

NEITHER SCHOLARLY NOR A SOLUTION: A RESPONSE TO TOM  
HARPUR'S *THE PAGAN CHRIST*

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In early 2004, Tom Harpur's *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* was published in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The book has been quite popular, received positive reviews,<sup>2</sup> and since its release in Canada it has also been sold in the United States and overseas. While Harpur's previous books may have been controversial, *The Pagan Christ* makes Harpur's most significant, radical and controversial claims about the Christian faith. For instance, Harpur declares that all Christian beliefs have their origins in ancient Egyptian religion, that Jesus never even existed, and that there was a literalist conspiracy in the third and fourth centuries to move the church away from its understanding the New Testament writings as myth towards a literal reading of the New Testament that interpreted the events described as real historical events. The implications of such claims are clear—if Harpur is right, the church needs to move away from 1800 years of tradition and theology and radically revise its beliefs and practice.

This critique deals with various issues raised in *The Pagan Christ*. It is not meant to be exhaustive, for some of the issues raised by Harpur require a much more comprehensive treatment. What this critique does do, however, is provide the general, non-specialist reader with a brief critique of some of Harpur's claims. The first section deals with some

1. Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004).

2. For a summary of some positive reviews, see [www.tomharpur.com](http://www.tomharpur.com) (1 March 2005).

general issues, and the second section deals with the core concerns of the book. What both sections will show is how *The Pagan Christ* is neither a work that respects basic scholarly conventions nor provides a fair and reasonable solution to the questions raised by Harpur.

### 1. *General Issues*

#### a. *Areas of Agreement*

While most of this article is quite critical of *The Pagan Christ*, it should be noted that I agree with Harpur in a few areas. First, it is worthwhile to affirm Harpur's aversion to rigid (and often hateful) fundamentalism. No doubt he has had some miserable experiences with well-meaning (hopefully) Christians. Second, it is also worthwhile to affirm that the church has done shameful things in the past (he notes events such as the Inquisition). Injustices must be acknowledged and lamented. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the answer to obnoxious Christians is to discard the doctrines of the church, and I am not convinced that certain abuses in the past should necessarily cause us to discard specific doctrines today. In other words, I do not believe that the only way to a healthy Christian spirituality is to dump historic orthodox Christianity.

#### b. *Harpur's Objections to Criticism*

On his website [www.tomharpur.com](http://www.tomharpur.com) (1 March 2005), Harpur provides four points as a "reasonable approach" to dealing with critics of his book. As my comments below indicate, I am convinced that much of his "reasonable approach" to his critics is actually unfair and unscholarly.

First, Harpur dismisses outright any criticism of his book by a priest, a church official or a professor at a seminary because he claims that all such people would naturally be biased against his book. He goes on to claim that such people (he labels them "ultra-conservative and/or fundamentalists") are "deeply threatened" by ideas that threaten their "traditional beliefs." He concludes by stating that these people fear his ideas because if "one stone of the edifice is obliterated, the whole edifice begins to totter."

Is this a "reasonable approach" to criticism? While it may be true that there are priests, church officials and seminary professors that have biases, to dismiss their criticisms outright before he has even heard them is ridiculous. Everyone has a bias (even Harpur), but the mark of a good scholar is to acknowledge one's bias and do everything (as much as

possible) to keep that bias from influencing the outcome of one's research. Harpur ignores the scholarly convention that dictates that arguments are dealt with on their own merit, and not by labeling the critic and then dismissing the critic because of the label. Philosophers call attacking the person and not the actual issue an *ad hominem* argument. Ironically, Harpur finds himself using *ad hominem* arguments, something that he damns fundamentalists for using.

Another problem with this particular approach of Harpur is that the argument can just as easily be turned around and used against Harpur. Certainly Harpur has a vested interest in his beliefs (who doesn't have a vested interest in their own beliefs?), and it could equally be claimed that he is "deeply threatened" by any ideas that threaten his nontraditional beliefs. Even the statement if "one stone of the edifice is obliterated, the whole edifice begins to totter" can be applied to Harpur and to why he seems to be so threatened by criticism of his work.

Second, Harpur claims that the "acid test" of "intellectual integrity" is that a critic has read the key works (Kuhn, Massey, Higgins) that Harpur relies upon to build his case. This is a valid point; to critique Kuhn, one should at least read something of Kuhn's. However, not everything in Harpur's book is based on Kuhn, Massey or Higgins. For instance, Harpur makes claims about the historicity of Jesus and the early church that do not necessarily have anything to do with Kuhn, Massey and Higgins. He also has certain assumptions that impact his interpretation of the New Testament. In other words, one need not read Kuhn and the others to critique certain assumptions that Harpur brings to his research or certain claims that he makes about the historical nature of the New Testament.

Third, Harpur criticizes the "general professional academic" who is discontent with the extent of Harpur's documentation. On the one hand, I agree with Harpur: a "popular level" book should be evaluated as just that. On the other hand, I disagree with Harpur. He claims to be a scholar, and invites scholars to read his work, yet he seems to want them to just accept as "factual" everything that Harpur says just because he says it. What scholar operates that way? Scholars want to see sources and be free to ask questions about them and about how they were interpreted.

Fourth, Harpur states that the most important consideration is whether the critic is concerned with the main thesis of the book, or if the critic is merely concerned with "nit-picking" and "discrediting the book

at any cost.” There are a few problems with this fourth consideration. One, how can he know a critic’s motives? Critics do not always state motives, and what may look like “nit-picking” may actually be a serious attempt to grapple with the provocative claims in the book. Two, “nit-picking” (if by that term one means a detailed and often tedious testing and critiquing of methodology and claims) is what most scholars do. In fact, I expect every student of mine to do with any book what I am doing to Harpur’s right now in this book review.

As the above comments indicate, I think that Harpur’s response to his critics is far from “reasonable.” His book states that 1800 or so years of Christian theology needs to be overturned, and that 2 billion Christians in the world have it all wrong. Despite these provocative claims, however, according to Harpur no criticisms by church leaders are valid, no one who has not read Kuhn, Massey or Higgins can say anything about the book, scholars should not expect to examine sources, and anyone who criticizes can be dismissed because he or she is just “nit-picking” and/or “discrediting the book at any cost.” Just who can critique the book?

### *c. The Alleged Need for a Change*

Harpur seems to think that Christianity is facing a crisis. In fact, he says that Christianity is “one more generation before extinction.”<sup>3</sup> This alleged crisis seems to be driving the need for a radical change in the way in which Christianity is understood. It cannot be denied that Christianity in the West is experiencing difficult times (Christianity in Europe appears to be in a very bad state, the church in Canada is following Europe’s course,<sup>4</sup> and the church in the U.S. seems to be holding its own). However, Christianity around the globe is robust and expanding. Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* does an excellent job of detailing the growth and health of the global church.<sup>5</sup> The irony is that the growing global church is mostly conservative and would balk at any suggestions

3. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 7. This alleged need to change and modernize is not a new idea. Since the nineteenth century there have been many who have felt that the church needed to “modernize,” as Harpur is advocating, in order to survive.

4. Although a new book by Reginald Bibby suggests that religion in Canada is not necessarily in the bad state that many had once thought. See Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2002).

5. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

that it is necessary to discard almost 2000 years of belief in order to “survive.” (What is also ironic is the fact that basically the only churches in the West that are growing, or not dramatically shrinking, are conservative ones—the “new improved” message of the mainline liberal churches seems to have minimal appeal.<sup>6</sup>) While Harpur’s personal experience may indicate that the church is on its deathbed, the larger (global) picture indicates that the church is far from close to death, and that any attempt to save the patient with the medicine that he is offering would only contribute to the demise of the patient he is trying to save.

#### d. Sloppy Thinking

The following are a few examples of sloppy thinking in *The Pagan Christ*. This type of sloppy thinking does nothing to convince thoughtful readers of the validity of Harpur’s argument.

First, Harpur takes the early church historian Eusebius to task for his lack of objectivity,<sup>7</sup> but uses without criticism the famous British Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon. However, Gibbon was far from an objective historian. Gibbon was a masterful historian, but his anti-Christian bias is no secret, and that bias colored his interpretation of the events described in his history of the Roman Empire. To be fair and consistent, Harpur should go after Gibbon for his bias with as much passion as he does against Eusebius. It is neither fair, nor scholarly, to ignore a bias when it works in your favor, and attack a bias when it does not (my hunch is that Harpur likes Gibbon’s bias, so it is okay for him).

Second, Harpur makes the absurd claim that “this great world religion [Christianity] actually rests on a foundation of falsehood and forgery.”<sup>8</sup> This quotation is referring to the work of Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*—but since when does Christianity rise or fall with the trustworthiness of a fourth-century church historian?

Third, since when does self-actualization prove the truthfulness of any book? Since when does a widespread response to a book prove its veracity? Harpur’s website takes great pains to indicate how the book has changed many people’s lives (a pretty standard thing to do when trying

6. For example, see Les Parrott III and Robin D. Perrin, “The New Denominations,” *Christianity Today* (11 March 1991), 29-33.

7. Harpur is right in his claim that Eusebius’s motives as a historian influenced his writing of the church’s history. In this regard, he is saying what almost everyone says about Eusebius.

8. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 54.

to sell a book—no big deal, and Harpur is not the only one to do it). However, it seems that these testimonials are presented, at least in part, to defend the book from its critics. The problem with such an approach is that anyone familiar with history can point to many books that at one time had a widespread readership and changed many lives, but today are books that are rejected as misguided or worse. Also, I have recently talked with a person who said that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and the concomitant conspiracy theory that went along with it, changed her life (in fact, her testimonial was remarkably similar to the ones on Harpur's website). So whose testimony is to be taken as "proof"? My point is simply that, while testimonials may be personally satisfying to an author, a good scholar should never confuse accolades and testimonials with the verification of one's research results.

Fourth, one wonders when something becomes no longer Christian. For example, if I simply apply vinyl siding to my house, or paint it, or add a porch, or replace the windows, I can still say that the house is the "same house." However, if I tear my house down, demolish the foundation, and rebuild my house on the lot down the street, I cannot say that my house is the "same house." The changes that Harpur is suggesting are so dramatic and radical, that I do not think that he can claim the title of Christian for what he is proposing. It is no longer the "same religion." Harpur is entitled to his opinion, but there is nothing in his proposal that is remotely similar to anything that the early church (or any period for that matter) believed.<sup>9</sup> That being the case, how can he call it Christianity?

Fifth, why should one believe Harpur's conspiracy theory when there are many others from which to choose? In the days immediately after the resurrection there was a conspiracy to explain away the event (Matt 28:11-15). Since that time there have been other conspiracy

9. This point is supported by J. Gresham Machen, an opponent of liberalism in the early part of the twentieth century. In his classic work against liberal theology, *Christianity and Liberalism*, he writes, "It is perfectly conceivable that the originators of the Christian movement had no right to legislate for subsequent generations; but at any rate they did have an inalienable right to legislate for all generations that should choose to bear the name of 'Christian.' It is conceivable that Christianity may now have to be abandoned, and another religion substituted for it; but at any rate the question what Christianity is can be determined only by an examination of the beginnings of Christianity." See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 20.

theories about various aspects of the church's history. Two very recent examples of such conspiracies are Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Harpur's *The Pagan Christ*. In light of these conspiracy theories, the obvious question is: why should one endorse Harpur's conspiracy theory? Why not Dan Brown's in the *Da Vinci Code*? Since they cannot all be true, what evidence is there that indicates that his conspiracy theory is "true" and Dan Brown's (or any of the other ones out there) is "not true"?

e. *What About Islam?*

I am curious to know what Harpur thinks about Mohammed and Islam. It is generally recognized that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are world religions with a great deal in common. They share similar prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus), and Muslims have recognized and respected the Jews and Christians as "people of the book." However, if everything taught in Judaism and Christianity really has its origins in ancient Egyptian religion, and nothing in the Jewish or Christian scriptures is meant to be taken as history, and Jesus never actually existed, what does that say about Islam? For the sake of consistency, would Harpur also argue that nothing in the Koran should be taken as history, that everything in Islam has its roots in ancient Egyptian religion, and that Mohammed never really existed? Stated differently, is the sequel to *The Pagan Christ* going to be *The Pagan Mohammed*?

## 2. Core Issues

The items and concerns listed above are important, but they still do not get to the heart of Harpur's claims that the origins of Christianity can be found in ancient Egyptian religion. Therefore, this section will deal with the core issues surrounding this claim, as well as the claim itself.

a. *Reputation*

Harpur states that he depends on Kuhn for his theories about the Egyptian origins of Christianity. In fact, even what Harpur says about the "crisis" facing the church (and the need for change) comes right from Kuhn's work.<sup>10</sup> He dedicates the book to Kuhn, refers to him

10. For example, compare the remarks made in *The Pagan Christ*, 7-8, with remarks made in Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *The Lost Light* (Elizabeth, NJ: Academy Press, 1940), 1-2.

throughout the book, and urges people to read his works.<sup>11</sup> That being the case, in order to deal with Harpur, one must deal with Kuhn. However, Kuhn makes it very clear that his work in *The Lost Light* is very much dependent on the work of Massey. In that Kuhn is quite right, for approximately one-third of his endnotes in *The Lost Light* refer to Massey's works (usually *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World*).<sup>12</sup> Kuhn also pays tribute to Massey in one of his endnotes in *The Lost Light*.<sup>13</sup> Since Harpur's work is really a modern re-working of Kuhn's and Massey's ideas, it is fair to say that to test Harpur's claims, one must really test the sources of his ideas.<sup>14</sup> So what about the claims of Kuhn and Massey?<sup>15</sup>

First of all, how were Kuhn and Massey viewed by the academic world? Harpur claims that Massey was a man of "vivid genius and poetic fire who distinguished himself as a social reformer, a poet, and especially an Egyptologist" who was "light-years ahead of his time."<sup>16</sup> Massey also wrote, it is claimed, a "series of brilliant scholarly works on the religion and mythology of ancient Egypt."<sup>17</sup> Harpur does note that Massey's work was not widely circulated, and his work was "considered taboo" in the "respectable literary and religious circles."<sup>18</sup> This chorus of praise for Massey is echoed in Kuhn's work where he says that Massey's contribution to the study of ancient Egyptian religion was

11. On his website ([www.tomharpur.com](http://www.tomharpur.com)), Harpur urges people to read Kuhn's works.

12. Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1907).

13. Kuhn, *The Lost Light*, ch. 4 n. 7.

14. Harpur also identifies Higgins as one of the three main contributors to his theory. While Higgins does have a part to play, I would argue that most of Harpur's ideas come directly from Kuhn (and Kuhn from Massey). That being the case, I think that much of what Harpur says hinges more on Kuhn and Massey than Higgins. (Harpur even states in *The Pagan Christ*, "Acknowledgements," that he leans more on Massey than Higgins.)

15. Since Harpur is dismissive of those who have not read any of Kuhn and Massey's works, I go on record here stating that I have read a number of Kuhn's and Massey's works.

16. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 9.

17. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 202.

18. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 9.

invaluable.<sup>19</sup> Obviously Harpur and Kuhn are impressed with Massey, but what about others? Harpur makes similar claims about Kuhn.<sup>20</sup>

If Massey and Kuhn were so brilliant, and their contribution so profound, certainly others would have noticed. The problem is that they have not. For instance, a 1908 review of Massey's *Ancient Egypt* in the *New York Times* is far from complimentary. It states, in part:

But, further, he [Kuhn] had little idea of what is and what is not permissible in logical argument; very few of his syllogisms are without a flaw; he has no perception of what is possible or impossible in respect of philological comparisons, and he was dominated by a fanatical belief with regard to the origin of Christianity which at once takes his book out of the realm of science.<sup>21</sup>

One professor of Egyptology at the University of Chicago has stated that Kuhn, Massey and Higgins are “not to be considered giants in the field of Egyptology” and that their works are “on the fringe.”<sup>22</sup> As Ward Gasque has also noted, not one of the men is noted in the standard reference works in the field such as the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (2001), M.L. Bierbrier's *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (1995) and Ida B. Pratt's *Ancient Egypt* (1925/1942).<sup>23</sup> My point is not that a scholar must be recognized as brilliant by his or her peers in order to be correct. Rather, I am simply taking issue with Harpur's polemics. He overstates the genius and reputation of Massey and Kuhn in order to bolster his case; such an approach may sell books, but it is not good scholarship.

In response to this criticism, Harpur may say that he did state that both were never really recognized in their day. But if they were not recognized in their day, who suddenly determined that they were both geniuses—Harpur? If Harpur wanted to keep the reputation of these

19. Kuhn, *The Lost Light*, 595-96.

20. “I have found the writings and research of Dr. Alvin Boyd Kuhn to be the most erudite, most eloquent, and most convincing—both intellectually and intuitively—of any modern writer on religion I have encountered in a lifetime dedicated to such matters. To meet him through his books and monographs is to be confronted by a towering polymath whom history has yet to recognize fully in his brilliance.” See Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 9.

21. *New York Times*, 15 February 1908.

22. Personal email correspondence between Gordon Heath and the professor.

23. W. Ward Gasque, “Comment: Was Christ's Life Based on Pagan Myths?” [www.canadianchristianity.com](http://www.canadianchristianity.com) (31 March 2005).

two men out of the discussion he should never have placed them on such an intellectual pedestal. Besides, if 2000 years of Christian theology are supposed to be overturned on the conclusions of a few scholars, I hope that the genius of the few scholars would have been recognized by at least a few others.

b. *Research*

But enough of the reputations of Kuhn and Massey. What about the actual research of both men, and of Harpur? What was the quality of their research? There is no way to dissect all the works of Harpur, Kuhn and Massey in this brief critique. However, suffice it to say that in many cases their methodology is seriously flawed (which should cause one to be skeptical about the conclusions). First, the fact that there are similarities between Christianity and first- and second-century paganism is quite obvious. In fact, church fathers pointed out the similarities. What is important to note, however, is that the church fathers also pointed out the differences. Second, for Harpur, Kuhn and Massey there is a positive and clear connection between every single similarity between Christianity and ancient Egyptian religion. Similarities may mean that there is a connection and that one idea begat the other, but similarities do not necessarily mean that there is a connection. Third, tracing the etymology of words can be precarious at the best of times, something that Harpur, Kuhn and Massey ignore. Fourth, historians rely on primary sources, and must argue on the basis of such evidence. Kuhn and Massey's works, however, are sorely lacking in this regard. Fifth, Harpur, Kuhn and Massey assume that the scriptures are not meant to be read as historical texts or read literally in any way. In other words, the scriptures are "myth." Each one of these flaws will be dealt with below.

1. *Irenaeus on Harpur*. One way to critique Harpur, Kuhn and Massey's methodology is to examine what the early church father Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) had to say about such an approach to Christian truth. Why? In the work *Against Heresies* (c. 182–188), Irenaeus takes on the many Gnostics who had infiltrated the church. His aim (apparently unsuccessful) was two-fold: "(1) to render it impossible for any one to confound Gnosticism with Christianity, and (2) to make it impossible for such a monstrous system to survive, or ever to rise again."<sup>24</sup> The reason

24. "Introductory Note to *Irenaeus Against Heresies*," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004),

for bringing Irenaeus into the discussion is that Irenaeus was a critic of Gnosticism, and Harpur, Kuhn and Massey are, in many ways, modern-day Gnostics.

Irenaeus began by warning his readers that they should be careful, for the Gnostics make their teaching “appear to the inexperienced...more true than the truth itself,” partly because the Gnostics used language that appeared to be Christian (but, as Irenaeus states, their sentiments were not).<sup>25</sup> He provided myriads of examples of how the Gnostics ignored the natural sense of scripture and twisted it to fit their preconceived notions. The following is a long quotation, but what it does is provide a sense of the type of methodology that Irenaeus found simply unacceptable:

They [Gnostics] tell us, however, that this knowledge has not been openly divulged, because all are not capable of receiving it, but has been mystically revealed by the Saviour through means of parables to those qualified for understanding it. This has been done as follows. The thirty Aeons are indicated...by the thirty years during which they say the Saviour performed no public act, and by the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Paul also, they affirm, very clearly and frequently names these Aeons, and even goes so far as to preserve their order, when he says, “To all the generations of the Aeons of the Aeon.” Nay, we ourselves, when at the giving of thanks we pronounce the words, “To Aeons of Aeons” (for ever and ever), do set forth these Aeons. And, in fine, wherever the words Aeon or Aeons occur, they at once refer them to these beings. The production, again, of the Duodecad of the Aeons, is indicated by the fact that the Lord was *twelve* years of age when He disputed with the teachers of the law, and by the election of the apostles, for of these there were twelve. The other eighteen Aeons are made manifest in this way: that the Lord, [according to them] conversed with His disciples for eighteen months after His resurrection from the dead. They also affirm that these eighteen Aeons are strikingly indicated by the first two letters of His name [Ἰησοῦς], namely *Iota* and *Eta*. And, in like manner, they assert that the ten Aeons are pointed out by the letter *Iota*, which begins His name; while for the same reason, they tell us the Saviour said, “One *Iota*, or one tittle, shall by no means pass away until all be fulfilled.” They further maintain that the passion which took place in the case of the twelfth Aeon is

310 (page citations are to the reprint edition). All following references in footnotes to early Christian writings below are from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* edition as noted above.

25. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, Preface.

pointed at by the apostasy of Judas, who was the twelfth apostle, and also by the fact that Christ suffered in the twelfth month.<sup>26</sup>

In tedious detail, Irenaeus went on to illustrate the many other Gnostic approaches to reading the scriptures. What they all had in common was a fascination with numbers, parallels, etymologies and hidden meanings. This same fascination and fixation permeates Kuhn and Massey's work. In Irenaeus' opinion, such an approach to the scriptures was to "disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lie..., dismember and destroy the truth."<sup>27</sup> What the Gnostics did was very much like one who dismantles a work of art and recreates something entirely different from the original:

...when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, [the Gnostics]...then take this likeness of the man all to pieces...re-arrange the gems, and so fit them into the form of a dog or a fox, and even that poorly executed; and...then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the Gnostics eventually destroyed the meaning of the original authors. Whether or not the agenda is being driven by a need to make some type of link between Christianity and some Gnostic demi-urge, or ancient Egyptian religion, in Irenaeus' opinion, a fascination with numbers, parallels, etymologies and hidden meanings in the scriptures was not a way to get at the real meaning of the scriptures and of the essence of the Christian faith.

Here is where I find Harpur a bit dishonest and unscholarly. Harpur will bring Irenaeus on his side when he can find a quotation from Irenaeus that seems to support his point, but completely ignore the vast majority of Irenaeus' teaching that utterly condemns Harpur's entire methodology. Either Harpur is unaware of Irenaeus' condemnation of the Gnostic approach to scripture (which would erode Harpur's claim of being a scholar), or he knows about it and chooses to ignore it (which would lead one to question his integrity). Either way, I do not see how anyone even remotely familiar with Irenaeus' writings can, at the same time, support anything written by Kuhn or Massey. Harpur should know that and let his readers know it too.

26. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.3.

27. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.8.

28. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.8.

2. *Similarities with Paganism.* Another early church writer that is helpful when critiquing Harpur, Kuhn and Massey is Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165). Justin Martyr was well aware of the similarities between Christianity and paganism (as were other early church leaders). In fact, Justin spent a considerable amount of time outlining some of the ways in which Christian practices and beliefs were similar to the pagans who persecuted them.<sup>29</sup> However, in Justin’s opinion, the similarities did not necessarily mean that the message contained in the Gospels had its origins in ancient Roman or Greek (or whatever) religion. In fact, Justin tried to make it very clear that while there may be similarities between Christianity and the other “gods,” the Christian claim was that Jesus was superior to all such “gods.”<sup>30</sup>

The question remains, however, what does one do with the similarities? Kuhn and Massey argue that such similarities mean that one came from the other. Justin Martyr claimed the similarities were due to the work of demons who anticipated the coming of Christ and so made copies of the real thing to deceive people,<sup>31</sup> due to Plato’s reliance on Moses,<sup>32</sup> or due to traces of truth found in all people (the λόγος σπερμᾶτικός).<sup>33</sup> While one may disagree with Justin’s analysis, the point being made here is that, for Justin, the similarities did not mean that the Christian faith came from any other ancient religion or that all religions were equally valid. On the contrary, for Justin, the coming of Jesus had been foretold in the Old Testament prophets, and his arrival was the fulfillment of such prophecy. He was also the Word who had become flesh, died, and physically rose again. Consequently, all other gods were inferior to the Son of God, and all other “gods” were not to be worshipped.

While Justin’s blaming the demons for some of the similarities between Christianity and paganism may seem credulous today, Kuhn and Massey’s methodology that assumes all similarities are conclusive

29. For example, see Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, chs. 20–22.

30. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 22.

31. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 54.

32. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 59.

33. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 46. Justin said: “We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists...”

proof that everything in Christianity was predated by ancient Egyptian religion is just as credulous. First, many of the “facts” that come from the research of Harpur, Kuhn and Massey are questionable.<sup>34</sup> Second, and more importantly, the way in which Harpur, Kuhn and Massey go about making connections between ancient Egyptian religion and Christianity can best be described as simplistic and superficial. Others have outlined a more comprehensive and thoughtful methodology to follow when trying to determine whether or not similarities are due to coincidence, or due to other factors such as some type of historical connection.<sup>35</sup> Kuhn and Massey’s conclusions would have had a bit more credibility if they approached their subject with a more sound methodology in this regard.

34. For example, look at Gasque’s ever-so-brief analysis in his critique of *The Pagan Christ* in Gasque, “Comment: Was Christ’s life based on pagan myths?”.

35. For a more thoughtful and scholarly approach, I recommend reading the works of scholars such as Walter Burkert and Charles Penglase. For example, Burkert states, “Since the discovery of the Akkadian epics and of Gilgamesh in particular, there has been no shortage of associations between motifs in these and in the Homeric epics, especially the *Odyssey*. These motifs can be highlighted and used to surprise, but hardly to prove anything: Approximately the same motifs and themes will be found everywhere. Instead of individual motifs, therefore, we must focus on more complex structures, where sheer coincidence is less likely: a system of deities and a basic cosmological idea, the narrative structure of a whole scene, decrees of the gods about mankind, or a very special configuration of attack and defense. Once the historical link, the fact of transmission, has been established, then further connections, including linguistic borrowings, become more likely, even if these alone do not suffice to carry the burden of proof.” See Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 88. Penglase writes, “It is all too easy to run eagerly after superficial parallels which cannot really be sustained under a closer scrutiny. Accordingly, the parallels must have similar ideas underlying them and, second, any suggestion of influence requires that the parallels be numerous, complex and detailed, with a similar conceptual usage and, ideally, that they should point to a specific myth or group of related myths in Mesopotamia. Finally, the parallels and their similar underlying ideas must involve central features in the material to be compared. Only then, it would seem, may any claim stronger than one of mere coincidence be worthy of serious consideration.” See Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

3. *The Text as Myth*. What about Harpur's claim that the Gospels were written as "myth"? Harpur claims that the church of the third and fourth centuries committed one of the "most far-reaching tragedies in histories" by taking a "literalist, popularized, historical approach to sublime truth. What was preserved in the amber of allegory, it misrepresented as plodding fact."<sup>36</sup> This claim is a repeat of Kuhn's theory. Just what did the early church think about Jesus? Did he come to earth as a person of flesh and blood, or did the early church think and write (as Harpur claims) in terms of "myth" (not really expecting such expressions of faith to be taken literally)? A great deal of Harpur's thesis depends on the mythological nature of the early church's writings; but how valid is the claim?

The most compelling reason for rejecting such a claim is that the most natural reading of the New Testament and the writings of the early church indicate that the earliest Christians were convinced that Jesus did actually live, and the events described in the New Testament were events that actually occurred.<sup>37</sup> While the idea of reading the documents of the New Testament as myth is popular in some circles,<sup>38</sup> there is nothing in the actual texts themselves to justify such a wholesale reading. To claim, as Harpur does, that Paul's use of an allegory in Galatians is evidence that the entire New Testament should be read as allegory is simply arbitrary and unfair.<sup>39</sup> Completely ignoring the New Testament

36. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 2.

37. Note that I am not saying that everything that the early church said about historical events was true. I am simply saying that they believed that the events described in the Gospels had actually happened.

38. The German theologian Rudolf Bultmann's contribution to the emphasis on "myth" cannot be underestimated. For a brief summary of his contribution, see Alister McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750–1990* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), ch. 7. For a helpful survey of various views of Jesus and the Gospels in the decades before the twentieth century, see Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985). For an example of a contemporary emphasis on "myth," see Richard Taylor, "Religion and Truth," *Philosophy Now* (August/September 2004), 10–12.

39. Harpur claims that the church "forgot or ignored the fact that St. Paul himself used the esoteric, allegorical approach." See Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 19. Of course, he is referring to Gal 4:24–25. What Harpur neglects to mention is that Paul states in Gal 4:24 that he is speaking figuratively at that moment. In my opinion, no serious scholar would extrapolate from Gal 4:24–25 that all of Paul's writings should be taken figuratively.

author's intentions and imposing such an interpretation is more the forced application of a particular literary theory or theological bias than good historical research and analysis. Of course, this is not to say that there are parts of the bible that are not allegory, or poems, or parables, or proverbs, or some other type of genre (and should be read as such). I am simply saying that the context must determine the way in which a text is read.<sup>40</sup>

The evidence is compelling that the earliest church believed that Jesus was an actual historic person. To claim otherwise goes against a natural reading of the New Testament, the earliest creeds, the writings of the church fathers and early liturgical works. What the primary source evidence indicates is that they believed Jesus lived, died and rose again. These convictions in the first and second century are important to note, for Harpur and Kuhn claim that such convictions came about only in the third and fourth centuries after a literalist conspiracy. In fact, here is a critical flaw in Harpur's thesis: the third- and fourth-century church fathers make basically the exact same claims as the first- and second-century church fathers in regards to the historicity of the faith.

The following examples provide evidence that the early church was convinced that the events described in the Gospels really occurred. Note that the following examples are all pre-third and fourth centuries (the centuries when Harpur states the literalist take-over took place).

### *Creeds*

A creed (from the Latin "credo" meaning "I believe") is a brief summary of core convictions. The *Apostles Creed*,<sup>41</sup> one of the earliest creeds of the church, is an attempt to summarize the apostle's teaching.

40. Perhaps a ridiculous example will illustrate my point. Harpur claims that in the past he has had some pretty negative experiences with fundamentalists. What if I (arbitrarily) decided to claim that Harpur never actually literally meant that he had those experiences, but rather, he meant something else. What if I asserted that only a literalist would take his accounts of historical events as "history"? My guess is that Harpur would think that such claims were unfair because nothing in his text indicated that such accounts should be taken as myth, and that his accounts of historical events should be taken literally. My point is simply that the intentions of the early church writers should be respected, as should the intentions of Harpur and others.

41. The fact that the twelve apostles almost certainly did not write this creed does not undermine the point being made here. The *Apostles Creed* (regardless of author) simply illustrates how the earliest Christians believed in the historicity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

This creed indicates that the events described in the Gospels were understood to be actual historic events, and that those events were at the very core of the faith.

*The Apostles Creed* (c. AD 100)<sup>42</sup>

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

### *Liturgies*

In the earliest churches, the Eucharist was (usually) celebrated every Lord’s Day, and the language of the Eucharist indicates something very important about the early church’s view of the historicity of the Gospels. The language of the Eucharist in the liturgies indicates that the early Christians believed in a very real body and blood of a very real historical saviour.

*First Apology of Justin* (mid-2nd century)

“For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon

42. While the creed in its present form can only be traced to around the beginning of the sixth century, the core elements go back “to the apostolic age.” See Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, I (Harper & Row, 1931; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 19-20 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

them; that Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, said....”<sup>43</sup>

### *Martyrdom Accounts*

The following two examples indicate how early church martyrs saw their own martyrdom as a participation in the (very real) suffering of their Lord.

#### *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* (early 2nd century)

“For, on hearing that I came bound from Syria for the sake of Christ, our common hope, trusting through your prayers to be permitted to fight with beasts at Rome, that so by martyrdom I may indeed become the disciple of Him ‘who gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God...’”<sup>44</sup>

#### *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (c. AD 202)

“And they indeed rejoiced that they should have incurred any one of their Lord’s passions.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Various Writings*

The following brief excerpts indicate the conviction among some of the early church fathers that the events described in the Gospels were not some type of allegory or myth, but were actual historical events at the very heart of the new faith.

#### *The First Epistle of Clement* (c. AD 97)

“The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits [of their

43. *First Apology of Justin*, ch. 66.

44. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, ch. 1.

45. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, ch. 6.1.

labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.”<sup>46</sup>

*The Epistle to Diognetus* (c. AD 130)

“...but truly God Himself, who is almighty, the Creator of all things, and invisible, has sent from heaven, and placed among men [Him who is] the truth, and the holy and incomprehensible Word, and has firmly established Him in their hearts... He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave us His own Son as a ransom for us...”<sup>47</sup>

*The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* (mid-2nd century)

“...and bringeth forth fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] ‘whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the bands of the grave.’”<sup>48</sup>

*Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* (early 2nd century)

“Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; he was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of being in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.”<sup>49</sup>

*The Epistle of Barnabas* (mid-2nd century)

“And He [since it behoved Him to appear in the flesh], that He might abolish death, and reveal the resurrection from the dead, endured [what and as He did], in order that He might fulfill the promise made unto the fathers, and by preparing a new people for Himself, might show, while He dwelt on earth, that He, when He has raised mankind, also will judge them.”<sup>50</sup>

46. *The First Epistle of Clement*, ch. 42.

47. *The Epistle to Diognetus*, chs. 7 and 9.

48. *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, ch. 1.

49. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*, ch. 9.

50. *The Epistle of Barnabas*, ch. 5.

*The Prescription Against Heretics* (late 2nd or early 3rd century)

“Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen ‘in diverse manners’ by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father...”<sup>51</sup>

*On the Resurrection* (mid-2nd century)

In this brief work, Justin condemned those who denied a resurrection of the flesh. One of his arguments was that the resurrection of Jesus was an example of the possibility of a physical resurrection.

*On the Flesh of Jesus* (late 2nd or early 3rd century)

This entire work was written by Tertullian to condemn the teaching of Marcion and others who stated that Jesus was not truly human (real “flesh”). Tertullian attempted to make it very clear that Jesus’ flesh was real, as was his suffering, dying, and resurrection.

The above examples provide evidence that the early church read the New Testament writings as descriptions of actual historical events. In other words, the conviction that Jesus had come into the world in human flesh was a core conviction of the earliest church. Such a “literalist” reading of the New Testament was not the result of a third- and

51. *The Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 13.

fourth-century conspiracy, but rather, was, in part, the result of reading the New Testament with the authors' intention(s) in mind.

4. *Historical Methodology*. Harpur commits many serious fallacies when he begins to delve into historical research. In fact, the way in which he deals with historical questions and evidence reveals a lack of even the most rudimentary knowledge of basic conventions practiced in the discipline of history. The following five examples serve to illustrate this deficiency:

a. *Unrealistic expectations*. While one can expect a degree of certainty in disciplines such as chemistry or physics, the degree of certainty in history is markedly different. When seeking to reconstruct the past, a historian has only evidence to interpret. As in a court of law, this evidence is open to interpretation, and this evidence can only lead to a conclusion based on probability, not absolute certainty. In other words, there is no way to "prove" that Jesus existed (if by "prove" one means to come to a conclusion that is as objective as a conclusion in chemistry or physics). Rather, one must determine whether or not Jesus existed by weighing evidence. To expect anything more is unfair and unscholarly. My critique of Harpur in this regard is two-fold. First, Harpur seems to expect the proof for Jesus' existence to be more than can be possible. He states on his webpage that "to date there has been no incontrovertible evidence of an historical Jesus' existence."<sup>52</sup> Second, Harpur makes it appear that since absolute objective certainty is lacking as to whether or not Jesus existed, one is not justified in believing in a historical Jesus. What Harpur fails to understand is that "incontrovertible evidence" is very difficult to find when it comes to historical issues (especially events in ancient history).<sup>53</sup> The only way we can prove that anyone existed in

52. "The Responses to *The Pagan Christ*," [www.tomharpur.com/Commentary.asp](http://www.tomharpur.com/Commentary.asp) (28 February 2005)

53. I am not proposing that we need to accept the postmodernist claim that we cannot know anything with confidence about the past. I am saying that evidence is essential to any claim, and that there is rarely enough evidence to answer every question about the past. For a very helpful book on the need for evidence, and the possibility and limits of historical knowledge, see Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997). For a helpful discussion from an overtly Christian perspective, see David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990).

the past is to examine and weigh evidence. If the aim of Harpur's book is to sway readers, it may be successful. If the aim of this book is to help its readers think carefully about the probability of Jesus' existence, it is a failure.

b. *Need for evidence.* Harpur's thesis is built on the assumption that there was a third- and fourth-century conspiracy by literalists to take what was understood to be myth and turn it into accounts of actual historical events. While anyone can say anything about the past, all claims about the past must be substantiated by evidence. What Harpur fails to do (along with Kuhn and Massey) is to provide actual evidence of such a conspiracy. The destruction of pagan works does not indicate any such conspiracy, for the works could be destroyed for a wide variety of reasons (one would have to go back and examine the actual evidence available to ascertain motives). A literalist understanding in the third and fourth centuries does not indicate a conspiracy, for the evidence indicates that the first- and second-century Christians were just as literalist as the third- and fourth-century Christians. What Harpur, Kuhn or Massey, need to do is substantiate their claims by providing convincing evidence of at least the following: first, an actual shift in attitudes between the earliest church and the church of the third and fourth centuries in regards to "myth versus literalist" interpretations of the Gospels; second, the names and parties of the alleged conspiracy; third, the actual events surrounding the way in which this conspiracy carried out its allegedly successful transformation of how the church understood the Gospel accounts. Harpur may counter by saying that the evidence for such a conspiracy has been destroyed, and/or there is a paucity of information about the earliest church's history in the centuries before the fourth century. Such an argument, however, seems to be self-defeating, for if the evidence has been destroyed or is lacking, how can he make his claims in the first place? Any historian or scholar worth the name knows that evidence must be provided for any claims about the past (especially ones that affect 2 billion Christians and 2000 years of Christian history!).

On another note regarding Harpur and evidence, Harpur's reliance on his feelings for confirmation of his convictions regarding the Jesus of history are troubling for anyone concerned with even a modicum of good scholarship. The most obvious example of the importance of feelings is when he concludes his chapter on the Jesus of history with the statement,

the truth, I have discovered, is that this *inner experience* of the presence and power of God as the Christ within our own consciousness is the *best proof* of the authenticity of true Christianity.<sup>54</sup>

How can difficult historical questions be answered by relying on Harpur's feelings? First, could not opponents of Harpur claim the same sensory experience as verification of their convictions (and then you have to decide whose feelings are more valid – a difficult task!)? Second, relying on one's feeling to verify one's research results may resonate with some, but it certainly does not resonate with anyone concerned with historical scholarship that relies on a sifting and interpreting of actual historical evidence.

c. *Quotations taken out of context, or inaccurate documentation.* Numerous times Harpur fails to interpret a quotation in its context, or provide accurate documentation in his footnotes.<sup>55</sup> In this regard Harpur fails to do what is expected at even the most basic level of historical research. A few examples will suffice to show that one should be quite cautious in trusting Harpur's use of sources.

First, Harpur quotes Saint Augustine in regards to the existence of Christianity before Christ.<sup>56</sup> Augustine certainly implied that in some form the faith existed before Christ came. However, did he mean it in the way that Harpur means it, or does the context of the quotation exclude Harpur's interpretation? One never knows from reading *The Pagan Christ* because the context of the quotation is never mentioned. On a different note, within this quotation is also the conviction that Christ came in the flesh. It is noteworthy that Harpur will use Augustine's statement as an authority for the idea of a pre-existent Christianity, but elsewhere will reject the idea of a historical Jesus, an idea imbedded within the very same statement of Augustine.

Second, Harpur quotes Massey, who states that Irenaeus never believed that the divine Word (Logo) could ever become incarnate in

54. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 176 (italics added, not in original).

55. Note that I am not criticizing the book for its lack of footnotes (something that Harpur is sensitive to).

56. "The very thing which is now called the Christian religion existed among the ancients also, nor was it wanting from the inception of the human race until the coming of Christ in the flesh, at which point the true religion which was already in existence began to be called Christian." Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 27.

one man, and that Irenaeus never believed that Jesus was crucified.<sup>57</sup> The problem with this claim is that, while Irenaeus did believe that Jesus was quite a bit older than is traditionally thought, Irenaeus did believe that Jesus was the Son of God who lived and eventually died (crucified), rose again, and ascended to heaven.<sup>58</sup>

Third, Harpur makes it sound like Irenaeus believed that the only criterion for selecting the four Gospels (out from the many other options) was that “there were four winds and four quarters to the globe.”<sup>59</sup> Besides making Irenaeus sound quite silly, Harpur takes this phraseology of Irenaeus to make it appear like there was no thoughtful process for selecting the four Gospels. A closer reading of Irenaeus (and of early church history), however, reveals that there were more reasons for selecting the four Gospels than just the four winds/quarters argument. For instance, Irenaeus stressed the fact that the books we now call the New Testament were to be trusted and followed because of their apostolic authorship and content, and that the each author of each book proclaimed the same message.<sup>60</sup>

Fourth, in order to bolster his case for the pre-existence of Christian teaching before Christ, he claims that Eusebius wrote, “the Gospels of the New Testament were really the old dramatic books of the Essenes, from pre-Christian days.”<sup>61</sup> His footnote supporting this claim refers to Book 2, chapter 17, of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, a portion where Eusebius referred to some comments of Philo of Alexandria. Eusebius made it very clear that he believed that Philo was referring to a very ascetic Christian community,<sup>62</sup> and that the scriptures being referred to were “most likely” the Gospels, apostolic writings, and other epistles. There is nothing in chapter 17 that refers to the Gospels existing

57. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 160-62.

58. For example, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.10.

59. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 161.

60. For example, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.15-16. For some helpful commentary on the formation of the New Testament canon, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988); David Ewert, *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations: A General Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961).

61. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 28.

62. Eusebius stated, “Next, after describing the character of their dwellings, he [Philo] has this to say about the *churches* in the area: In every house there is a holy chamber...” See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, ch. 17.

in pre-Christian days, and Harpur's reference to Book 2, chapter 17, to support his claim is simply wrong.

Fifth, another example of inaccurate documentation can be found on pages 28-29. On those pages Harpur claims that Justin Martyr took "great pains to show that Christianity in no way differed from Paganism." He then provides a quotation from Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, chapter 21, to bolster this claim. Once again, a look at the actual text and context of what Harpur is referring to reveals that Harpur's claim is simply wrong. For example, in chapter 20 of the *First Apology*, Justin Martyr asked why it was that Christians were hated when they held to many beliefs that were held in common by many pagans.<sup>63</sup> In chapter 21 (the one Harpur quotes), Justin Martyr went on to ask why Christians were persecuted when they believed things about Jesus' life, death and resurrection that were similar to what the Romans believed about their gods. In chapter 22, Justin Martyr then stated that the *First Apology* would "prove Him [Jesus] superior" to the Roman gods (a far cry from stating that there was absolutely no difference between Christianity and paganism). A close reading of the *First Apology* reveals that Harpur's claim is groundless. In the *First Apology*, Justin Martyr does not say that there was "no" difference between Christianity and paganism. In fact, a reading of the entire work reveals that, while there were similarities between Christianity and paganism,<sup>64</sup> Justin Martyr wanted the Romans to know that there were substantial differences between the two, and Christianity was superior.

Sixth, yet another example of inaccurate documentation can be found on page 10. Harpur claims that Kuhn's works never received the "wide recognition they so deeply deserve." Why? Harpur claims that Kuhn "simply stepped too often and much too hard on too many powerful toes, particularly those of the vested religious institutions and their hierarchical keepers." Harpur provides an endnote at the conclusion of this claim so that the reader can go to the back of the book to see the evidence that he offers to substantiate such a claim. However, the actual

63. "If, therefore, on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you [the Romans] honour, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching, and if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are we unjustly hated more than all others?" See Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 20.

64. These similarities were stressed by Justin Martyr in order to try to convince the Romans to back off on their persecution of Christians (in other words, in many ways the Christians were just like the Romans, so why persecute them?).

endnote provides absolutely no evidence of such a malicious conspiracy. The endnote does provide a list of Kuhn's works with a bit of biographical material, but there is nothing in this summary that supports Harpur's claim. Anyone can claim anything, but clear and fair thinking people require evidence.

My main concern in this section is that Harpur does not deal with sources in an honest or scholarly manner. By pulling out of context various quotations from early church writers, Harpur makes it appear that people such as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine and others said basically the same thing then that Harpur is saying today. While there may be some overlap between ideas, to make mini-Harpurs out of Irenaeus and others is unfair and unscholarly. Likewise, while these examples of inaccurate documentation do not necessarily disprove Harpur's thesis,<sup>65</sup> they do indicate that Harpur's book needs to be read quite carefully and critically, especially in regards to the accuracy of his documentation.

d. *Suppression of evidence.* Statements such as "the historical evidence [for Jesus' existence] simply isn't there" are irresponsible and unscholarly.<sup>66</sup> There are many significant scholarly works that provide evidence for the historicity of the events described in the New Testament.<sup>67</sup> While one does not have to accept such evidence as conclusive or convincing, one cannot deny that there is at least evidence to consider. Good and fair scholars (even writing a "popular level" book) do not suppress evidence by trying to get readers to think that there is no case for the opposition. Rather, a good scholar presents both (or many) sides of the debate and then states the reasons for choosing a particular side. It seems that Harpur's desire to convince his readers has led him to suppress evidence and make it appear that his case is the only possible and thoughtful one.

65. There may be more, for I did not check for accuracy in each and every note.

66. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 175.

67. For example, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987); F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1972, reprint edition); Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (eds.), *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

e. *Consequences of research.* At the end of his chapter on the Jesus of history, Harpur states that the consequences of believing in a historical or personal Jesus are “limiting, and deeply divisive,” makes relations with those of others faiths such as Jews and Muslims a “perpetual impossibility,” and in the United States has made for a “passive-dependent Jesus cult totally prone to extreme magical thinking.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, to conclude anything other than what he concludes about the historical Jesus is completely unacceptable due to the consequences. The problem with such a view is that it has nothing to do with scholarly historical research. Certainly there are consequences to beliefs, but the question as to whether or not Jesus actually existed is a completely separate one from the consequences of believing in a historical Jesus. To not understand this distinction is to make one susceptible to the very common error of interpreting the past with the aim of confirming one’s present day convictions. This error is one that Harpur makes, for he seems so locked into his assumptions about the necessity of the Jesus story being a myth that he is not willing to accept an interpretation of the evidence that would allow for the possibility that he could be wrong. Of course, one’s biases always affect a study of the past and a sifting of the evidence. However, good scholars do everything possible to minimize this and to account for it; Harpur does neither.

This very brief examination of the way in which Harpur has approached the study of history indicates that he is either ignorant of how good historical research is carried out, or is intentionally abandoning good methodology to engage in convincing polemics. In either case, Harpur’s credibility is sorely tested.

### 3. Conclusion

While Harpur’s *The Pagan Christ* may have sold many copies, and changed some lives, its core contentions are seriously lacking any scholarly support. Harpur’s book reveals a cavalier approach to evidence and sources that should undermine anyone’s confidence in the claims of the book. In other words, *The Pagan Christ* neither respects basic scholarly conventions nor provides a fair and reasonable solution to the questions

68. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 175.

raised by Harpur. Certainly the issues raised in Harpur's book demand a more thorough treatment than what this brief critique can provide. However, as this article indicates, if Christians are to abandon 2000 years of belief and tradition, there needs to be a better reason for doing so than what Harpur provides in *The Pagan Christ*.