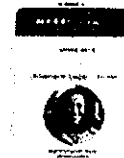


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Buddha, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammed: Larger-than-life historic figures or largely legends?

Story by Valerie Tarico • Yesterday 4:28 AM



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Expert: We know less than you think about the lives of Buddha, Abraham, Jesus, Muhammed and most other religious 'founders'

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Feedback

and most other religious "founders."

Author

David Fitzgerald

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is a history buff whose primary fascination is the early history of religion. When he researched the origins of Christianity, he was astounded to discover how little evidence we have about Jesus as a historical person. The least fantastical stories about the life of Jesus are found in the four New Testament gospels, but the four gospels that made it into the New Testament and others that did not—

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were written

generations after

any historical Jesus rabbi would have lived. They contradict each other and contain miraculous events that in any other context we would simply call magic, mythology, or fairy tales. These events echo "tropes" that were common in the folklore of the region, like the idea of a woman impregnated by a god, or talking animals, or transmutation (one substance turning into another), or magical healings, or a person returning from the dead, or



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being/becoming a deity.

The historical record is so frayed, and so stitched together with obvious myth and legend, that Fitzgerald began wondering whether the man, Jesus, had ever actually existed. He soon discovered he was not alone. Were the stories about Jesus *mythologized history* (meaning that stories of a real person had mythic elements added over time—like Davie Crockett killing a bear when he was only three)? Or were they *historicized mythology* (meaning that legends of a mythic personage had historical details added as the stories were retold)? Ancient writings offer us plenty of both. Alexander the Great performed miracles. The three wise men of the Christmas story received names and biographies during the Middle Ages.

For generations now, academic Bible scholars have been gradually transferring bits of the gospel stories out of the *History* bucket and into the *Mythology* bucket. As inquiry tools have become more advanced, what we "know" about any historical Jesus has shrunk


The vast

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want to understand why, read or listen to New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman or James McGrath. But either way, we can be confident that biblical portraits of Jesus offer little clarity about whoever he may have been. The form of the gospels, their contents, internal contradictions and most likely dates of writing suggest that they are largely the stuff of legend.

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That's OK says Fitzgerald. As several scholars have pointed out, we don't need to know who Jesus was or even whether he existed in order to better understand the emergence of Christianity. There are, as it turns out, patterns in how religions emerge, whether or not an iconic founder was a single flesh-and-blood person. These patterns have to do with cultural and technological evolution, which will be highlighted in Part 2 of this series.


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But one key piece of the pattern is this: Most major religions have founders who are wrapped in layers and layers of obvious mythology—to the point that little of interest remains when the myths are peeled away. Christianity is far from unique when it comes to sketchy evidence about an ostensible founder who is now heralded as a prophet, god or demi-god. For centuries—or even millennia—religious teachings have pointed to great individuals, prophets, demi-gods, or supernatural beings as the source of divine revelation. But looking closely at these claims can be rather like holding cotton candy in the rain.

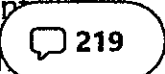
As Fitzgerald began to write and speak publicly about his doubts regarding Jesus, he was surprised to be contacted by Buddhists and former Muslims who informed him that they were having similar debates in their respective circles—arguments over whether the Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, or the Prophet Muhammad, actually existed! As with Jesus, the vast majority of relevant experts assume that the stories of Muhammad are rooted in a real person. But even assuming these larger-than-life figures did once exist in the flesh, the doubts reflect how remarkably little about their lives or any direct roles they (rather than their legends) may have played in history.

Judaism – Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and other Old Testament Figures

Most non-Christians and non-fundamentalist Christians recognize stories like the Garden of Eden, Tower of Babel, and Noah's Flood as sacred myths which sought to explain natural disasters or bolster moral rules or tribal identity. A devastating meteor strike may have inspired stories about Sodom and Gomorrah or the walls of Jericho (or then again, maybe not), but we lack archeological evidence for major Biblical stories including the conquest of Canaan and the flight from Egypt. We have nothing to back up stories of the Patriarchs from Abraham to Moses and Joshua.

part of a millennium afterwards. Even then, archeology suggests that David and Solomon existed, but the grandeur of their fabled kingdoms and royal exploits likely did not. To modern eyes, the real David and his “united monarchy” might look like a bandit chieftain of a small kingdom in the wild Judean hill country.  24


Daniel Lazare tells the story this way:

“Judah, the sole remaining Jewish outpost by the late eighth century B.C., was a small, out-of-the-way kingdom with little in the way of military or financial clout. Yet at some point its priests and rulers seem to have been seized with the idea that their national deity, Yehowah, deemed to be nothing less than the king of the universe, was about to transform them into a great power. They set about creating an imperial past commensurate with such an empire, one that had the southern heroes of David and Solomon conquering the northern kingdom and making rival kings tremble throughout the known world. From a “henotheistic” cult in which Yahweh was worshiped as the chief god among many, they refashioned the national religion so that henceforth Yahweh would be worshiped to the exclusion of all other deities.”  219

Jewish history doesn't start approaching historical reliability until centuries later, with well-corroborated events such as the Babylonian conquest and exile, and even the accounts from these and later periods show extensive bias from the scribal factions that wrote them. For instance, they demonize successful, long-lasting rulers such as Manasseh and the Omride dynasty (including the notorious queen Jezebel), while heaping praise on short-lived but pious failures like Josiah.

Islam – Muhammad

The Arab conquests of the 7 and 8 century are well-established and undeniable—but the same is not true of the prophet who was the purported inspiration behind them. Before these military conquests, Arabia was a region of many different tribes, including urban merchants, nomadic Bedouin, and Jewish and Christian communities. The pagan Arabs worshipped hundreds of gods, including the three goddesses Al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza, mentioned in the notorious “Satanic Verses” of the Qur'an, and high gods like Hubaal and Allah. Features we associate with Islam, such as pilgrimages to the sacred Kaaba in Mecca (originally a thousand-year-old shrine to Hubaal), were important parts of the region's religious life for centuries before the Muslim era.

According to tradition, it was the prophet Muhammad who united the Arabian tribes and wrote the Qur'an. But there are curious inconsistencies in the official story. Early mentions of Muhammad are oddly non-specific and, at least twice, are accompanied by a circled  Feedback

possible it originally referred to Jesus, as pockets of Christianity were well established in the region. Crosses appear on some coins of this era and in some early ostensibly Muslim architecture.

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Though orthodox Muslims believe Muhammad received the Qur'an directly from the archangel Gabriel (*Jibril* in Arabic), as much as a third of the Qur'an appears not only to pre-date Muhammad, but to be derived from various earlier Syrian Christian liturgical writings.

According to the standard account, the Qur'an in its present form was distributed in the 650s—but in example after example of important correspondence and records, no one—neither Arabians, Christians nor Jews—ever mentions the Qur'an until the early eighth century.

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During the early years of the Arab conquests, accounts by conquered peoples never mention Islam, Muhammad, or the Qur'an. The Arab conquerors are called "Ishmaelites," "Saracens," "Muhajirun," "Hagarians" —but never "Muslims." Approximately two generations after Muhammad's official death date, the first references to Islam and "Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam" appear. Around the same time, Islamic beliefs begin to appear on coins and inscriptions, and certain common Muslim practices such as reciting from the Qur'an during mosque prayers begin.

But no record of Muhammad's reported death in 632 appears until more than a century later. After the Abbasid dynasty supplants Abd al-Malik's Umayyad line in the mid-8th century, the first complete biography of Muhammad finally appears and biographical material begins to proliferate (at least 125 years after his supposed death). The Abbasids also accuse their Umayyad predecessors of gross impiety, and Abbasids, Umayyads and Shiites all write new hadiths against one another.

All these and still other inexplicable elements of early Islamic history suggest that, incredible as it seems, Islam and the Qur'an and the shape of Muhammad's biography were results rather than causes of the Arabian conquests.

Buddhism – Buddha

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died over a century earlier than that (949 BCE). In any case, it was not until the e

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Buddha was written in the form of an epic poem called the *Buddhacarita*.

According to tradition, the Buddha's teachings were only transmitted orally for several centuries. By the time the earliest Buddhist scriptures were first written down, large numbers of rival Buddhist schools existed—each with their own competing collection of Buddha's teachings. Virtually all of these have been lost, though some have been partially reconstructed through translations into Chinese, Korean, and Tibetan. However, our surviving and reconstructed canons differ from one another so greatly that scholars are unable to tell which, if any, represent the "original" or "authentic" Buddhist scriptures.

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Daoism—Lao-Tze

According to venerable tradition, the founder of Daoism, Laozi (aka Lao-Tze, Lao Tzu, Lao Dan, or "Old Master") wrote his teachings in a short book named after him in the sixth or early fifth century BCE. Modern scholars disagree. Based on archaeological evidence, competing collections of sayings attributed to Laozi began to be written down probably from the second half of the fifth century BCE, grew, competed for attention, and gradually came to be consolidated over the following centuries until the *Laozi* probably reached a relatively stable form around the mid-3 century BCE.

Nearly every fact about Laozi is in dispute, including the name Laozi itself. The most common biographical account of his life was recorded around 94 BCE in Sima Qian's *Shiji*, (or "Records of the Grand Historian"). Scholars today take the *Shiji* with a grain of salt. According to Daoism scholar William Boltz, it "contains virtually nothing that is demonstrably factual; we are left no choice but to acknowledge the likely fictional nature of the traditional Lao tzu [Laozi] figure."

Sikhism—Gurū Nānak

Sikhism has only been around for about five hundred years, a Johnny-come-lately compared to most world religions. Its founder, Gurū Nānak, said to have lived c. 1469-1539, was the first of a line of ten founding gurus of the faith. Virtually everything known about him comes from *Janamsakhis*, or "birth-stories" of the life of Guru Nanak and his early companions. These miracle-laden tales are replete with supernatural characters and extraordinary events like conversations with fish and animals. They come in many versions, which often contradict each other, and in some cases have clearly been tinkered with to beef up the role of this or that disciple or advance the claim of some faction. Oddly, they don't begin to appear until 50-80 years after his death, and many more come in during the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries.

Nānak and the first six gurus (along with the poetry of thirteen Hindu Bhakti movement poets and two Sufi Muslim poets). However, the *Adi Granth*, its first rendition, was compiled by the *fifth* guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1564–1606) in 1604, generations after the faith's supposed beginnings, and the final edition of Sikh scriptures, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, was not finalized until a full century after *that*, in 1704.

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Confucianism – Confucius

Confucius, or “Master Kong,” a.k.a. K’ung Fu-tzu, Kǒng Fūzǐ, etc., is said to be a 5th century BCE figure, though his earliest biography appears 400 years after his death. *The Analects*, attributed to him was actually composed sometime during the Warring States period (476–221 BC) and reached its final form during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).

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Jainism – Rishabhanatha

Jainism claims that Rishabhanatha, the first of its twenty-four founding Jain *Tirthankara*, meaning teachers, was born millions and millions of years BCE, lived for 8.2 million *Purva* years—one *Pūrva* (पूर्व) equals 8,400,000 years, *squared*, in Western reckoning—and was 4,950 ft. tall. Skipping forward a bit, in the 9th century BCE, their 23rd *Tirthankar*, Parshvanatha, is born. He is a mere 13 1/2 feet tall and lives for but 100 years.

Despite this impressive (some might say incredible) pedigree, observers could be forgiven for suspecting that the religion actually started with the 24th and final (and shortest) *Tirthankar*, Mahavira, supposedly born at the beginning of the 6th century BCE; the actual year varies from sect to sect. It’s difficult to say for certain, as tradition also holds that starting around 300 BCE, Mahavira’s teachings, transmitted orally by Jain monks, were gradually lost, and the first written versions did not arrive until about the 1st century CE—at least, according to one branch of Jainism, a fact disputed by rival factions.

In Summary

Not all religions claim great men—or god-men—as founders. Shinto & Hinduism are two of the oldest religions still widely practiced. Historically, Hinduism is considered a fusion of multiple Indian cultures over millennia, while Shinto emerged from the beliefs and practices of prehistoric Japan. As such, there is no single founder figure of Hinduism or Shinto. Other religions, like Bahá’í and Mormonism have known founders, but we also have clear documentation of the ways in which they borrowed from and adapted earlier religions. Mirza Hoseyn ‘Ali Nuri, founder of Bahá’í, drew on Bábism, which is itself a spin-off of Shia Islam.

divine inspiration or intervention, the natural history of these religions is pretty clear.

But as with other information sets that replicate and spread (for example: DNA, internet memes or culture), changes can accumulate in small or large increments, introduced gradually or in large chunks. As bits get handed down, people instinctively "correct" those that don't make sense or are no longer acceptable before passing them on. If we strip away the founding stories and look at religions with a critical eye, some of these corrections become obvious.

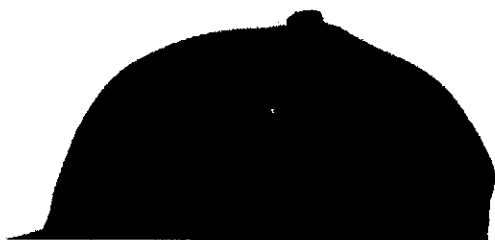
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Looking at the big picture, patterns emerge in this process, patterns that are shaped by cultural and technological evolution and the gradual accumulation of knowledge. And that is the topic of Part 2 in this series.

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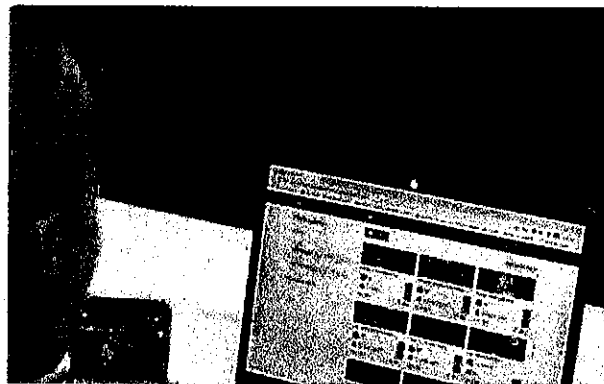
Valerie Tarico is a psychologist and writer in Seattle, Washington. She is the author of Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light and Deas and Other Imaginings. Her articles about religion, reproductive health, and the role of women in society have been featured at sites including The Huffington Post, Salon, The Independent, Quillette, Free Inquiry, The Humanist, AlterNet, Raw Story, Grist, Jezebel, and the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. Subscribe at ValerieTarico.com.

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