

169 Fact or fiction?

Around 2000 years ago, there was a man called Jesus who lived in Nazareth, in Galilee. Ethnically, he was a Jew, a very religious nation who had their own Scriptures. His country and his people were among many who were ruled by the Romans. Jesus had been a carpenter but, having known the Jewish Scriptures since he was a boy, he started out as an itinerant preacher and teacher.

He amassed quite a following, and it is claimed that he did miracles including healing people. He associated with people on the fringes of society, and was very outspoken against the Jewish religious elite of his day.

This made him very unpopular with the Jewish leaders, who managed to persuade the Roman authorities that he was a dangerous troublemaker, and the Romans put him to death.

Within weeks, his followers, so far from being demoralised by the death of their leader, started claiming that Jesus had come back to life, and they then carried on Jesus' teaching and preaching about "the good news" (or "gospel"), saying things like, "The kingdom of God has come."

The Romans were unhappy with this talk of a "kingdom" and began to persecute this new group, brutally killing many of them.

The persecution meant that many of them fled, taking this "good news" to other areas of Palestine and eventually into other countries. Jesus had said that, as predicted in the Jewish Scriptures, he was "the Christ" (or "Messiah") so the groups became known as Christ-ians, and their faith spread rapidly around the known world.

The Christian faith gained some respectability when, in the year 312, the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and over the next few hundred years the power and wealth of the Christian church grew.

Then, by the eighth century Christians were waging war against a newer religious grouping, Islam, founded in the seventh century.

In the 15th century the church began using torture and murder as a way of combatting heresy (the Spanish Inquisition), and then, in the 16th century, with the Reformation, the western church split into two main streams, Catholic and Protestant, and Christians began killing one another. The Catholic/Protestant divide had a major political element to it, which has meant that the killing has continued, sadly, even into the 21st century.

Meanwhile, since the 16th century, the Protestant church has split into more and more pieces, as Christians have argued about various different theological issues.

Not a pretty story!

Alongside the above, Christians have thankfully done some good things like caring for the poor, providing healthcare and education, and helping to establish workers' rights and abolish slavery.

If the above is roughly factually/historically true then it begs the question, “What went wrong?” and maybe also, “Might it be worth looking back at the teachings of Jesus?”

I’m wondering about the idea of getting together a few people who might call themselves atheists or agnostics, and perhaps read together a bit of Mark’s Gospel (because it’s the shortest), and see what we/they think.

Does that appeal to anyone?

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