

# Every religion claims to be historical (but only Christianity is)

**BUDDHISM, HINDUISM, ISLAM, AND ZOROASTRIANISM MAKE HISTORICAL CLAIMS, BUT NONE ARE AS RELIABLE AS CHRISTIANITY.**

*By Gary Habermas and Benjamin C. F. Shaw • March 6, 2020*

It is far from surprising that world religious adherents typically claim that their faith is unique in several regards. Christians are no different here. These are quite natural assertions, as everyone wants to believe that something so crucial to them is both different and well as exceptional. But Christians often go further. They claim frequently that they actually have *evidence* that their faith is different from all the others.

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How do the claims of other religious founders compare *evidentially* to Christianity? Of the difficulties afflicting the major non-Christian religious claims, arguably the most troubling are historical in nature. Here we will briefly examine Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism.

## **Buddhism**

Some may be surprised to find that Buddha most likely rejected belief in God, at least in the sense of a personal or creator God. Buddha's more philosophically-inclined followers tended to follow the same course.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhist studies in Japan yielded surprising historical results. One historical example drawn from nineteenth century Japanese Buddhists may be helpful. University of Chicago historian James Ketelaar points out that various dates for Buddha's birth differed from each other by over 2,000 years, noting that this compares to stating that Jesus was born sometime between Socrates and Descartes! Yet, Buddha's historical existence was crucial for these Buddhists because their faith was built on the historical Buddha's actually having achieved enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> As a result, "endless contradictions" yielded frustration because the available accounts were thought to be reliable.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhist scholar Edward Conze raises another issue. Many of Buddha's major writings date from 600 to 900 years after his death, with oral teachings being the norm for the first 500 years. Conze then states clearly the corresponding issue that

this causes: while some of the myriad volumes must actually represent Buddha's original teachings, the chief problem is epistemic in nature: "we have, however, no objective criterion which would allow us to isolate the original gospel. All attempts to find it are based on mere surmise, and the discussion of the subject generally leads to nothing but ill will and fruitless disputes."<sup>4</sup> In other words, some of Buddha's original teachings must be among the ones we possess, but we can never really tell which are authentic because the documents are so late. Conze concedes that that's why Buddhists cannot compete with Christians regarding the reliability of their traditions.<sup>5</sup>

## Hinduism

Another instance concerns the Hindu faith, where probably the best-known figure is that of Krishna. It is significant that, according to one report, even most Hindu scholars doubt whether or not Krishna actually lived. This conclusion is probably supported from certain claims made on behalf of Krishna, who was believed to have first delivered the text of the *Bhagavad-Gita* "to the sun-god some hundreds of millions of years ago."<sup>6</sup> Comments like this may contribute to statements such as, "The general pattern translators have followed" has been to count the larger work of which the *Bhagavad-Gita* is a part (the Mahabharata) as "quaint mythology." Then Krishna himself "becomes a poetic device for presenting the ideas of some anonymous genius, or at best, He becomes a minor historical personage."<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, none of the actual Hindu texts can be accurately dated prior to the Twelfth Century AD!<sup>8</sup> On the date that Krishna actually lived and spoke with his first disciple Arjuna approximately 3,000 BC, the earliest copy which we have today

dates from some 4,100 years later! How many changes may have occurred to the text regarding Krishna's teaching in the *over four intervening millennia*, especially in a culture where historical events were thought of in a far different manner than with Jewish chroniclers?

## **Islam**

Muslims have long cited the Qur'an against the Gospels in order to argue that Jesus did not die by crucifixion. A leading Muslim apologist, the late Ahmed Deedat, summarized the typical Christian response to this Muslim objection: how could a man 1,000 miles away and writing a full 600 years after the crucifixion know what happened to Jesus? Deedat's reply to this critique is surprising: "The Christian plea is valid. Their logic is good"! Then he uses the Qur'an anyway, in order to argue against the Gospels!<sup>9</sup> Amazingly, Deedat admits that the Christian's historical critique is "valid . . . good"—600 years *is* too late to be an authentic contributor to the dialogue concerning Jesus' crucifixion.

Further, it is arguable that no miraculous events at all are reported of Muhammad in the Qur'an beyond the words themselves. While miraculous reports do appear in the Hadith Muslim tradition, these texts begin some 200 years later still and extend even several centuries beyond that.<sup>10</sup>

## **Zoroastrianism**

The span of potential dates for Zoroaster's birth varies as widely as a full 1,000 years, being placed somewhere between 1,500 and 500 BC!<sup>11</sup> Further, the vast majority of writings that teach Zoroastrian eschatological beliefs date only from the

ninth century AD. So this immediately removes the bulk of the most crucial Zoroastrian material to *at least 1,350* years after Zoroaster lived.<sup>12</sup>

The only items that could have been written by Zoroaster himself are a small portion of *non-theological* prayers and hymns, contained within the Avesta, which was composed over a period of 1,000 years. Moreover, the earliest manuscript copies of the Avesta are “highly dubious” and date to the thirteenth century AD, or some 1,800 years after the closest of Zoroaster’s birth dates!<sup>13</sup> Much of the religion’s theology (especially eschatology) comes from the Bundahishn, a ninth century AD writing.<sup>14</sup> So the end result is that we know very little concerning Zoroaster’s theology except through very late sources (of at least 1,350 years later) that were not written by him.<sup>15</sup> There are certainly no rivals here to Christianity’s teachings.

## **Scholarly Responses to the Evidential Comparisons**



How do critical scholars recognize and treat these historical data that clearly favor the Christian tradition as compared to the data that are possessed by the other religious traditions? Some even quite skeptical scholars somewhat surprisingly acknowledge the situation, or at least various aspects of it.

For example, after asking if the New Testament can be trusted, John A.T. Robinson comments: “It’s not a question that a Hindu would ask of the Bhagavad-Gita or a Muslim of the Koran or even a Jew of the Old Testament.” Then he adds that the majority scholarly outlook favors a generally conservative view

of the New Testament texts, due to the vast available data. Robinson concludes that the New Testament is “by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

In spite of his criticisms, Bart Ehrman acknowledges that, “the New Testament is preserved in far more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity.” Additionally, “scholars are convinced that we can reconstruct the original words of the New Testament with reasonable (though probably not 100 percent) accuracy.”<sup>17</sup>

However, well-copied manuscripts by themselves do not insure that the content is therefore reliable. Critical scholars have also commented on this matter. Many researchers, including Ehrman, have provided numerous comments regarding the early dates, reliable testimony and traditions, and multiple attestation of sources within various New Testament scenarios.<sup>18</sup>

But on too many occasions, scholars have also placed other religious examples almost on a par with the historical case for the New Testament writings by failing to look critically at the lack of non-Christian provenance. In fact, this is too often done without requiring any evidence at all for the non-Christian teachings.

For example, leading critical philosopher Charles Hartshorne implied in his comments regarding a public debate on Jesus’ resurrection that he felt bound not to accept Jesus’ resurrection because it might also confront him with the miraculous events that Buddha was supposed to have performed! But how can events regarding Jesus’ resurrection confirmed perhaps just months afterward be compared fairly to events reported several hundreds of years after Buddha?

Perhaps the reason for this comparison is at least partly solved when Hartshorne confesses in the last sentence of his essay, “My metaphysical bias is against resurrections.”<sup>19</sup>

Precisely such an overly-critical attitude toward Christian beliefs while hardly posing any similarly tough questions at all to the almost always unevidenced, non-Christian situations reveals a scholarly double standard. But too seldom scholars are hardly at all critical of non-Christian teachings. Granted, it could be that the lack of factual data regarding the non-Christian religions is simply unknown to the commentator. But it seems at many other times to be a case of political correctness or something similar that we see regularly in the news.

As a final brief point worth remembering, the popular platitude favoring “tolerance” above all is that all major religions basically proclaim the same core message or set of truths, though they may be packaged differently. The most common rendition is that all religions are paths up various sides of the same mountain. Interpreted in that manner, evidence is often not required, *unless*, of course, we are discussing Christianity! This double standard could be the most important back-handed compliment of all—the reason for this attitude is that above all other belief systems, Christianity *does* trade in factual and evidential data.

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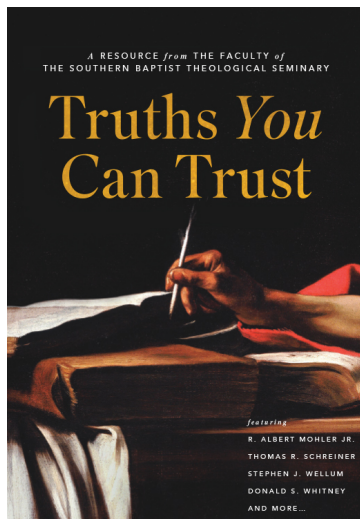
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