

# The Challenge of History: An Interview with William Lane Craig

William Lane Craig

## SUMMARY

The most distinctive claim about Christianity in relation to other world religions is that Christianity says that God has revealed himself in history. As British theologian, Alan Richardson, has stated: "The Christian faith...is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred, or to have been quite different from the biblical-Christian account of them, then the whole edifice of Christian faith, life and worship would be found to have been built on sand."

At this time of Christmas, we celebrate the central event in world-history that God became man in Jesus Christ. Today this claim is under assault in a variety of ways. Some claim it's a myth; others assert that it's a meaningless statement because it is impossible to really know the past. AP asked William Lane Craig, Research Professor in Philosophy at Talbot Theological Seminary, Los Angeles, what he thought about these views.

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### Why is history so important to the Christian faith?

History is crucial to Christianity because it keeps the Christian faith from degenerating into mythology. Unless the Bible is rooted in actual historical events, there is no reason to think that Jesus of Nazareth should be any more determinative for my life today than so-called gods like Thor, Odin or Zeus or any other mythological deity. History is the vital component in Christianity because it grounds faith in fact and keeps it from being mere myth.

### Do other religions have a similar interest in history?

Yes, but only in a relative sense. Other religions certainly have an historical component. One thinks of Judaism, for example, where at least among orthodox Jews, God's acts in history like the Exodus are very important. God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt is the central miracle of the Old Testament. Again, history plays some role in Islam. For instance, the coming down of the Qur'an out of heaven to Muhammad is purported to be an historical event and is believed by Muslims to be God's revelation to him.

So there are historical elements in these faiths, but they don't have the same significance as historical events in Christianity. The reason for this is that one's salvation in Judaism and in Islam is not a matter of historical facts; it's a matter of being obedient to certain sorts of prescribed activities or regulations. Although these regulations arose in a certain historical context, that context doesn't really affect the practice of the piety of those religions in any way. However, in Christianity it's entirely different. In Christianity the saving acts of God are themselves historical acts. So if you were to remove the historicity of Jesus or the historicity of the cross, the whole basis for atonement and salvation would be removed.

So, in one sense, it's true that history is important to these other faiths; but historical facts do not occupy the central role that the saving acts of God do in Christianity.

**GE Ladd has said : “The uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events.” What does he mean by that?**

Ladd is right, of course. Christianity is not a code for living or a philosophy of religion; rather, it is rooted in real events of history. The reason it's scandalous is because it ties up the truth of Christianity with the truth of those historical facts. This means that if these historical events are shown to be fraudulent or fictional, then the whole basis of Christianity is removed. To put it as simply as possible: the truth or falsity of Christianity stands or falls with individual events within history.

Islam, on the other hand, is not nearly as dependent on history. For instance, you can follow the five pillars of Islam: make the confession, say the prayers, give the alms, go to Mecca and so forth, but none of these things is directly dependent upon historical events. However, Christianity is quite different. The offer of salvation that we receive in the Gospel is real only if the specific events upon which the offer is based are real. And that's scandalous in a sense because, as I said, if those events are shown to be fictional, then the whole religion collapses.

On the other hand, I think this makes Christianity a truly great religion because it gives us a means of verifying the truth of the Christian faith. We can actually investigate history to see whether Jesus of Nazareth lived, died and rose again and made the claims that we find in the New Testament. So the Christian faith provides a touchstone for the assessment of its claims that isn't present in most other religions of the world.

**Has the historical element of the Christian faith always been considered important in the Church?**

Traditionally, it has. Right from the beginning, Christianity's earliest creeds are affirmations of historical events. For instance, the Apostles' Creed says of Jesus “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...on the third day He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.” These historical events are important elements in the early creeds.

Tragically, with the rise of liberal theology in the 19th century, the importance of history for Christian faith was depreciated and lost. Liberal scholars no longer believed that Jesus was really central to the heart of the Christian faith. They looked elsewhere for the central core: the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. They believed that this was the one doctrine that was fundamental to Christianity. Everything else was secondary, including historical events.

Thankfully, liberal theology has come and gone. I think the 20th century has been characterized by a strong appreciation of the centrality of history for the Christian faith. And we should be really grateful for that.

### **Didn't the church in the Middle Ages also lose contact with history through its preoccupation with philosophical theology?**

In one sense it did. But that shouldn't lead us to think that people in the medieval period didn't sense the importance of history. They believed that events like the resurrection of Jesus really occurred; they understood that these were not just fictions or myths. For them, Jesus of Nazareth really lived, died and did these things.

The difficulty was that they didn't have any way of demonstrating that this had happened. The most that they could do was to appeal to the miracle of the church itself. To them, it seemed incredible that this universal edifice, now spread throughout all of known civilization, could have been predicated upon a falsehood. So the living miracle of the church itself was the best proof they could give that these events actually did happen. But medieval scholars certainly did believe that these historical events occurred. They were in no doubt whatsoever that the historicity of these events was crucial and not to be compromised.

### **What impact did this renewed interest in history have on apologetics in the period after the Reformation?**

At the time of the Renaissance scholars developed a new consciousness of history. They became intensely interested in rediscovering the past. This desire to develop an historical understanding expressed itself in the love and search for documents of antiquity. There was a great interest in recovering Greek documents and in mastering the ability to read Greek once again.

This interest in the classics had a flow-on effect for New Testament studies. Scholars became interested in the historical roots of Christianity and began the task of establishing the text of the New Testament as reliably as they could. As a result, the first glimmerings of an interest in a historically-oriented apologetic for the Christian faith began to appear. Scholars such as Philippe de Mornay and Hugo Grotius soon began to use historical arguments to defend the truth of the gospels and Christianity.

### **Why are people so skeptical today of the idea that history is an objective reality?**

I think that some people are skeptical about this because of the popularity of relativistic views of truth. Post-modernism denies the existence of objective truth. Post-modernists believe that the past is merely the construction of the present. They believe that since the events of the past are gone, they are lost—they're no longer accessible. Therefore history is what we make it. And, moreover, since they claim that no historian is a neutral observer, but is inevitably caught up in the historical process, he cannot reconstruct the past objectively as it really was. This has led some thinkers to a relativistic view of history according to which, as one person put it, "History is a series of lies that everyone has decided to agree upon."

**Is there any point in trying to discover the historical facts about Jesus, when so many people have tried to do it and have come up with different assessments of them?**

Yes, I believe there is. I think that the diversity of opinions about the historical Jesus can be largely tied to the sort of philosophical presuppositions that critics bring to the table. Their conclusions are not really being determined by the evidence so much as by the presuppositions that they bring to it. You see this clearly in their published works.

For instance, the members of the Jesus Seminar explicitly state what their presuppositions are in their introduction to their edition of *Five Gospels*. For them, the number one pillar of scholarly wisdom is the presupposition of scientific naturalism. In other words, they don't believe that there are supernatural events in history. They think that whenever you find a miraculous event in the narrative, this is an automatic sign that you're in the presence of either legend or mythology. They simply begin with the assumption that miracles are fictional in character. Extraordinarily, they make no attempt to justify this presupposition. If you begin with the assumption of scientific naturalism, then of course events like the virgin birth, the incarnation, the miracles of Jesus and his resurrection will have to be assessed as non-historical.

Again, some critics like Marcus Borg make it very clear that what he's looking for is a Jesus who will be religiously available to people in the contemporary scene. Borg deliberately sets out to re-interpret Jesus to be a sort of cross-cultural, spiritual person—a kind of mystic—who will appeal to persons in all cultures and in all religions. That's why he comes up with a very politically-correct Jesus—a Jesus who is not offensive or jarring to the modern mind. Borg's reconstructed Jesus is a good example of how some scholars' conclusions are deeply shaped by their presuppositions.

However, if you do not force these critical presuppositions upon the Gospels, then there is quite a remarkable consensus emerging amongst scholars about the person of the historical Jesus, what He taught, and about events in his life surrounding his death and resurrection. So I think we need to be careful not to exaggerate the diversity of views amongst scholars today. Certainly there has been a diversity of views in past quests to recover the historical Jesus—but contemporary scholarship has actually recovered, I think, the broad outlines of a portrait of Jesus that can be largely agreed upon.

**Since we cannot directly observe the past, can we know anything about it as it actually happened? Could our ideas of the past be an elaborate fabrication, as untrustworthy as a dream?**

Well, the difference between a dream and history, of course, is that history leaves a residue and a dream does not. And it's through this residue, whether in the form of literary documents or archaeological debris, that historians are able to reconstruct the past. True historians work within the constraints of the remaining evidence. And that's the difference between actual history and a dream. It is only on the basis of the evidence that we can reconstruct the past; we are certainly never justified in going against that evidence.

Interestingly, the historian follows the same method as the historical scientist in sciences like geology, paleontology or cosmology. There the scientist is also involved in reconstructing the past,

either the past history of the universe or the earth's past. The only real difference between the scientist and the historian is that the historian studies human history rather than earth history or cosmic history. But in terms of method, they're doing exactly the same. The historian's history is on the same level as the geologist's history or the cosmologist's history. When people try to play off history against science, they're making an illegitimate move because history is on "all-fours" with the historical sciences. As long as we proceed within the constraints of the evidence, there's no reason to think that we can't reconstruct the past as it actually happened.

**How do we know that historical facts are real? The events themselves have gone and all we're left with is an historian's statement. For instance, with respect to the Christmas story, all we have is Matthew and Luke's historical statements that they took place.**

In the first place, it's important to notice that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. When you think about it, we have no evidence at all for most historical events—yet they really happened. For example, we have no evidence that on April 2nd , 1802, Napoleon spat in a puddle. Perhaps he did, but we have no way of knowing.

Most historical events don't leave sufficient evidence to reconstruct them, so the absence of evidence isn't itself proof that an event didn't occur. In the case of the gospels, I find it extraordinary that we have any evidence at all for some of these events. For instance, consider the events of the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In this case, we have evidence from a variety of sources. This is very interesting when we compare it with the evidence that we have for other persons in antiquity. In their case, we have almost no evidence at all. So it's clearly wrong to say that the mere absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

In cases where we do have evidence, historians have worked out a number of objective rules that we can apply to the sources so as to establish whether they are historically credible accounts as opposed to mere fiction. We call these criteria "the criteria of authenticity."

For instance, let's consider the criterion of "multiple attestation." If we have independent accounts of the same event, this rule says it's more likely to be historical than fictional because it would be most unusual if two authors independently made up the same story about the same event. Isn't it remarkable that we should have two, independent virgin birth narratives about Jesus? If you apply this rule of multiple attestation to Jesus' birth narratives, then we have good grounds for believing that he was born in Bethlehem and born of a virgin. Why? Because we have it attested in independent narratives—Matthew and Luke are independent of one another in their sources at least.

Another rule for establishing the historical nature of an event is the principle of dissimilarity. This rule says that if you can show that an event or saying of Jesus' life is unlike anything in prior Judaism and also unlike anything in the Church that followed him, then it's highly probable that it belongs to the historical Jesus himself. So this criterion of dissimilarity can be a very positive help in establishing events as historical. Incidentally, this rule doesn't mean that if some of Jesus' statements are similar to those found in Judaism or the early church, then this indicates that they've been borrowed from these sources. Critics misapply the rule when they do that.

Another rule is the criterion of embarrassment. This rule says that if you find elements in the

narratives that are awkward for the early Christian Church, or perhaps even embarrassing, then these too are most likely to be historical rather than to have been invented by the Church. A further criterion would be the execution of Jesus. His crucifixion is such a firmly fixed anchor point in history that events in the Gospels can be assessed by their likelihood of leading up to Jesus' execution/crucifixion. For example, Marcus Borg's portrait of him as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is incompatible with his crucifixion for being the king of the Jews. On this view, he did nothing that would have led to his crucifixion. So we can conclude that this view probably doesn't give us an accurate portrait of Jesus as he really was.

There are other criteria as well. In fact, there's a long list of them, but these are just a few. Historians apply them all the time to secular narratives with a view towards establishing their historical credibility. I find these criteria to be very helpful. When critics like those in the Jesus Seminar use these criteria to come up with skeptical portraits of Jesus, the reason is, I think, because of their presuppositions and not because of the criteria. They apply these criteria falsely because they're skewed by their naturalistic presuppositions.

**Some people say that history is unscientific because with science, at least, you have the evidence in front of you, and you can experiment on it and repeat the experiment obviously you can't reconstruct a historical event—what do you say to that? Is science therefore more objective than history?**

No, I don't think so. Let's take geology, for instance. Now a geologist assumes that certain theoretical entities, like dinosaurs, once existed. He observes fossil bones and he hypothesizes that these are the remains of living creatures that actually once roamed the earth. But he's never seen one. In a sense, a dinosaur is a theoretical entity similar to a quark. But the difference is that the quark involves, obviously, such a high level of theoretical abstraction that we're not sure that quarks are really there. However, nobody really doubts that dinosaurs once existed. And yet, as I say, the subjects of this science are just as removed from the geologist as are the events of history from the historian.

Moreover, the historian operates with just as much residue of the past as the geologist does. He can rely on archaeology and other sciences like numismatics (the study of coins) or papyrology. All of these sciences explore the past, just as geology or paleontology does. They are disciplines designed to reconstruct the past within the constraints of the evidence. So I don't think you can draw a demarcation between science and history in such a way as to say, well, science is objective but history is a bog of subjectivity.

**Some historians, especially revisionists like neo-Nazis, are very selective in their use of facts. They write histories that are more a reflection of their prejudices than actually what took place. To what extent can we be assured that the gospel writers were not revisionists themselves?**

It's important to understand that all ancient historians wrote from a point of view. Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus—all of them had a case to make. For them, history was a means of defending

their understanding or position. So in that sense, all of Greco-Roman history is based upon documents that reflect a certain bias. However, that does not prevent the classical Greco-Roman historian from reconstructing the past as it actually happened.

Similarly, when Jewish historians write about the Holocaust, they clearly have a point of view and are as passionately committed to it as the neo-Nazis. Nevertheless, we don't write off their work as unhistorical because of their bias or put it on a par with that of the neo-Nazis. Rather, we assess both versions of the Holocaust by the evidence. If the Jewish account falls within the constraints of the evidence, then their point of view doesn't necessarily falsify what they write.

Now the gospels are written from a certain point of view: they have a story to tell—the story of Jesus. They are proclamations which have an intense interest in certain events of history. But that doesn't mean that they cannot tell the truth about the past, or that we cannot assess their credibility.

The "criteria of authenticity" that I've already mentioned are aimed precisely at getting past the sort of bias that may influence historians as they write the story of the past. These rules are designed to assist us in establishing what really happened. They help us to see if a historian is telling the truth.

In short, if a historian's understanding of the past is wrong, the reason it's wrong is because it doesn't fit the evidence; it's not wrong because he has a point of view. So it all goes back to what the evidence indicates.

**Every new generation has its slant on history. Karl Popper, the philosopher, has said, "There can be no history of the past as it actually did happen, there can only be historical interpretations and none of them is final. Every generation has a right to frame its own." Is this true? Is it possible to come to a really objective understanding of history?**

I think the reason historians are often rewriting the past stems from a couple of factors. One of them is the discovery of new evidence. When we discover new evidence, this can revise our picture of the past. So we need to rewrite the history to bring it into conformity with the new evidence. Now, far from undermining the objectivity of history, this is actually evidence for it. If the discovery of new information means that we have to readjust our view of the past to bring it into line with the wider body of evidence, I should have thought that that was powerful testimony for the objectivity of history, not against it.

The other reason why historians revise their earlier understandings is that with increasing distance, or with new perspectives, we often acquire a different view of the past and its significance.

Sometimes we see events in a new light. We see how certain events have shaped history in ways that we didn't appreciate before. And again, I think, these perspectives do not falsify the past; rather, they help us to see the significance of these events from a new vantage-point. The important point to note is this: our expanded understanding of the past doesn't lead us to think that these events never occurred, or that past histories are necessarily false. Usually, it's more a matter of reassessing the motives of the key figures or the significance of the events themselves for the course of subsequent history and how they've shaped and affected things.

So I don't think that the need to re-write history undermines the objectivity of the discipline at all.

Actually, I think it's quite the reverse. It's really testimony to the objectivity of history.

**What other problems are there with the view that says that we can never know the past as it really was?**

I can think of at least three significant problems that historians face if they take the view that we can't know the past as it is. The first difficulty they face is that there is a common core of historical events that is accepted by all historians, whether Catholic or Protestant, Marxist or capitalist, 19th century liberal or 20th century revisionist. For instance, I don't know of any historian who would deny things like the date of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's assassination, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and so forth. These form a sort of back-bone of history, upon which all historians are agreed. I think it was Isaiah Berlin who said, "If some one were to claim that the plays of William Shakespeare were actually written in the Court of Ghengis Khan, we wouldn't say that he was merely mistaken, but that he was out of his mind." So there is this common core of historical events that everyone agrees upon. I think this is a powerful argument which simply overwhelms the relativist claim that there is no objective history.

The second difficulty that relativists face is that there's a difference between history and propaganda. Historians insist on this difference. When the Soviet Union, in the aftermath of the Stalinist takeover, began to rewrite history, vast amounts of material—newspapers and all sorts of documents—were mashed to pulp. Stalin did this so that he could rewrite the history books. Quite naturally, he wanted people to think that he was at the forefront of the Bolshevik revolution. I guess we shouldn't be surprised that everybody recognizes that this sort of Soviet rewriting of history was pure propaganda. It had no basis whatsoever in fact. Historians understand that when they do their work they must do so within the constraints of the evidence; they are not allowed to propagandize. However, such a distinction becomes meaningless if relativism is true. If relativism is valid, we need to face the fact that we cannot insist on the distinction between history and propaganda upon which all reputable historians insist.

Finally, the third problem with the view that says that we can't know the past objectively is that on this basis it becomes impossible to criticize bad history. Take Immanuel Velikovsky, a popular author, as a prime example. He attempts to rewrite ancient history entirely by denying whole civilizations and linguistic groups on the basis of astronomical catastrophes in the earth's history. Now Velikovsky's views have been rejected across the board by historians as being utterly fanciful. His books have received very negative reviews in the historical community. And yet, if relativism were true, it would be impossible to criticize this sort of work. In fact, if Velikovsky's work were allowed to stand, any view of the past would be possible.

I believe that those who deny the possibility of objective history haven't faced the fact seriously that a common core of historical events accepted by all historians exists. Nor have they taken seriously enough the truth that there is a distinction between history and propaganda. Again, the fact that all historians are quick to criticize bad history provides powerful evidence that it is quite possible to do an objective history of the past.

**One New Testament critic has said: “Since the disciples were close followers of Jesus they would have been less accurate observers and recorders of what actually happened.” Is there any truth in this with regards to the birth narratives of Jesus?**

With respect to the birth narratives of Jesus, we don't have eye-witness testimony from Jesus' disciples to this event, but it's very interesting to ask about the sources of the birth narratives. Colin Hemer, in his book, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* goes through Acts with a fine-toothed comb with a view toward assessing Luke's credibility as an ancient historian. He pulls out a wealth of historical detail from the book. He assesses the historical information that he finds in terms of facts that would have been the general knowledge of anybody living at the time down to details so specific that only an eyewitness could have known about them. And he establishes convincingly the historical credibility of Luke as an historical author.

Further, Hemer argues that this assessment of Luke's reliability in Acts ought to be extended to Luke's Gospel as well. He asks the interesting question: “What sources might there have been for the Gospel of Luke?” Well, one way of determining this is to subtract from Luke's Gospel anything that we find in the other Gospels and see what's left over. When you do that, it's interesting that the uniquely Lucan material tends to be associated with women who are mainly mentioned in his Gospel—people like Joanna and, interestingly enough, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now Luke says that he accompanied Paul on his missionary journey back to Jerusalem where he interviewed eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life and ministry. And I think that it's not unlikely that Luke may have interviewed Mary as his source for the virgin birth story. It's interesting to note that Luke's account is told from Mary's perspective, whereas Matthew's narrative is more from Joseph's perspective. It's not implausible, therefore, to believe that we may have an indirect source in Mary herself for Luke's birth narrative of Jesus.

**Numbers of historians have suggested that the birth narratives of Jesus are implausible because it seems almost fanciful that people like the Magi would have appeared. What do you think?**

When people say things like this, it's probably due to the fact that they have great difficulty accepting the supernatural elements of the narrative. They find it too hard to swallow the idea that a star appeared in the East that led the Magi to Jesus. Again, I think this is going to depend largely upon your openness to a supernatural view. I mean, there have been attempts to show that this could have been a providential coincidence of certain planets that produced a bright light in the sky. Some argue that such an event was astronomically plausible. But as I read the narrative, it seems to me that Luke describes this as a supernatural event. If you believe in the existence of God, I don't see any reason to think that he couldn't have drawn Zoroastrian priests to come from the East to find Jesus and worship him in that way.

Of course, there is also the dispute about the slaughter of the children by Herod, but that's really, again, an argument from silence. Those who claim that it couldn't have happened do so on the basis that it's not mentioned in Josephus. But remember what we said before: absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

**Would the murder of these children have been consistent with Herod's character?**

I don't think there's any doubt about that! It certainly fits right into Herod's character that he should do such a thing. Actually, Josephus tells that before he died Herod had given commands that upon his death all the notables in the area were to be rounded up in a stadium and slaughtered because he feared the people would not lament his passing and in this fashion he could ensure that there would be lamentation upon his death! Thankfully, this order wasn't carried out, but it shows us something of his brutal character. If he had ordered the slaughter of children around Bethlehem, there wouldn't necessarily have been great numbers of male babies that were killed—it might have been a couple of dozen at the most—so I don't think much can be inferred from Josephus' silence about the incident. I really think that people need to come up with better arguments if they're going to say that the birth narratives are non-historical.

**What about the claim by some scholars that Luke is mistaken in his view that there was a census that was taken throughout the known world at the time of Jesus' birth?**

That's more of a problem, I think, because we do have positive evidence that there was a census taken by Quirinius around AD 6 or 7. But it's very interesting that Luke refers to this census when he talks about the revolt of Judas the Galilean. But when he talks about the census that drew Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem he says this was the first census which suggests that Luke is differentiating this census from the later one taken by Quirinius. So he doesn't seem to be confusing the two; he's aware of the latter one, and he's saying this is an earlier one. So once again it does become an argument from silence, namely, that since we don't have any independent attestation of this earlier census, Luke must be wrong. Well, he could be, but then again these arguments from silence are very tenuous. We should note that he doesn't actually say that Quirinius was the governor at this time. The word he uses in the Greek is not the Greek word for "governor", and it could have been that Quirinius, as a military commander, directed this census at the behest of the authority in power. So again, it's really an argument from silence which proves nothing.

Again, I need to say again in favor of Luke, that his accuracy on other matters is just impeccable. He gets it right over and over again in so many other cases that this gives him a certain credibility that makes us reluctant to say, "He's made a major *faux pas* here."

**Luke claims in his introduction (1:1-4) to be writing something similar to a Greek scientific treatise. Is that right?**

Yes. His preface is written in the Greek of the classical Greek historian. But after the preface, he reverts to the more common, vulgar Greek. It's as though he's put the reader on notice in the preface, saying: "I, too, if I choose, can write in the classical Greek of the great Greek historians." And he speaks there of using the methodology of the Greek historian, namely, interviewing witnesses to the events in order to lay out an orderly narrative of what's actually happened. In

other words, his aim is to establish the truth of the Gospel events. So his project is clearly to write history. Further, the book of Acts demonstrates his historical reliability abundantly. And so in the case of the Gospel, where we do not have the benefit of secular confirmation, we ought to extend to Luke the credibility as a historian which he has earned in the book of Acts.