

2 Peter 1:16-21

I have a fun little exercise for us this morning. We're going to make up a religion!

Why would we want to do that, you may ask? Good question: Well, to be rich and famous of course. That seems like a perfectly healthy thing for a group of people to be about, doesn't it? Lying for personal gain? But think of the praise! Think of the fame! People will speak our names for thousands of years. Our religion will change the world -and may even inspire some good, so who cares if it's all a lie in the end?

Ready? The first thing we need is a public figure to base it around. They better be compelling, they better be engaging, they better be mysterious. He (or she – this is a modern religion - but lets go with “he” in the planning phase here) better have grand aspirations and delusions of godliness. They really need to “buy-in” to the fact that they are true God come to save the world. And it would be best if they weren't arrogant while they did it. Yes, a humble man of the people who thinks they are God, that's who we need. Because afterall this is a public figure, lots of people will see them and easily be able to tell others if he is a fraud.

If he could do some magic tricks that would be great too. We can help him with that. But, and this goes without saying from the start, we need to be sworn to secrecy that we are tricking people. But it shouldn't be too hard to trick people into

thinking he raised the dead, since people don't know about heartbeats or death at all right? People are so dumb. But we can't screw it up at all, or else the whole thing is a sham. So pay attention in those miracle planning meetings!

Next, we have to get the leader killed. He can't go on living too long getting frail or senile – remember he is supposed to be God! We have to make him disappear so that we can say he rose or ascended or something, right? We will have a brainstorming session later about what we can steal from other ancient religions and apply to this guy. But, back to the problem at hand, we need him dead, but then we need to ditch the body somewhere. Oh, and maybe one of us can dress up like him to fool others into thinking they'd seen him after he died. (That would be great!) So... which of you want to fight off the people guarding the body and steal it? But don't kill the guards, that wouldn't be nice, just trick them into thinking they saw an angel. Should be a piece of cake.

But then, if we want it to be a Judeo-Christian religion, there is that pesky Old Testament. Those writers are already dead so we can't convince them to tailor their writings to us, to make it look like our guy is the guy. So that means we have to make our guy look like who they expected. So we better pick a guy from Bethlehem, who also has been to Egypt and Nazareth. And he's got to be descended from David. That's a dealbreaker. So someone get to looking at genealogies. We are going to need to do a ton of interviews. Oof. This is a lot of

work. But remember the fame and riches and glory that will be ours! It'll be worth it.

So, once we find him, get him famous, and get him killed, and hide the body, then we are off and running! All we need to do then is to spread the news that he's alive again. It would be better if it came from the more reputable of us. And when we write it all down, let's make sure to get our story straight. Can't have varying perspectives on this, I want us unified in every aspect. In fact, we better just have one document, one gospel, that we spread. We will make it official. Nobody can translate it unless we say so.

And then, we divvy up some preaching stations, and we sit back and relax and enjoy the fame and masses that come to adore us. They don't have to know it's based on a lie. And it will be easy to forget about that as we are dining in king's palaces anyways.

How's the plan sound? Flawless? You on board? No!?

There is a reason that many religions of the world start PRIVATELY. One person, one vision, one revelation, one teacher with a new philosophy. There are so many fewer loose ends that way. And I am not even saying the false religions of the world started conspiratorially. Maybe those people did see or hear something. But

I also know more than God can talk to you... And those voices might, again, want one, single, person to start with, it's so much easier to coordinate.

But Christianity is not a private religion. Jesus taught publicly, died publicly, rose publicly, and the testimony of those events, which was in line with the many other prophets of the OT (who were already dead so how could they be “in on it”?) was distributed publicly. And those documents, or as Peter calls them today “eyewitness” accounts, I suppose did earn them fame – we are still talking about them, sure – but did it earn them riches and an easy life? Not at all. The sheer amount of planning, luck, and propaganda to pull off fabricating Christianity is astronomical.

Which is why Peter (who atheists suppose is one of the chief inventors of Christianity) says, “we did not follow cleverly devised myths, but we actually saw him.” And the atheist would retort “well of course he said that, he's lying.” Well then, the atheist needs to come up with some other explanation. Because that plan I laid out today is ludicrous. Absolutely ludicrous. We know Jesus was (and still is) a historical person, we know the disciples were real, and we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that sometime in the first century the world explodes with people saying Jesus rose again. Those are facts.

And to say it was fabricated is an argument from silence. There are no documents about a body -all they needed was a body, and they guarded it. Whereas we do have these varied, but harmonious, gospel accounts that also are supported, as Peter says in our text today, from the sure prophetic witness. That point to this Jesus as a man attested to by miracles. And again, if the disciples were “in on it” they above all would know he is a fraud! And if they lied about their fraud of a teacher for clout then they had a funny strategy, that’s for sure: why the different gospels? why was the testimony spread by social outcasts? why make themselves look so foolish in the gospels? Let alone the fact that if they did all that for personal gain, well, the elephant in the room is that they didn’t get personal gain! They suffer such great pain for him. And not one of them said it was a joke? Not one of them, when they saw they weren’t getting riches, but abuse, became disenchanted and fell away? And it wasn’t like the cults where you have to stay together on the property so they can make sure you don’t make a run for it – no, the disciples went all over the known world, spread out in poverty, and pain, and chains and proclaimed the very same message unto their deaths.

The only other explanation, other than Jesus actually being the Savior of the world, is some sort of mass psychosis that hit all of them, of which none of them ever recovered (or got worse and lapsed into total madness), and was so unique that all of them agreed on the same delusion. I think that’s harder to believe than someone

rising from the dead! But it's out there. The last atheist I debated said that the disciples were overcome by grief and imagined that he was alive again. And I thought, "What an insult to everyone who has ever grieved a loved one before." Why was the grief so intense for all of them that they were driven to delusion. And why are we, when we lose our nearest and dearest, not so mad as to say they are back from the dead, even if we do at times catch a bit of their scent or a memory that takes us back to when they were still with us? How come none of us, who do grieve so deeply, don't ever seem to actually maintain over years and years that they are alive again?

And so the arguments go back and forth from made up stories copied Mithris and Norse religions (that aren't even all that similar at all, once you look at them) to delusions and hallucinations and drugs. But none of those can fully account for the evidence we have in the gospels and history or the path it would take to get there. It's too big!

What is compelling however, is the fact that we are all here somehow, thinking and speaking on things eternal, more than just animals in a universe that is very real. And if it was placed here somehow, someway, outside the laws of physics, then could those forces or that One outside those laws bring a man back to life. And if so, maybe he can do it for us. How do we reach him? How can we convince him to care for us?

But is the answer to this not the Gospel that gives us joy? He comes down to us. He reveals himself to us. He did to Peter James and John on a mountain and in a resurrection. And to us? “Listen to Him.” Through his word. We are not second rate because we are not eye-witnesses, he has come to us and still does as he has promised where two or more are gathered, in the water, in His body and blood, with His Spirit. And do not think those things are separate from the “real” Jesus. There is only One Jesus, the One born of Mary, who was crucified and risen. And if that is real, if he really was there with Peter James and John and so many others, then that means he is really here with us. To guide, to warn, to teach. But also to comfort, to forgive, to save, and to raise up to eternal life even as he has already overcome the cross and grave. That is no clever myth, that is a promise rooted in reality attested to by very real people.