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The Impossible Faith

Or, How Not to Start an Ancient Religion

James Patrick Holding

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If you are finding this page from *The Impossible Faith* book, welcome! This is a more detailed offering upon which the first few chapters of TIF was based. If you want to discuss some aspects of the book, come see me on my forum of choice, [TheologyWeb](#).

Over the years we have collected literally reams of information in defense of the Christian faith. In that time we have dealt with, and made use of, numerous sources informing of the social, literary, and other background of the NT world. Now the time has come to piece together some of these in a general defense of the faith. (We have comments on some reactions to this piece from certain local yokels at MetaFilter [here](#).)

We have subtitled our piece, *How Not to Start an Ancient Religion*. The background here is certain skeptical claims that Christianity was a movement born of the adage that a sucker is born every minute, and Christianity collected about a year's worth of suckers to start with. As proof we are pointed to various figures and/or movements in history -- [Sabbatai Sevi](#), [Zalmoxis](#), or [Alex and his pet snake Glycon](#). We have shown why each of these parallels is inadequate, but now it is time to put together a comprehensive list of issues that we assert that critics must deal with in explaining why Christianity succeeded where it should have clearly failed or died out as did these others. Merely saying it was "lucky" where Sevi, et al. were not will not be an adequate answer -- and in fact, is

the least likely answer of all as we shall see.

Below I offer a list of 17 factors to be considered -- places where Christianity "did the wrong thing" in order to be a successful religion. It is my contention that the only way Christianity did succeed is because it was a truly revealed faith -- and because it had the irrefutable witness of the resurrection. I may add more factors as my research continues. For now, this should be enough to keep the skeptics busy if they aren't otherwise engaged in such scholarly pursuits as looking for contradictions between numbers in 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles or digging up obscure and irrelevant pagan figures who sold snake oil. Veteran readers will note that there is little new actually reported in this article that is not found elsewhere on this site; indeed much of what is below is taken verbatim from other articles - it is only the application that is new.

Factor #1 -- Who Would Buy One Crucified?

1 Cor. 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

1 Cor. 15:12-19 Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

With the exception of the Christ-mythers and conspiracy theorists (and I put Muslims in this rank, where this issue is concerned!), few would deny the historical reality of the crucifixion. But once that door is opened, it brings about the first of our problems: Who on earth would believe a religion centered on a crucified man?

As Martin Hengel has amply shown us in his monograph, *Crucifixion*, the shame of the cross was the result of a fundamental norm of the Greco-Roman Empire. Hengel observes that "crucifixion was an utterly offensive affair, 'obscene' in the original sense of the word." (22) As Malina and Rohrbaugh note in their *Social-Science Commentary* on

John [263-4], crucifixion was a "status degradation ritual" designed to humiliate in every way, including the symbolic pinioning of hands and legs signifying a loss of power, and loss of ability to control the body in various ways, including befouling one's self with excrement. The process was so offensive that the Gospels turn out to be our most detailed description of a crucifixion from ancient times - the pagan authors were too revolted by the subject to give equally comprehensive descriptions - in spite of the fact that thousands of crucifixions were done at a time on some occasions. "(T)he cultured literary world wanted to have nothing to do with [crucifixion], and as a rule kept silent about it." (38) It was recognized as early as Paul (1 Cor. 1:18; see also Heb. 12:2) that preaching a savior who underwent this disgraceful treatment was folly. This was so for Jews (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23) as well as Gentiles. Justin Martyr later writes in his first Apology 13:4 --

They say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God...

Celsus describes Jesus as one who was "bound in the most ignominious fashion" and "executed in a shameful way." Josephus describes crucifixion as "the most wretched of deaths." An oracle of Apollo preserved by Augustine described Jesus as "a god who died in delusions...executed in the prime of life by the worst of deaths, a death bound with iron." (4) And so the opinions go: Seneca, Lucian, Pseudo-Manetho, Plautus. Even the lower classes joined the charade, as demonstrated by a bit of graffiti depicting a man supplicating before a crucified figure with an asses' head - sub-titled, "Alexamenos worships god." (The asses' head being a recognition of Christianity's Jewish roots: A convention of anti-Jewish polemic was that the Jews worshipped an ass in their temple. - 19) Though confused in other matters, Walter Bauer rightly said (ibid.):

The enemies of Christianity always referred to the disgracefulness of the death of Jesus with great emphasis and malicious pleasure. A god or son of god dying on a cross! That was enough to put paid to the new religion.

And DeSilva adds [51]:

No member of the Jewish community or the Greco-Roman society would have come to faith or joined the Christian movement without first accepting that God's perspective on what kind of behavior merits honor differs exceedingly from the perspective of human beings, since the message about Jesus is that both the Jewish and Gentile leaders of Jerusalem evaluated Jesus, his

convictions and his deeds as meriting a shameful death, but God overturned their evaluation of Jesus by raising him from the dead and seating him at God's own right hand as Lord.

N. T. Wright makes these points in *Resurrection of the Son of God* [543, 559, 563]:

The argument at this point proceeds in three stages. (i) Early Christianity was thoroughly messianic, shaping itself around the belief that Jesus was God's Messiah, Israel's Messiah. (ii) But Messiahship in Judaism, such as it was, never envisaged someone doing the sort of things Jesus had done, let alone suffering the fate he suffered. (iii) The historian must therefore ask why the early Christians made this claim about Jesus, and why they reordered their lives accordingly.

Jewish beliefs about a coming Messiah, and about the deeds such a figure would be expected to accomplish, came in various shapes and sizes, but they did not include a shameful death which left the Roman empire celebrating its usual victory.

Something has happened to belief in a coming Messiah...It has neither been abandoned or simply reaffirmed wholesale. It has been redefined around Jesus. Why? To this question, of course, the early Christians reply with one voice: we believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah because he was raised bodily from the dead. Nothing else will do.

The message of the cross was an abhorrence, a vulgarity in its social context. Discussing crucifixion was the worst sort of social *faux pas*; it was akin, in only the thinnest sense, to discussing sewage reclamation techniques over a fine meal - but even worse when associated with an alleged god come to earth. Hengel adds: "A crucified messiah...must have seemed a contradiction in terms to anyone, Jew, Greek, Roman or barbarian, asked to believe such a claim, and it will certainly have been thought offensive and foolish." That a god would descend to the realm of matter and suffer in this ignominious fashion "ran counter not only to Roman political thinking, but to the whole ethos of religion in ancient times and in particular to the ideas of God held by educated people." (10, 4) Announcing a crucified god would be akin to the Southern Baptist Convention announcing that they endorsed pedophilia! If Jesus had truly been a god, then by Roman thinking, the Crucifixion should never have happened. Celsus, an ancient pagan critic of Christianity, writes:

But if (Jesus) was really so great, he ought, in order to display his divinity, to have disappeared suddenly from the cross.

This comment represents not just some skeptical challenge, but is a reflection of an ingrained socio-theological consciousness. The Romans could not envision a god dying like Jesus - period. Just as well to argue that the sky is green, or that pigs fly, only those arguments, at least, would not offend sensibilities to the maximum. We need to emphasize this (for the first but not the last time) from a social perspective because our own society is not as attuned as ancient society to the process of honor. We found it strange to watch *Shogun* and conceive of men committing suicide for the sake of honor. The Jews, Greeks and Romans would not have found this strange at all. As David DeSilva shows in *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity*, that which was honorable was, to the ancients, of primary importance. Honor was placed above one's personal safety and was the key element in deciding courses of action. Isocrates gives behavioral advice based not on what was "right or wrong", but on what was "noble or disgraceful". "The promise of honor and threat of disgrace [were] prominent goads to pursue a certain kind of life and to avoid many alternatives." [24] Christianity, of course, argued in reply that Jesus' death was an honorable act of sacrifice for the good of others -- but that sort of logic only works if you are already convinced by other means!

This being the case, we may fairly ask, for the first time in this essay, why Christianity succeeded at all. The ignominy of a crucified savior was as much a deterrent to Christian belief as it is today - indeed, it was far, far more so! Why, then, were there any Christians at all? At best this should have been a movement that had only a few strange followers, then died out within decades as a footnote, if it was mentioned at all. The historical reality of the crucifixion could not of course be denied. To survive Christianity should have either turned Gnostic (as indeed happened in some offshoots), or else not bothered with Jesus at all, and merely made him into the movement's first martyr for a higher moral ideal within Judaism. It would have been absurd to suggest, to either Jew or Gentile, that a crucified being was worthy of worship or died for our sins.

There can be only one good explanation: Christianity succeeded because from the cross came victory, and after death came resurrection! The shame of the cross turns out to be one of Christianity's most incontrovertible proofs!

Factor #2 -- Neither Here Nor There: Or, A Man from Galilee??

John 1:46 And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?

Acts 21:39 But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city...

What advantage has religion and geography? To the ancients, "much in every way"! Political correctness was 2000 years in the future, and the Greco-Roman world was rife with what we would call prejudices and stereotypes -- which were accepted as "Gospel truth"! Say today that "X are always brutes, gluttons, etc." and you will have half a dozen civil rights groups ringing your doorbell. Say it in Rome and you'll have everyone agreeing with you -- sometimes including the group itself!

Jesus' Jewishness could hardly have been denied by the early Christians, but it was also a major impediment to spreading the Gospel beyond the Jews themselves. Judaism was regarded by the Romans and Gentiles as a superstition. Roman writers like Tacitus willingly reported (not as true, but in the frame of "some say...") all manner of calumnies against Jews as a whole, regarding them as a spiteful and hateful race. Bringing a Jewish savior to the door of the average Roman would have been only less successful bringing one to the door of a Nazi -- though the Roman may not have wanted to kill you; he would certainly have laughed in your face, slammed the door, or given you a violent noogie.

This is made quite clear by Judaism's own limited inroads in terms of Gentile converts. To be sure, this is partly attributable to Judaism not being much of a missionary religion. And yet if Christianity didn't have some cards close to the vest, the Jewishness of Jesus *even by itself* means that it never should have expanded in the Gentile world much beyond the circle of those Gentiles who were already God-fearers (i.e., Gentile proselytes to Judaism).

Let us stress again the points made by Robert Wilken in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. The Romans naturally considered their own belief systems to be superior to all others. (57) They also believed that superstitions (such as Judaism and Christianity) undermined the social system established by their religion - and of course they were right. However, the point is that anyone who followed or adopted one of their foreign superstitions would be looked on not only as a religious rebel, but as a social rebel as well. They were breaking with the status quo, upsetting the apple cart, taking part in a 60s style rebellion against the establishment. They upset the Roman concept of piety and were thought to be incapable of it. In those days, things were not pluralistic or "politically correct" and there were no champions of diversity on the college campuses: Today, atheists and theists can

debate in a free forum, but back then one of the camps would have the state (and the sword!) on their side - and in the time we're talking about, that wasn't the Christians!

Those who adhered to *superstitio* therefore found themselves, as a matter of course, associated with bizarre and extreme behaviors - as the Christians did, and as Tacitus also reports of the Jews in his *Histories*. And it went further: "(B)ecause superstition leads to irrational ideas about the gods, the inevitable consequence is atheism." (61) Since "superstitionists" bucked the established cosmic order, their view of the universe was regarded as capricious and irrational, and this eventually led to the charge by critics like Crescens that Christians were actually atheists (68).

That's just a problem within the Gentile mission, of course. But both there, and even within Judaism, Christianity had to overcome another stigma, exemplified in our comparative quotes above. When Paul mentioned that he was from Tarsus, he didn't do it so he could compare notes about hometowns with the centurion. Being from a major *polis* like Tarsus signified a high honor rating for the person who laid claim to it -- only marginally matched today in our concepts of "being from the right side of the tracks"! Christianity had a serious handicap in this regard, the stigma of a savior who undeniably hailed from Galilee -- for the Romans and Gentiles, not only a Jewish land, but a hotbed of political sedition; for the Jews, not as bad as Samaria of course, but a land of yokels and farmers without much respect for the Torah, and worst of all, a savior from a puny village of no account. Not even a birth in Bethlehem, or Matthew's suggestion that an origin in Galilee was prophetically ordained, would have unattached such a stigma: Indeed, Jews would not be convinced of this, even as today, unless something else first convinced them that Jesus was divine or the Messiah. The ancients were no less sensitive to the possibility of "spin doctoring" than we are.

There are other minor extensions to this business of stereotyping. Assigning Jesus the work of a carpenter was the wrong thing to do; Cicero noted that such occupations were "vulgar" and compared the work to slavery. Placing Jesus' birth story in the a suspicious context where a charge of illegitimacy would be all too obvious to make would compound the problems as well. If the Gospels were making up these things, how hard would it have been to put Jesus in Sepphoris or even Capernaum (and still take advantage of the prophetic "Galilee" connection) -- and as skeptics are wont to say, wrongly, this would be no easier or harder to check out than Nazareth. How hard would it have been to take an "adoptionist" Christology and give Jesus an indisputably honorable birth (rather than claiming honor by the dubious, on the surface, claim that God was Jesus' Father)? Maybe harder, since more people are less likely to notice one man

than in a small town with strong community ties. What it boils down to is that everything about Jesus as a person was all wrong to get people to believe he was deity -- and there must have been something powerful to overcome all the stigmas.

Factor #3 -- Getting Physical! The Wrong "Resurrection"

As we have shown [here](#), the resurrection of Jesus, within the context of Judaism, was thought by Gentiles to be what can be described as "grossly" physical. This in itself raises a certain problem for Christianity beyond a basic Jewish mission. We have regularly quoted the dictum of PHEME PERKINS: "Christianity's pagan critics generally viewed resurrection as misunderstood metempsychosis at best. At worst, it seemed ridiculous." It may further be noted that the pagan world was awash with points of view associated with those who thought matter was evil and at the root of all of man's problems. Platonic thought, as Murray Harris puts it, supposed that "man's highest good consisted of emancipation from corporeal defilement. The nakedness of disembodiment was the ideal state." Physical resurrection was the *last* sort of endgame for mankind that you wanted to preach.

Indeed, among the pagans, resurrection was deemed impossible. Wright in *Resurrection of the Son of God* quotes Homer's King Priam: "Lamenting for your dead son will do no good at all. You will be dead before you bring him back to life." And Aeschylus *Eumenides*: "Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection." And so on, with several other quotes denying the possibility of resurrection. [32-3] Wright even notes that belief in resurrection was a ground for persecution: "We should not forget that when Irenaeus became bishop of Lyons he was replacing the bishop who had died in a fierce persecution; and that one of the themes of that persecution was the Christians' tenacious hold on the belief in bodily resurrection. Details of the martyrdom are found in the letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyons to those of Asia and Phrygia. The letter describes how in some cases the torturers burnt the bodies and scattered the ashes into Rhone, so that no relic of the martyrs might still be seen on earth. This they did, says the writer, 'as though they were capable of conquering god, and taking away their rebirth [palingenesia]'."

Judaism itself would have had its own, lesser difficulty, albeit not insurmountable: there was no perception of the resurrection of an individual before the general resurrection at judgment. But again, this, though weird, could have been overcome -- as long as there was evidence! Not so easily in the pagan world. We can see well enough that Paul had to fight the Gnostics, the Platonists, and the ascetics on these counts. But what makes this especially telling is that a

physical resurrection was completely unnecessary for merely starting a religion. It would have been enough to say that Jesus' body had been taken up to heaven, like Moses' or like Elijah's. Indeed this would have fit (see [here](#)) what was expected, and would have been much easier to "sell" to the Greeks and Romans, for whom the best "evidence" of elevation to divine rank was apotheosis -- the transport of the soul to the heavenly realms after death; or else translation while still alive. So why bother making the road harder? There is only one plausible answer -- they really had a resurrection to preach.

Factor #4 -- What's New? What's Not Good

Roman literature tells us that "(t)he primary test of truth in religious matters was custom and tradition, the practices of the ancients." (62) In other words, if your beliefs had the right sort of background and a decent lineage, you had the respect of the Romans. Old was good. Innovation was bad.

This was a big sticking point for Christianity, because it could only trace its roots back to a recent founder. Christians were regarded as "arrogant innovators" (63) whose religion was the new kid on the block, but yet had the nerve to insist that it was the only way to go! As noted above, Christianity argued that the "powers that be" which judged Jesus worthy of the worst and most shameful sort of death were 180 degrees off, and God Himself said so!

Malina and Neyrey [164] explain the matter further. Reverence was given to ancestors, who were considered greater "by the fact of birth." Romans "were culturally constrained to attempt the impossible task of living up to the traditions of those necessarily greater personages of their shared past." What had been handed down was "presumed valid and normative. Forceful arguments might be phrased as: 'We have always done it this way!'" *Semper, ubique, ab omnibus* -- "Always, everywhere, by everyone!" In contrast, Christianity said, "Not now, not here, and not you!" Of course this explains why Paul appeals to that which was handed on to him by others (1 Cor. 11:2) -- but that is within a church context and where the handing on occurred in the last 20 years! Pilch and Malina add [*Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, 19] that change or novelty in religious doctrine or practice met with an especially violent reaction; change or novelty was "a means value which serves to innovate or subvert core and secondary values."

Even Christian eschatology and theology stood against this perception. The idea of sanctification, of an ultimate cleansing and perfecting of the world and each person, stood in opposition to the view that the past was the best of times, and things have gotten worse since then.

The Jews, on the other hand, traced their roots back much further, and although some Roman critics did make an effort to "uproot" those roots, others (including Tacitus) accorded the Jews a degree of respect because of the antiquity of their beliefs. In light of this we can understand efforts by Christian writers to link Christianity to Judaism as much as possible, and thus attain the same "antiquity" that the Jews were sometimes granted. (Of course we would agree that the Christians were right to do this, but that is not how the Romans saw it!)

Critics of Christianity, of course, "caught on" to this "trick" and soon pointed (however illicitly) out that Christians could hardly claim Judaism and at the same time observe none of its practices. Therefore this is a hurdle that Christianity could never overcome outside a limited circle -- not without some substantial offering of proof.

Factor #5 -- Don't Demand Behavior

This is not one of the greatest barriers, but it is a significant one, and of course still is today. Ethically, Christian religion is "hard to do". Judaism was as well, and that is one reason why there were so few God-fearers. Christianity didn't offer nice, drunken parties or orgies with temple prostitutes; in fact it forbade them. It didn't encourage wealth; it encouraged sharing the wealth. It didn't appeal to the senses, it promised "pie in the sky by and by." This was a problem in the ancient world as much as it is now -- if not more so. It would not appeal to the rich, who would be directed to share their wealth. The poor might like that, but not if they couldn't spend that shared dough on their favorite vice-distraction (not all of which were known to be "self-harming" and therefore offered an ulterior motivation for giving them up). Again, this is not an insurmountable hurdle; some Romans were attracted to the ethical system of Judaism, and would have been likewise attracted to Christianity. But it is very difficult to explain why Christianity grew where God-fearers were always a very small group. Not even evangelistic fervor explains that.

Factor #6 -- Tolerance is a Virtue

We have already alluded to the problem of Christianity being seen as an "arrogant innovator." Now compound the problem: Not only an innovator, but an exclusivist innovator. Many skeptics and non-believers today claim to be turned off by Christian "arrogance" and exclusivity. How much more so in the ancient world? The Romans were already grossly intolerant (point 2 above); how much more so in the context of another and very new faith playing the same game and claiming to overthrow the social and religious order? How if

a faith came telling us we needed to stop attending our churches (and in fact would prefer we tear them down!), stop having our parties, stop observing the social order that had been in place from the time of our venerated ancestors until now? As DeSilva notes, "the message about this Christ was incompatible with the most deeply rooted religious ideology of the Gentile world, as well as the more recent message propogated in Roman imperial ideology" [46] (i.e., the *pax Romana* versus the eschatology and judgment of God). The Christians refused to believe in the gods, "the guardians of stability of the world order, the generous patrons who provided all that was needed for sustaining life, as well as the granters of individual petitions." Jews and Christians alike were accused of atheism under this rebric. Futhermore, because there was no aspect of social life that was secular -- religion was intertwined with public life in a way that would make legions of ACLU attorneys choke to death -- Jews and Christians held themseles aloof from public life, and engendered thereby the indignation of their neighbors.

That was bad enough, but Jews too would be intolerant to the new faith. Jewish families would feel social pressure to cut off converts and avoid the shame of their conversion. Without something to overcome Roman and even Jewish intolerance, Christianity was doomed.

Factor #7 -- Stepping Into History

Acts 26:26 For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

This factor is a large one, multifaceted and complex and with varying levels of strength. Let's put it this way: If you wanted to start a new religion with new and wild claims involved, do you claim, at *any* point, to have connections that you don't have? If I claimed tomorrow or even 40 years from now that my Aunt Nettie was resurrected, do I dare say that she was put on trial before Clarence Thomas, was wanted by my state governor for questioning, was buried in the intended tomb of Tom Cruise? We have often individually considered the claims of Christianity such as the burial in Joe of A.'s tomb, but let's now consider collectively what we're dealing with. The NT is filled with claims of connections to and reports of incidents involving "famous people." Here's how one of our readers put it: Herod Agrippa -- this man was a client king for the Romans over the area surrounding Jerusalem -- "was eaten of worms" as Luke reported in Acts 12:20-23. Copies of Acts circulated in the area and were accessible to the public. Had Luke reported falsely, Christianity would have been dismissed as a fraud and would not have "caught on" as

a religion. If Luke lied in his reports, Luke probably would have been jailed and/or executed by Agrippa's son, Herod Agrippa II (who held the same position), because that was the fellow Paul testified to in Acts 25-26 (reported by Luke). And Agrippa II was alive and in power after Luke wrote and circulated Acts; indeed he had access to all the needed information and claims ("For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." [Acts 26:26-27] Did Agrippa execute Paul for these statements? No, and he could not have if it was not true. Rather Agrippa told Governor Festus, "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar." [Acts 26:32])

"So what?" the skeptic may ask. So what? Now consider the domino effect of making such claims. If claim #1 is proven false, that opens the way to doubt others -- all the way up the line to the resurrection. And it need not even be Joe of A's tomb in particular, or Herod becoming wormburgers in particular. It can be any one of the places where the early Christians and the NT made bold claim to some influence or event in any city. People outside the area of Lystra may not have known enough about what happened in Lystra, or wanted to check it, but Christianity was making claims at varied points across the Empire, and there were also built in "fact checkers" stationed around the Empire who could say something about all the claims central to Jerusalem and Judaea -- the Diaspora Jews. (And it gets worse; see below!)

The NT claims countless touch-points that could go under this list. An earthquake, a darkness at midday, the temple curtain torn in two, an execution, all at Passover (with the attendant crowds numbering in the millions), people falling out of a house speaking in tongues at Pentecost (another "millions attend" event) -- all in a small city and culture where word would spread fast (see below). Healings of illnesses and dysfunctions, even reversals of death, in highly public places. A triumphal entry into Jerusalem in blatant fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

In short, Christianity was highly vulnerable to inspection and disproof on innumerable points -- any one of which, had it failed to prove out, would have snowballed into further doubt, especially given the previous factors above which would have been motive enough for any Jew or Gentile to say or do something. This is not the way to start a religion. You start a religion by linking to obscure *and* nameless people. You don't talk of a synagogue ruler or a Sanhedrin member, or even a centurion being in your history (even if you don't name them; there were few enough of each of these that it would not be hard to make a check). You stick with no-names like the woman at the well. Such persons of course would have had to

be interacted with anyway, but the point is not their presence, but the presence of those of greater social standing and notice, and the claims attached to them. It is impossible that Christianity thrived and survived without having its ducks in a row in this regard.

Factor #8 -- Do Martyrs Matter, and More?

This is a standard argument, but in need of some fine-tuning. The most important martyrs are those of the time of Jesus and shortly thereafter. Admittedly there are few examples of this sort of martyrdom that we may point to -- records of church tradition are our only source for the martyrdoms of many of the Apostles; our best witness is actually Paul himself, who testifies that he persecuted the church with "zeal" -- using a word used to describe the actions of the Maccabbeans who killed when needed to clean things up.

But in fact we can broaden this argument further: persecution did not automatically equal martyrdom, and this is yet another reason why Christianity should not have thrived and survived. As Robin Lane Fox writes, "By reducing the history of Christian persecution to a history of legal hearings, we miss a large part of the victimization." [Fox.PagChr, 424] Beyond action by authorities, Christians could expect social ostracization if they stuck by their faith, and that is where much of the persecution Fox refers to came from - rejection by family and society, relegation to outcast status. It didn't need to be martyrdom -- it was enough that you would suffer socially and otherwise, even if still alive. DeSilva notes that those who violated the current social values (as Christians indeed did!) would find themselves subject to measures designed to shame them back into compliance -- insult, reproach, physical abuse, whipping, confiscation of property, and of course disgrace -- much more important in an honor-and-shame society than to us. And the NT offers ample record of such things happening [Heb. 10:32-4; 1 Pet. 2:12, 3:16, 4:12-16; Phil. 1:27-30; 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:13-14; 2 Thess. 1:4-5; Rev. 2:9-10, 13].

So it is: The Jews would dislike you, the Romans would dislike you, your family would disown you, everyone would avoid or make sport of you. Furthermore, men like Paul and Matthew, and even Peter and John, gave up lucrative trades for the sake of a mission that was all too obviously going to be nothing but trouble for them. It is quite unlikely that anyone would have gone the distance for the Christian faith at any time -- unless it had something tangible behind it.

Factor #9 -- Human vs. Divine: Never the Twain Shall Meet!

Our next factor is related to the one above about resurrection, and it is a problem from both a Jewish and a Gentile perspective. Earl Doherty, a skeptic, has referred to the incredibility of "the idea that Jews, both in Palestine and across the empire, could have come to believe-or been converted to the idea by others-that a human man was the Son of God....To believe that ordinary Jews were willing to bestow on any human man, no matter how impressive, all the titles of divinity and full identification with the ancient God of Abraham is simply inconceivable." And so it would be: Unless it actually happened, and that "human man" proved himself to be the Son of God. Doherty's "fallacy" amounts to an argument in favor of Christianity!

And it would be no better in the Gentile world. The idea of a god condescending to material form, for more than a temporary visit, of sweating, stinking, going to the bathroom, and especially *suffering and dying* here on earth -- this would be too much to swallow!

Factor #10 -- No Class!

"Neither male nor female, neither slave nor free." You might be so used to applauding this sort of concept that you don't realize what a radical message it was for the ancient world. And this is another reason why Christianity should have petered out in the cradle if it were a fake.

Malina and Neyrey note that in the ancient world, people took their major identity from the various groups to which they belonged. Whatever group(s) they were embedded in determined their identity. Changes in persons (such as Paul's conversion) were abnormal. Each person had certain role expectations they were expected to fulfill. The erasure or blurring of these various distinctions -- stated clearly in Paul, but also done in practice by Jesus during his ministry -- would have made Christianity seem radical and offensive.

Note that this is not just to those in power or rich; it is an anachronism of Western individualism to suppose that a slave or the poor would have found Christianity's message appealing on this basis. For one thing, even from a Western perspective, joining the group did not do anything to alleviate their condition in practical terms. For another, in the ancient world, it would have been foreign to the mind to not stand in some sort of dependent relationship. "When ancient Mediterraneans speak of 'freedom,' they generally understand the term as both freedom from slavery to one lord or master, and freedom to enter the service of another lord or benefactor." [163] It would also not have occurred to such persons as a whole that their situation could be changed, since all that happened was attributed to fate, fortune, or providence. [189] You did not fight your situation, you

endured it, and to endure it was the most honorable thing. [Hence the joke of Job's wife saying, "Job, get a job!" is funnier than we think!] In other words, it was not a matter of whether you were in service to another, but who you were in service to!) Shattering these social distinctions would have been a *faux pas* of the greatest order -- unless you had some powerful cards to play.

By the same token, a Christian's Jewish neighbors would be no happier. Strict observance of the Torah became Judaism's own "defense mechanism" against Roman prejudices, their way of staying pure of outside influences. A convert who ceased to observe the law, and began to associate with Gentiles, would receive a double-whammy -- especially with memories still fresh of the era of Antiochus, when Jews often capitulated to Hellenism. He had in essence given up "spiritual showering"!

Christianity turned the norms upside down and said that birth, ethnicity, gender, and wealth -- that which determined a person's honor and worth in this setting -- meant zipola. Even minor honor signs like appearance and charisma were dissed {2 Cor. 5:12).

The group-identity factor makes for another proof of Christianity's authenticity. In a group-oriented society, you took your identity from your group leader, and people needed the support and endorsement of others to support their identity. Christianity forced a severing of social and religious ties, the things which made an ancient person "human" in standing. (It did provide its own community support in return, but that hardly explains why people join in the first place!) Moreover, a person like Jesus could not have kept a ministry going unless those around him supported him. A merely human Jesus could not have met this demand and must have provided convincing proofs of his power and authority to maintain a following, and for a movement to have started and survived well beyond him. A merely human Jesus would have had to live up to the expectations of others and would have been abandoned, or at least had to change horses, at the first sign of failure.

Factor #11 -- Don't Rely on Women!

This one has been brought up many times, but it bears repeating and elaboration. If Christianity wanted to succeed, it should never have admitted that women were the first to discover the empty tomb or the first to see the Risen Jesus. It also never should have admitted that women were main supporters (Luke 8:3) or lead converts (Acts 16).

Many have pointed out that women were regarded as "bad witnesses" in the ancient world. We need to emphasize that

this was not a peculiarity as it would be seen today, but an ingrained stereotype. As Malina and Neyrey note, gender in antiquity came laden with "elaborate stereotypes of what was appropriate male or female behavior." [72] Quintilian said that where murder was concerned, males are more likely to commit robbery, while females were prone to poisoning. We find such sentiments absurd and politically incorrect today -- but whether they are or not, this was ingrained indelibly in the ancient mind. "In general Greek and Roman courts excluded as witnesses women, slaves, and children...According to Josephus...[women] are unacceptable because of the 'levity and temerity of their sex'." [82] Women were so untrustworthy that they were not even allowed to be witnesses to the rising of the moon as a sign of the beginning of festivals! DeSilva also notes [33] that a woman and her words were not regarded as "public property" but should rather be guarded from strangers -- women were expected to speak to and through their husbands. A woman's place was in the home, not the witness stand, and any woman who took an independent witness was violating the honor code.

It would have been much easier to put the finding of the tomb on the male disciples (as seems to have been emphasized, based on the 1 Cor. 15 creed, though that serves a different purpose of establishing that the church's *leadership* was a witness to the Risen Christ, not so much an avoidance of the female witnesses), or someone like Cleophas or even Nicodemus, find the tomb first, or to mediate the witness through Peter or John. But they were apparently stuck with this -- and also apparently overcame yet another stigma.

Factor #12 -- Don't Rely on Bumpkins, Either!

But before you go out and join NOW, we have more. It wasn't just women who had a problem. Peter and John were dismissed based on their social standing (Acts 4:13) and this reflects a much larger point of view among the ancients. We have noted above the problem of having Jesus hail from Galilee and Nazareth. This was as much a problem for the disciples as well -- and would have hindered their preaching. The Jews themselves had no trust in such people, if we are to believe later witness in the Talmud: of men such as Peter and John, called "people of the land," it was said: "...we do not commit testimony to them; we do not accept testimony from them." Though this is a late witness, it represents an ancient truism also applicable in the ancient world as a whole. Social standing was intimately tied to personal character. Fairly or unfairly, a country bumpkin was the last person you would believe. Only Paul may have avoided this stigma among the apostolic band. (Matthew may have as well, if he were not a member of a group despised for different reasons: a tax collector!) Very few messengers of Christianity would have been able to avoid this stigma.

There's another complexity to this factor: Christianity held none of the power cards. It was not endorsed by the "power structure" of the day, neither Roman nor Jewish. It could have been crushed merely by authority if necessary. Why wasn't it, when it made itself so prone to be in the business of others? You think no one would care? Don't be sure:

Factor #13 -- You Can't Keep a Secret!

The group-oriented culture of the ancients leads to a shoring up of yet another common apologetic argument. Apologists regularly note that Christian claims would have been easy to check out and verify. Skeptics, especially G. A. Wells, counter by supposing that no one would have cared to find out such things. The skeptics are very wrong -- they operate not only against the natural human tendency to curiosity, but also against a very important group-oriented social structure.

Do you value your privacy? Then stay in America. Malina and Neyrey note that "in group-oriented cultures such as the ancient Mediterranean, we must remember that people continually mind each other's business." [183] Privacy was unknown and unexpected. On the one hand, neighbors exerted "constant vigilance" over others; on the other hand, those watched were constantly concerned for appearances, and the associated rewards of honor or sanctions of shame that came with the results. It's the same in group-oriented cultures today...if you ever wonder why we have trouble spreading "democracy" you need look no further than that 70% of the world is group-oriented.

Think of this: We complain of the erosion of privacy, but know as well that it is a compromise for the sake of social control. The ancients would not have worried about not having adequate measures in place to stop a terrorist attack -- because such measures of surveillance were already present. Control comes not from individuals controlling themselves, but from the group controlling the individual. (This is also why we have a tough time relating to the ancient church's ways of fellowship!) Pilch and Malina [115] add that strangers were viewed in the ancient world as posing a threat to the community, because "they are potentially anything one cares to imagine...Hence, they must be checked over both as to how they might fit in and as to whether they will subscribe to the community's norms." Malina adds in *The New Testament World* [36-7] that honor was always presumed to exist within one's own family of blood," but all outside that circle are "presumed to be dishonorable -- untrustworthy, if you will -- unless proved otherwise." No one outside the family is trusted "unless that trust can be validated and verified." Strangers to a village are considered "potential enemies"; foreigners "just assing through" (as missionaries would) are "considered as certain enemies."

Missionaries would find their virtues tested at every new stopping point!

Ancient people controlled one another's behavior by watching them, spreading word of their behavior (what we call "gossip"), and by public dishonor. Critics who ask what Pharisees were doing out in the country watching Jesus' disciples crack grain, and consider that improbable, are way off track. "...[T]he Pharisees seems to mind Jesus' business all the time," [183] and little wonder, since that was quite normal to do. (Philo notes that there were "thousands" who kept their eyes on others in their zeal to ensure that others did not subvert the Jewish ancestral institutions -- Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 379.)

So now the skeptic has another conundrum. In a society where nothing escaped notice, there was indeed every reason to suppose that people hearing the Gospel message would check against the facts -- especially where a movement with a radical message like Christianity was concerned. The empty tomb *would* be checked. Matthew's story of resurrected saints would be checked out. Lazarus would be sought out for questioning. Excessive honor claims, such as that Jesus had been vindicated, or his claims to be divine, would have been given close scrutiny. And later, converts to the new faith would have to answer to their neighbors. Checking the facts would provide "grist for the mill" (since it would be assumed it could help control the movement). If the Pharisees checked Jesus on things like handwashing and grain picking; if large crowds gathered around Jesus each time he so much as sneezed -- how much more would things like a claimed resurrection have been looked at!

Factor #14 -- An Ignorant Deity??

Scholars of all persuasions have long recognized the "criteria of embarrassment" as a marker for authentic words of Jesus. Places where Jesus claims to be ignorant (not knowing the day or hour of his return; not knowing who touched him in the crowd) or shows weakness are taken as honest recollections and authentic (even where miracles stories often are not!). This is a lesser cousin of the crucifixion factor above -- if you want a decent deity, you have to make him fully respectable. Ignorance of future or present events paint a stark portrait that theological explanations about kenotic emptying just won't overcome in the short term. You have to have a trump card to overcome that seeming two of spades; otherwise critics like Celsus have more axes to grind.

Factor #15 -- A Prophet Without Honor

Mark 6:4 A prophet is not without honour, but in

his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.

We have already noted above that Jesus died a dishonorable form of death, and came from a locale with a low "honor rating". There is more to this matter of dishonor, but so as not to be appearing to stack the deck, let's look at some other places where Jesus endured disgrace -- and thereby also offended the sensibilities of his contemporaries:

- The mocking before his execution -- this was no mere game of dress-up, but a calculated insult to Jesus' honor and his claim to be King of the Jews. Doing this, and challenging Jesus to prophesy, was a way of challenging, and negating, Jesus' honor. By the thinking of an honor-based society, Jesus should have met the challenge and shown himself to be a true prophet or king.
- The charges themselves -- on the surface, Jesus openly committed blasphemy and pled guilty to sedition. "Those who elected to follow such a subversive and disgraced man were immediately suspect in the eyes of [Jews and Romans]." [DeSilva, 46]
- The burial -- Byron McCane has written in an article *The Shame of Jesus' Burial* in which he argues that Joseph of Arimathea had clear motives, even aside from being a disciple of Jesus, to arrange for the burial: It fits the requirement of Deut. 21:22-23 to bury one hung on a tree before sunset, and as a Sanhedrin member Joseph would have this concern and want to make arrangements. On the other hand, that Jesus was buried in Joseph's tomb -- and not in a tomb belonging to his family -- was itself dishonorable. The lack of mourners for Jesus was also a great dishonor.

It should be fairly noted that McCane does not regard all that is in the Gospels as reliable. He indicates as well that Joseph was not really a disciple of Jesus, just a Sanhedrin member doing a duty. It perhaps may not occur to McCane to suppose that Joseph used such a duty as a pretext to get hold of Jesus' body before another Sanhedrin member with less respect for Jesus did so. But in any event, even with the Gospel accounts considered fully accurate, they "still depict a burial which a Jew in Roman Palestine would have recognized as dishonorable."

Factor #16 -- Miscellaneous Contrarium

In this section we will be placing miscellaneous notes about teachings and attitudes of Jesus and early Christianity which were contrary to what was accepted as normal in the first century. Some of these will to some extent overlap with

factors above (especially newness, #4). Because this section was added later than 1-15, there is no parallel to it in the three "other religion" essays below.

From Malina and Rohrbaugh's *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* and the one on John as well:

- Jesus taught people to break even with family, if needed, for the sake of the Kingdom; he also indicated a highly inclusive assembly (Matt. 8:11-12) in a highly inclusive society. Christianity itself, as we see above, had beliefs which would have alienated others. Was it worth the price? "Given the sharp social stratification prevalent in antiquity, persons engaging in inappropriate social relations [JPH note: mixing slave and free, rich and poor, etc.!] risked being cut off from networks on which their positions depended. In traditional societies this was taken with deadly seriousness. Alienation from family or clan could literally be a matter of life and death, especially for the elite [JPH note: Christianity had more than the usual number from this area!], who would risk everything by the wrong kind of association with the wrong kind of people. Since the inclusive Christian communities demanded just this kind of association across kinship status lines, the situation depicted here [Matt. 10:34-36] is realistic indeed. The alienation would even spread beyond the family of origin to the larger kinship network formed by marriage..." [92] "Association" included being seen eating with persons of lower social rank [135]. "Such a departure from the family was something morally impossible in a society where the kinship unit was the focal social institution." [244]
- Relatedly, leaving the family usually meant forsaking material goods, in line with Jesus' demand to the rich young ruler (Luke 5:11). This is also a problem: "Geographical mobility and the consequent break with one's social network (biological family, patrons, friends, neighbors) were considered seriously deviant behavior and would have been much more traumatic in antiquity than simply leaving behind material wealth." [313] Now relate this to Peter and Co. leaving all behind!
- In his teachings Jesus often made reversals of common expectations that would have grossly offended the majority. The "Good Samaritan" parable is an example -- we all know that Samaritans were despised people; that would have been offensive enough! But few realize that the *victim* was also drawn up as someone broadly hated: The victim (and the Samaritan as well) were traders, who often grew rich at the expense of others, and were despised by the masses who saw them as thieves and would actually have sympathized with the bandits who robbed them! Jesus completely reversed

the stereotypes (see item 2 above) in a way that would have shocked most of his listeners. [347] (To say nothing of extending the category of "neighbor" to such people!)

- A similar reversal: the invitation to, and acceptance of, Zaccheus (Luke 19). By dining with Zach, Jesus indicated fellowship with one whose values he shared. The crowd was dismayed, because tax collectors were stereotyped as "rapacious extortioners." Zach's pronouncement, often understood to mean he is now paying back what he has stolen, actually means he *has been* paying back already anyone he discovers he has cheated (even before he met Jesus!) and Jesus' fellowship is therefore understood as saying, "I believe him" -- whereas the crowd does not. [387] (Of course this has applications for Matthew as well.)
- We may not think much of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet while Martha does the housework; we may even sympathize, but the ancients would not have. Because a woman's reputation depended on her ability to run a household, Martha's complaint would be seen as legitimate -- and Mary herself, because she sat and listened rather than help, was "acting like a male"! [348] This example would have been shocking to the ancients. So likewise Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman [John, 98-9] -- speaking to her in public (especially as a social deviant), and using the same drinking utensil, would have offended common views of purity and ingroup-outgroup relations.
- The theme of being "born again" was a real shocker! [John, 82] When one was born, one's honor status was considered fixed at birth. Only extraordinary circumstances allowed for a change in honor status. Being born again would mean changing one's honor status in a very fundamental way, "a life-changing event of staggering proportions." Preaching a "new birth" would have been inconceivable!

From N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* [369-442]:

Touching cherished symbols can be a risk and a half! Think of how people react when someone burns Old Glory -- and now apply that to some things that Jesus did which "implicitly and explicitly attacked what had become the standard symbols of the second-Temple Jewish worldview" and thereby subverted the unique Jewish ethos that was perceived to have given Israel its unique identity:

- The general attitude towards pagan powers like Rome was revolution. Jesus advised instead "turning the other cheek" and carrying the soldier's pack an extra mile. The difference is one of Malcolm X versus Martin Luther King, in a time when X's methods were highly favored.

- Keeping the Sabbath strictly was a Jewish distinctive; Jesus' actions of healing and plucking corn on the Sabbath violated not the actual law, but the rigorous interpretation favored of it by those wishing to preserve and emphasize this distinction. (See related item [here](#).)
- Jesus' dispensing with ritual handwashing (like the "stickler" Sabbath observance, not a rule of the law, but a rigorous interpretation of it) violated perceptions of purity.
- Jesus' command to follow him, rather than bury the dead, violated one of the most ingrained sensibilities of the day to care for the family and attend to their burial needs (important both in Jewish and non-Jewish contexts).
- Jesus' demonstration in the Temple was a symbolic "acting out" of the destruction of what, to many Jews, was Judaism's central symbol: the place where sacrifice and forgiveness of sins was effected; a place of great prestige and honor before non-Jews; the central political symbol of Israel. Not all Jews agreed with this assessment (the Essenes for example considered the Temple apparatus corrupt and probably would have sympathized with Jesus here), but for Jesus to say it would be destroyed, and by pagans at that, would have been profoundly offensive to many Jews, especially those who considered it security against pagan invasion.

From Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* we have these observations, offered by a reader with his own observations:

"Precisely on the basis of the key texts from the Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel and elsewhere, the early Christians declared that Jesus was lord in such a way as to imply, over and over again, that Caesar was not....The theme is strong, though until recently largely unnoticed, in Paul. Romans 1.3-5 declares the 'gospel' that Jesus is the royal and powerful 'son of god' to whom the world owes loyal allegiance; Romans 1.16-17 declares that in this 'gospel' are to be found soteria and dikaiosune. Every element in this double formulation echoes, and parodies, things that were said in the imperial ideology, and the emerging imperial cult, at the time. At the other end of the letter's theological exposition (15.12), Paul quotes Isaiah 11.10: the Davidic Messiah is the world's true lord, and in him the nations will hope." (page 568-569)

Wright goes on to list other Pauline passages such as Philippians 2.6-11, I Corinthians 15.20-28, and Thessalonians 4.15-17 which speaks of Jesus in manners that parallels that of Caesar. He also notes:

"Nor is this confined to Paul. Matthew's risen Jesus declares that all authority in heaven and on earth is now given to him."

Also,

"The gospel of Jesus as king of the Jews is then placed, by implication, in tension with the rule of Herod as king of the Jews, until the latter's sudden death in chapter 12 [of Acts]; whereupon the gospel of Jesus as lord of the world is placed in tension with the rule of Caesar as lord of the world, a tension which comes to the surface in 17.7 and smoulders on through to the pregnant but powerful statement of the closing passage, with Paul in Rome speaking of the kingdom of the true god and the Lordship of Jesus himself....This entire strand of thought, of the kingdom of Israel's god inaugurated through the Lordship of Jesus and now confronting the kingdoms of the world with a rival call for loyalty, finds classic expression, a century after Paul, in the famous and deliberately subversive statement of Polycarp: 'How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?' Caesar was the king, the saviour, and demanded an oath by his 'genius'; Polycarp declared that to call Caesar these things would be to commit blasphemy against the true, divine king and saviour." (page 569-570)

Wright does note, per passages like Romans 13:1-7, that Christians were commanded to respect governing authorities. However, he goes on to say,

"Our particular modern and western way of formulating these matters, implying that one must either be a revolutionary or a compromised conservative, has made it harder, not easier, for us to arrive at a historical grasp of how the early Christians saw the matter. The command to respect authorities does not cut the nerve of the gospel's political challenge. It does not mean that the 'Lordship' of Jesus is reduced to a purely 'spiritual' matter. Had that been so, the great persecutions of the first three centuries could largely have been avoided. That, as we saw in the previous chapter, was the road taken by gnosticism." (page 570)

So the question to be asked is, "Why did the early Christians make such a bold political stand part of their established belief system?" They must have truly believed that Jesus was the Lord of this world, and that His resurrection from the dead proved it. Wright concludes:

"This subversive belief in Jesus' Lordship, over against that of Caesar, was held in the teeth of the fact that Caesar had demonstrated his superior power in the obvious way, by having Jesus crucified. But the truly extraordinary thing is that this belief was held by a tiny group who, for the first two or three generations at least, could hardly have mounted a riot in a village, let alone a revolution in an empire. And yet they persisted against all the odds, attracting the unwelcome notice of the authorities because of the power of the message and the worldview and lifestyle it generated and sustained. And

whenever we go back to the key texts for evidence of why they persisted in such an improbably and dangerous belief they answer: it is because Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. And this provokes us to ask once more: why did they make this claim?" (page 570)

An interesting parallel in modern times may be found [here](#).

Factor #17 -- Encouraging People to Check the Facts for Themselves

A reader (who goes by "Jezz" at TWeb) has suggested this new point. Encouraging people to verify claims and seek proof (and hence discouraging their gullibility) is a guaranteed way to get slammed if you are preaching lies. Let us suppose for a minute that you are trying to start a false religion. In order to support your false religion, you decide to make up a number of historical (i.e., testable) claims, and then hope that nobody would check up on them. In other words, despite the advice given in factors #7 (i.e., don't make up historical claims) and #13 (i.e., that people will check out your claims), you've decided to take a punt and hope that people will be gullible enough to join your religion. What is the most important thing to do, if you have made up claims that are provably false? Well, of course, you don't go around *encouraging* people to check up on your claims, knowing that if they do so you will be found out!

Suppose, for example, you are starting a new UFO cult, where the faithful will be taken up into a UFO that is waiting for them. Such a cultist would usually follow advice from factor #7, and make sure the UFO is somewhere where people can't go and check up on it (e.g., assert that the UFO is hiding behind the Moon). But suppose you ignored this advice, and instead asserted that the UFO was waiting in a cave in a mountain not far from the city. The *last* thing you would do is encourage people to go to the cave and check out your claim - thereby discouraging the very gullibility that your cult's survival depends on. If you wanted to attract people to join your cult, you'd have to do the direct opposite - discourage your potential recruits from checking it out (perhaps by throwing in a clause "If anyone goes to the cave before their time, they will not be taken.")

Throughout the NT, the apostles encouraged people to check seek proof and verify facts:

1 Thessalonians 5:21 Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

And when fledgling converts heeded this advice, not only did they remain converts (suggesting that the evidence held up under scrutiny), but the apostles described them as "noble" for doing so:

Acts 17:11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

As if the apostles weren't making things hard enough for themselves by making extraordinary and testable claims in a social environment where it was difficult to keep secrets, they increased the odds significantly by actively encouraging people to check out their claims. Encouraging people to verify claims and seek proof is a guaranteed way of ensuring that your fledgling cult is a flop - unless, of course, those claims hold up under the scrutiny that your encouragement will undoubtedly generate.

We may well add more factors at a later date, but for now, we have enough to pose our central challenge. Christianity, as we can see, had every possible disadvantage as a faith. As I have recently noted, some religions thrive by being vague (Rastafarianism) or by having only philosophical demands, or demands beyond verification (Buddhism, Hinduism). Others staked a claim to survival by isolation (Mormonism) or by the sword (Islam). Christianity did none of these things and had none of these benefits, other than a late flirtation with the sword when it was already a secure faith and it was being used for political purposes, as indeed any religion could be -- not as a means of spreading the Gospel. Every disadvantage, and none of the advantages.

We have seen that ignorance and apathy will not serve as adequate explanations. The claims of Christianity were not that difficult to figure intellectually, and anyway, what Christianity had to offer would not appeal to the ignorant -- or else would be balanced out by the many things that would have made the ignorant suspicious and mistrustful. Apathy where social matters were concerned is a product of our times, not the ancient world. Skeptics cannot smugly appeal to these as explanations.

I have been told that one critic has made the desperate suggestion that one or more of these factors may not have applied to all people at all times in this context. This is an absurd response -- the factors are centered on values and judgments inherent to the period, social mores that don't just turn on and off like a light switch. The critic would have to prove that there was a temporary lull in a sufficient number of factors (for even one of two of these are more than enough to have put people off the new faith) for Christianity to catch converts -- and then document and explain the lull, and why it apparently reversed itself yet again. Bottom line is that such an explanation is a counsel of despair.

Finally, the critic is confounded by the fact that -- as has been observed by Stark and Meeks -- Christianity as a movement was top-heavy in the social status area. Since 99% of the people were poor and/or wretched, of course any movement would take most of its people from that group, but Christianity had an unusual number of the rich and the powerful in its ranks for its size. As Witherington notes, quoting E. A. Judge (*Paul Quest*, 94):

...the Christians were dominated by a socially pretentious section of the population of big cities. Beyond that they seem to have drawn on a broad constituency, probably representing the household dependents of leading members.

These are the people who would be most affected by these factors and least likely to believe; they had the most to lose and the least (tangibly) to gain by becoming converts. Rodney Stark has shown in *The Rise of Christianity* why the movement continued to grow once it got a foothold, but this does not address how it managed to get a foothold in the first place. So how did it happen?

I propose that there is only one, broad explanation for Christianity overcoming these intolerable disadvantages, and that is that it had the ultimate rebuttal -- a certain, trustworthy, and undeniable witness to the resurrection of Jesus, the only event which, in the eyes of the ancients, would have vindicated Jesus' honor and overcome the innumerable stigmas of his life and death. It had certainty that could not be denied; in other words, enough early witnesses (as in, the 500!) with solid and indisputable testimony (no "vision of Jesus in the sky" but a tangible certainly of a physically resurrected body) and ranks of converts slightly after the fact (the thousands at Pentecost) who made it harder to not believe than to believe. Skeptics and critics must explain otherwise why, despite *each and every one of these factors*, Christianity survived, and thrived. A consistent witness, one that was strong enough to reach into the second century in spite of these factors, is the only reasonable candidate. Skeptics will need to find a better excuse than, "They was just stupid"!

For a comparison and contrast with other religions, see these:

- [Mithraism](#)
 - [Mormonism](#)
 - [Islam](#)
- See a critic stumble on these arguments [here](#).
 - See Richard Carrier get his own noggin busted [here](#).
 - See Robert Price do his thing and then get his thing done to him [here](#).
 - See the beer and peanuts crowd burp at this article [here](#).

- Kyle Gerkin responds [here](#) and there is a link at the bottom to a debate between us on [TheologyWeb](#).
- Matthew Green gets treated as seriously as he deserves over on my other site, [tektonics.com](#).
- John Loftus gets his thrashin' [here](#).

[Go Home!](#)