

2 Isn't Christianity just made up?

Isn't Christianity just made up? They ask. An Italian atheist took his parish priest to court for teaching the existence of Jesus and the judge refused to rule! Truth is you can't prove 100% that *anyone* existed – anyone who's not alive to prove it.

Actually Jesus *is* alive and he's made his case over 20 centuries - but that doesn't quite answer the question.

If people want to say Christianity's made up they'll be writing off a lot of historical evidence. The difficulty is that so much of that evidence is in Christian documents.

Not all of it. There are clear references to Jesus in first century writers.

Take Roman historian Tacitus. He writes that when Rome burned down in 64AD the Emperor Nero *fastened the guilt ...on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians...Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of...Pontius Pilate* Tacitus confirms from his ancient history what Christians recite Sunday by Sunday in their creed.

Scripture scholar Tom Wright says *it would be easier, frankly, to believe that Tiberius Caesar, Jesus' contemporary, was a figment of the imagination than to believe that there never was such a person as Jesus.* Trouble is you can see Tiberius' face on a coin but you can't see Jesus'. That's the way history goes! A Galilean carpenter wouldn't in the normal run of things leave the same mark on history as the Emperor of Rome!

If someone says to me Christianity's made up I'd point them patiently to the solid witness of the New Testament backed up by other first century writings.

At the heart of the New Testament is the story of Jesus who taught, healed, suffered and died in the name of his God. The astonishing part of this history is the record of his resurrection and the galvanising of his followers through the Holy Spirit.

People said Christianity was made up right from the beginning. Saul of Tarsus said so and then got stopped in his tracks on the way to Damascus by a heavenly light! The earliest historical evidence for Christianity actually lies in the letters of St. Paul which date from around 50AD, just 20 years after Jesus is said to have died and risen.

Millions today have read former atheist Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*. Strobel, a journalist and law student, attempted a rigorous investigation of the evidence for Jesus. He ended up a Christian! He was impressed by the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Strobel considered them to be as well authenticated as anything in history.

Discrepancies between the accounts - the number and placing of angels, who was first at the scene, where Christ appeared and so on - actually provide a ring of truth. These variations are consistent with the recording of a stupendous event. Any serious attempt to make up the resurrection stories would have made a better job of it!

When people say Christianity's made up we have to point them to the facts as best we can. That doesn't mean we shouldn't question their motivation. If you want to deny Christ's teaching, it's natural to have a go at denying his existence in the hope of undermining what he stands for.

Can you really undermine Christ's teaching like this? Mahatma Gandhi said of the Sermon on the Mount it'd be true even if Christ had never existed!

Is Christianity just made up? If it's not it's the best news of all. Atheist newspaper columnist Matthew Parris has said that if he came to believe it he'd spend his whole life letting people know about it. Those who have encountered the risen Jesus over 20 centuries prove his point.

How could so many have died as Christian martyrs for what they saw as at best a half truth? The experience of the living Christ by Christians is at the heart of the survival of Christianity for 2,000 years.

All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as this One Solitary Life....

(The name of Jesus) is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world.

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