



The Christianity Myth

K.A.G. Thackerey

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Thackerey analyzes the tension between blind faith and available proof, and sides with doubt as the more scientific choice.

The Christianity Myth traces a layman's journey from an inquisitive agnostic to a definitive atheist, proposing major theological shifts along the way. K. A. G. Thackerey's brief book is a forceful example of principled moves away from biblical literalism.

Though he regularly attended church services with his wife, Thackerey was never fully persuaded that claims about Jesus's resurrection had a firm and logical foundation. In the name of open inquiry, he decided to engage in some active research, first by attending a catechism class called the Alpha Course to find out what proofs believers offered, and then by reading a popular book from a Bible scholar who fell away from the faith. Both experiences left him convinced that New Testament claims, particularly related to resurrection and revelation, have no basis in reality.

The Christianity Myth works to relate those convictions to others concerned about biblical veracity. For those who have never questioned the absolute truth of biblical texts, these assertions stand to shock: outside of the Bible, there's little proof that Jesus existed, and none that he was resurrected. The vision on the road to Damascus isn't scientifically verifiable; there are inconsistencies between the various gospels.

The work leans heavily on respected scholar Bart Ehrman's book *Jesus, Interrupted* to bolster these claims, and is an enthusiastic conduit. The relayed scholarship is presented with some gaps, though. This is particularly true of the historically untenable notion that the Sadducees effected Jesus's execution, which *The Christian Myth* takes for granted as a historical reality.

The alternative explanations that the book offers for scriptural stories are both creative and provocative. The suggestion that Paul hallucinated his Damascus vision is interesting, if ultimately as unverifiable as Paul's own claims, but it is forwarded emphatically, with contemporary studies on hallucinatory religious experiences used to highlight the credibility of the proposal. This tension between blind faith and available proof exists throughout, and the book sides with doubt as the more scientific choice.

While the tone of the work is generally authoritative, some textual habits—especially a profusion of italicized words and phrases offset with quotation marks—undermine it. Chapters cover topics that remain inflammatory in beginning Bible courses, particularly related to authorship and canonization, and established arguments against literal readings are organized well here. That the boldest declarations—there's no real proof of a risen Jesus; New Testament texts were written with an evangelical agenda—are somewhat stale within the field may limit the audience. Certain declarations, particularly the repeated presentation of Jesus as “historically insignificant,” are unwieldy syllogisms. Last pages contain the off-putting flavor common in many New Atheist texts: believers are delusional, only incredulity is intelligent.

There's not much new here for those well-versed in biblical exegesis, but the exercise is a worthwhile one nonetheless. Those who are just beginning to study biblical texts from an academic perspective will certainly sympathize with the frustrations outlined in Thackeray's *The Christianity Myth*, which presents many initially surprising theories well.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (February 1, 2016)

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