

With religion, can we believe what we read?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Imagine, when I'm gone, that I never wrote a word — no columns, essays, books — nothing. None of my sermons or lectures, blogposts or letters, were written down. There was no written record of my words or thoughts you could read and be confident that "Chris wrote this." Everything you read about me was written by someone else, even some who never knew me; you form an image of me and feel that you have a fairly good sense of who I was and what I did, what I believed or didn't believe. Yet, how much confidence would you have that you knew who I was, what I did, what I thought or taught?

In the history of religion we have no literature that claims to be from the hand of the founder of that faith. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are known as the Books of Moses, yet no one knows if someone named Moses ever wrote a word of that text. Whether we consider Buddha or Confucius, Muhammad or Joseph Smith, there is no

way of knowing if they wrote anything at all. Some may have been illiterate, so they couldn't have written something even if they wanted to. Each of them relied on their followers or interpreters to pass along their message, their story. There is no evidence these Faith Founders employed secretaries or scribes to take dictation or make notes. How do we know later writings are accurate? Is it just a matter of faith?

In his classic expose of religion, "The Age of Reason" (1794), Thomas Paine stated his respect for Jesus of Nazareth as a major moral teacher. He went on to clearly state his problem with the supernaturalism of the Gospels:

"Jesus Christ wrote no account of himself, of his birth, parentage, or any thing else; not a line of what is called the New Testament is of his own writing. The history of him is altogether the work of other people; and as to the account given of his resurrection and ascension, it was the necessary counterpart to the story of his birth. His historians having brought him into the world in a supernatural manner, were obliged to take him out again in the same manner, or the first part of the story must have fallen to the ground." He questions the accounts of those who held the pens (styluses, quills?). How can we trust those

who passed along hearsay colored by their fervent faith rather than accuracy?

Think of our contemporaries who have died. Consider Martin Luther King Jr. Since his death in 1968, much has been written about him and he is often quoted as both a civil rights and religious authority. He never claimed to be divine, but guided by his faith — no one "believes" in the man. King was a powerful orator and a great writer as well. We can trace many of his ideas and beliefs straight back to his hand, his pen. He wrote many things, so we can be fairly certain we are hearing the man's voice in his own words. Thankfully, no one has attempted to deify Dr. King, and if they tried, anyone could easily seek for evidence in his own writings.

We have nothing like that from Jesus, or any other originator of a world faith. Along with Paine, we can be suspicious of the extraordinary claims in these ancient texts, and we can certainly question the supernaturalism without denying the historicity of a human being named Jesus. I don't doubt there was someone named Jesus in First Century Palestine any more than I would doubt there was someone named Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth. Though neither woman could read or write, I can still get a sense of what they thought and what

they did from the writings of others, while holding a healthy skepticism toward every storyteller.

All of this is to say, we are under no obligation to wholeheartedly believe any writings about someone who never wrote a word. Through my years of historical and biblical study in college and seminary, and based on my reflection and teaching, I choose to accept that Jesus existed, that he lived an honorable life of compassionate service, and through the writings of others he left many practical ethical instructions that can benefit the human community. Beyond that, there is no compelling reason to accept the worldview, or any irrational or superstitious biases, of those who wrote the stories.

We may be remembered by those who saw or heard us, maybe knew us; they can tell their own tales of our words and actions. Yet, can we ever really know someone unless we have something created by their own hands?

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