no written examples of their thinking, judgements or beliefs. Anyone could interpret the oral tradition that

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survived and fashion it to suit their own agenda. The confusing message of salvation and punishment was hijacked by the Patristic writers, particularly Paul and Augustine. These two misanthropic misogynists substituted asceticism, sexual repression, the inferiority of women and the concept of Original Sin as central doctrines of Christianity. Unfortunately, this flawed view of life on Earth escaped thoughtful review by Church authorities for centuries and remains the nucleus of Catholic Church teaching in spite of copious evidence to the contrary.

Judaism, which spawned Christianity, was the beginning of monotheism — conversion of a portfolio of gods to a single sovereign God incorporating all the attributes of the previously worshipped deities. We no longer needed a god for each naturally occurring event in the universe.

In Genesis, we learned that Yahweh is that God — the creator of the Earth and all organisms on it. Judaism, and Christianity after it, teach that humans are unique in nature and superior to all other life forms. Scripture distinguished humans from the rest of living organisms. Over time we have developed a preference for that Biblical version of ourselves.

Also, we evidently still feel a need for a divine overseer in order to live moral lives, even though morality has evolved throughout history as a cooperative mechanism to enable humans to interact with each other in a productive way. The evidence for human morality, without a divine dimension, is supported by the cooperative life within social groups. “Human morality is clearly an extension of evolved mammalian cooperation strategies and the sentiments needed to implement those strategies — sympathy, gratitude, trust, a sense of fairness, etc.” (Farris Naff and Norman)

Many attitudes formed in childhood about people and the universe come from fairy tales we read or hear which contain truths, falsehoods, fears and moral principles that inspired imaginations and crystalized thinking that last into adulthood. These stories are usually set in an unfamiliar cultural environment with an underlying moral message in the narrative that is often too subtle for naïve young minds to comprehend.

Children are gullible, easily led by authority figures and particularly susceptible to believe in magical events and ideas. Their minds are like

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sponges, soaking up whatever they hear, read and experience. However, unlike living aquatic sponges that filter out what they don't need, children have no reality filter to separate fact from fantasy or reality from myth. Christianity is one of those fairy tales set in a foreign culture, centuries removed from modern times.

In Genesis, we learn that God created the heavens and Earth and humans to populate the Earth. Though humans and most other air-breathing organisms need to reside on land, the Earth's surface is 70 percent salt water. The ratio of land to water seems significantly out of balance for land-based creatures and could easily be cited as a creation design flaw.

Genesis, the foundation for much of Catholic doctrine, is nothing more than a whimsical fairy tale. Yet, from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we derived an intriguing tale of the creation of the Earth and humankind, and then the concepts of Original Sin and shame, the image of a vengeful and deceitful God, plus gender inequality and misogyny.

The severity of punishment — banishment from paradise, daily toil and painful childbirth — was highly inappropriate and substantially out of proportion to Eve's disobedience and Adam's complicity. To condemn all of humankind forever for Eve's transgression is irrational.

Eve was chosen by biased male authors of Genesis to become the first sinner and to infect human posterity with the stain of Original Sin and eventual death. Why not choose Adam?

Blaming Eve was the first Biblical example of oppression of women by men and the origin of Judeo-Christian patriarchy. All of this was fabricated from the imagination of male writers who told the story of a fictional couple who never existed. "Evolution proves that the biblical Adam and Eve did not exist. Their 'original sin' was therefore impossible, so there would be no need for a messiah to save us from our sins." (Gray)

God's communication with His creations can only be categorized as bizarre. For the first hundreds of thousands of years of human existence the Judaic-Christian God was silent. Then, for about 1,200 years, during the period

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of the Old Testament, He was apparently both loquacious and personally involved with His creations. He communicated originally with Adam and Eve and then regularly with Moses, Abraham, Isaac, David, Jeremiah, Elijah and other prophets. Throughout the Old Testament we hear the disembodied voice of a God speaking to His people, giving instructions on how to live, keep His commandments and obtain salvation.

In the New Testament, He used His son Jesus as spokesperson. However, since the death of Jesus almost 2,000 years ago, His advice and admonitions have stopped and the protracted silence is deafening. Did God die? That explanation seems unlikely since He is claimed to be eternal. Did He lose interest in His creations? That seems implausible, too. You would think a creator would have at least some interest in His creations and periodically check up on how things were going.

That leaves a more plausible and logical explanation — that the God of the Bible only existed in the minds of the Biblical writers and a real God never existed.

When humans first appeared on Earth, they embarked on an intellectual and spiritual journey to understand the universe and their place in it. This quest is essentially a supernatural question; a potent and compelling undertaking.

Religion is an unnecessary intrusion into the process of living. It introduces uncertainty, adds complexity and raises more questions than it answers. Religion is counterfactual to reality. It introduces mystery, fantasy and transcendent concepts that are beyond our ken. The difficulty in defining and discussing religion is that the topic itself is subjective, mystical and unverifiable. Love, happiness and compassion are emotions that can be discussed, observed and measured in humans, but when these are attributed to supernatural spirits, the conversation departs from reality to an unseen and unknowable cosmic mystery.

We tend to attribute the founding of Christianity to Jesus, but in reality, Christianity is the result of many individuals writing and embellishing the activities and pronouncements about Jesus and his followers, early Jewish customs and myths and fantasies about primitive cultures.

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For many, religion is a convenient trope to deflect mysterious happenings in the world. Religion functions for some as a security blanket, alleviating the necessity to study, analyze and think about how the world really works. “It is God’s will,” is a trite but handy aphorism to assign God responsibility for all the phenomena that baffle humankind. ➔