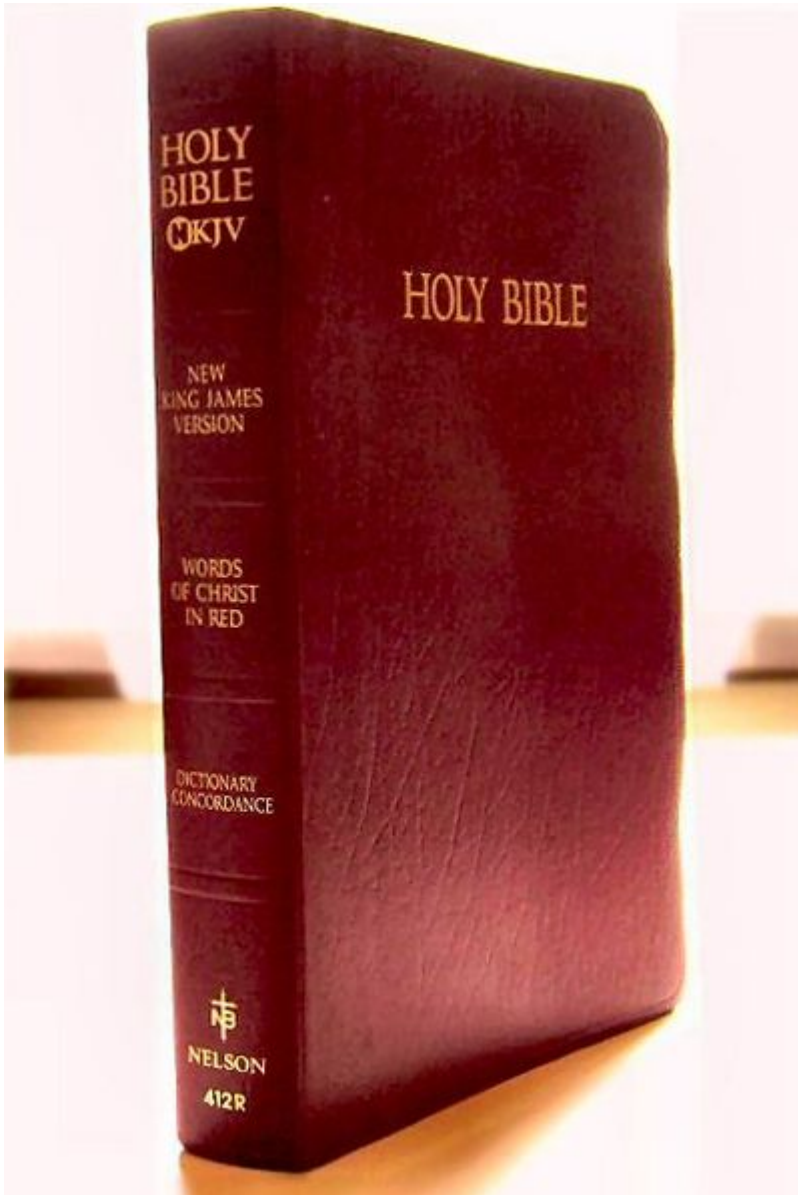


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## Trusting the Eye-witnesses: A Reply to Sullivan's Christianity in Crisis (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

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The April 2 edition of *Newsweek Magazine* featured a piece (just in time for Western Easter) by journalist Andrew Sullivan. It is a heartfelt piece, urging its readers to ignore (i.e. reject) all forms of contemporary Christianity and to embrace Jesus instead. Reading this thoughtful essay, I could not shake the feeling that Mr.

Sullivan was intending his piece to be edgy and radical. But for those whose reading is not confined to *Newsweek Magazine*, it was painfully apparent that Mr. Sullivan was in fact re-issuing *The Same Old Thing*. Far from being new and radical in his proposal, he was trudging down a well-trodden road in the wake of many people before him. The road even has a name, and can be found in Wikipedia. The road is called “The Quest for the Historical Jesus”, and earlier pedestrians along the road included, as well as Sullivan’s own Thomas Jefferson, such people as Albert Schweitzer, William Wrede, David Strauss, Ernest Renan, demythologizing Rudolf Bultmann, the chaps of the “Jesus Seminar”, and others too numerous to mention. The project boasts a cast of thousands, all walking down the same road, all sharing the same presuppositions, all determined to rescue the real Jesus from the false Jesus offered by the historical Church. They are a mixed lot, and each one comes up with his own particular version of the Historical Jesus, proclaiming his own creation to be the Real McCoy.

The Quest is easy enough to join. Simply follow these three steps:

1. Take the New Testament (any version), and pretend the Acts and Epistles do not exist.
2. Go through the four Gospels, and highlight the sayings and stories of Jesus that appeal to you.
3. Present this newer and leaner Jesus as the authentic one, consigning the rest of the sayings and stories of Jesus to the round bin entitled “the doctrines of the Church/ St. Paul”.

Presto! You too have now rescued Jesus from the hands of “politicians, priests and get-rich quick evangelists”. It is easy to feel confident about the new product, since the politicians, priests and get-rich quick evangelists are such an easy target. Few people would spend much time defending get-rich quick evangelists; fewer still would defend everything that the Roman Catholic Church has ever done. And no one in their senses would defend much done by politicians at any time. So, one quickly comes to the conclusion that, these being so wrong, your version must be right.

The ease with which the Quest is undertaken perhaps accounts for the many versions of it that have appeared throughout the years. As said above, Mr. Sullivan’s is by no means the first. Communists have looked at Jesus and pronounced Him the first true Communist; existentialists have looked at Him and found the first existentialist; flower children have rejoiced in Him as the first exponent of free love. Christian Scientists have seen Him as the great healer; socialists recognized Him as the great social reformer. Even the Nazi’s managed to

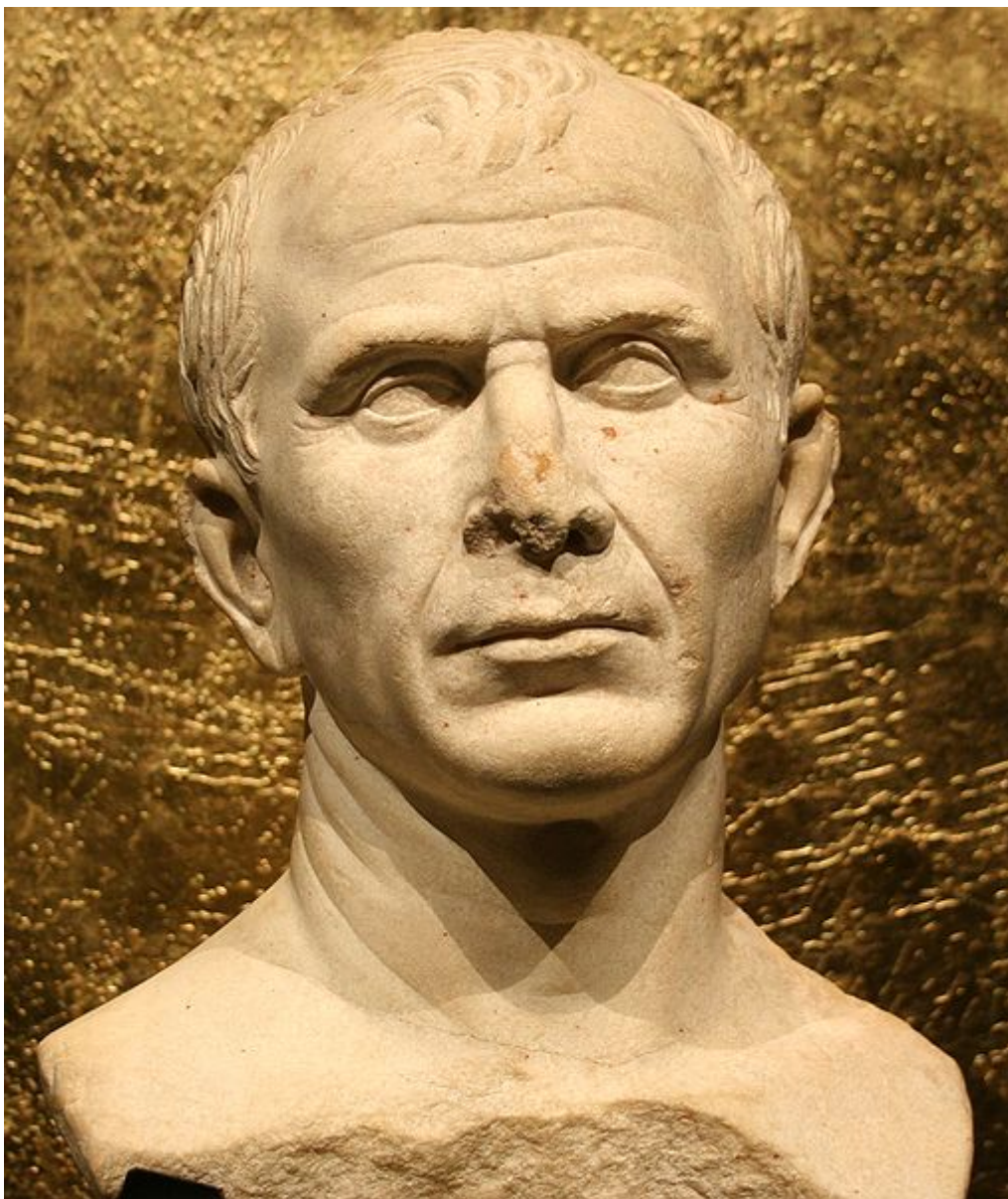
hail Him as a true Aryan (though given His unequivocally Jewish mother, this was a little trickier). It seems that the methodology of the Quest makes Jesus of Nazareth into the proverbial wax nose that can be reshaped however we like.

This alone should give us pause. As G.K. Chesterton observed in his *The Everlasting Man* (written almost a hundred years ago), there must surely be something not only mysterious but many-sided about Christ if so many smaller Christs can be carved out of Him. In fact, each version of the Quest consists of reduction, paring down the parts of Christ that do not resonate with our taste, and canonizing as uniquely authentic the parts that do. One question is: why should one prefer one version of the historical Jesus over another? Mr. Sullivan offers us the new Non-political Jesus, whose Gospel consisted essentially of lovingly embracing one's powerlessness. Why should one opt for his product over that of (say) S.G.F. Brandon, for whom Jesus was a failed political revolutionary? How does one choose which of the smaller Christs offered by the various Questers is the right one?

There is another question that must be faced as well, another speed bump on the Questing road. Oddly enough, it was mentioned by Mr. Sullivan, but he seems to have driven over it without realizing it.

I refer to his statement, "the canonized Gospels were written decades after Jesus' ministries". It is true, as Mr. Sullivan goes on to say, that these Gospels are preserved by "copies of copies of stories". They are indeed; the study of this truth is called "Textual Criticism", and scholars have been hard at it for quite a while. One aspect of their study may be mentioned here—that the "copies of the copies of the stories" are far more numerous than anything else surviving from antiquity, and this alone gives us assurance that the copies we possess today are pretty much what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote in the originals.

To put this into historical perspective, it is instructive to compare the New Testament with other ancient texts. The Greek writer Herodotus wrote his *History* around 450 B.C. No more than eight manuscripts of this work have survived, and they date from around 900 A.D., yet no scholar questions the authenticity of the text. The same is true of other ancient manuscripts. Julius Caesar wrote his *Gallic Wars* about 55 B.C., and only ten valid manuscripts have survived, dating from about 900 years after Caesar wrote them, yet all scholars accept the text as reliable. Plato wrote in about 400 B.C., and only seven copies of his work *Tetralogies* exist, the earliest of which dates from 900 A.D. But despite this 1200 year time span separating the original from the oldest manuscript copy, no one questions the authenticity of this text of Plato.



Compare all this with the New Testament. Herodotus' *History* survives in just eight manuscripts; the New Testament survives in hundreds of manuscripts. The earliest

surviving copy of Herodotus' History is 1300 years later than its original; the earliest New Testament is only 300 or so years later than its original. Indeed, two copies of John's Gospel (the Bodmer papyri) date from about 200 A.D.—just over one hundred years from the time of the original. No wonder that Sir Frederic Kenyon (one of the great authorities in the field of Textual Criticism) wrote, "The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established." Having "copies of copies" is a point *for* the historicity of the Gospel story, not against it.

The same is true regarding Mr. Sullivan's statement that the stories were written decades after the events. The events narrated about Jesus date from about 30 A.D. or so, and the Gospel accounts were circulating in the 60's—about three decades later. (St. Luke, Paul's companion in the 60's, said he consulted a number of these already existing accounts when making his own; see Lk. 1:1-4). And let's be clear: three decades is nothing. I can clearly remember seminal and important events in my life from three decades ago. I clearly remember being converted to Christ, getting married, the birth of my first child—all of which happened three decades ago or more. Certain things one of course forgets. I have no idea who was my gym teacher in grade six. But the important things one remembers. And arguably, nothing was more important to the first Christians than the life, sayings, and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. If I can clearly remember my wedding, why could not St. John and the other disciples who were there remember the wedding in Cana of Galilee when Christ turned the water into wine? If I can remember lectures and words given by my Old Testament prof in college, why could not Peter and the others remember the Sermon on the Mount or Christ's claims to divinity?

It is apparent that the Gospels are reliable enough in what they report, for the fact of their origin no more than a mere three decades after the original events, and the presence of hundreds of manuscript copies of them guarantee such authenticity. Each Quester therefore selects from these Gospels the bits he prefers and discards the rest, claiming to have at last discovered the real Jesus. As C. S. Lewis once observed about this process, this involves "the claim that the real behaviour and purpose and teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood by His followers, and has been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars...The idea that any man should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my

opinion preposterous.” And surely Lewis here simply offers common sense? If those twelve men who lived with Jesus and with each other day in and day out for months on end can’t be trusted to “get it”, there is no hope for us to recover the truth—or for Mr. Sullivan. Our real choice is not between the Jesus offered by contemporary Christianity and the one offered by Mr. Sullivan. It is between the one offered by the New Testament and complete ignorance regarding Jesus of Nazareth.

That is why I am a sceptic regarding all such Quests for the Historical Jesus, including this latest one. I trust that the original eyewitnesses and writers of the Gospels—who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles and some of the New Testament epistles—knew what they were talking about. I’ll pass on the smaller Christ that Mr. Sullivan has carved out for us. I will stick the larger and more complete one available in the Church.

*By Fr. Lawrence Farley*

*Make sure to visit [Straight from the Heart](#), where many more of Fr. Farley’s articles and thoughts can be found.*