

What Greg Sheridan gets Wrong

(and what he gets right)

A critique of Greg Sheridan's book:

Christians: the urgent case for Jesus in our world

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GREG SHERIDAN IS AN AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL COMMENTATOR AND a Catholic who has written several books on politics and a couple on religion. He frequently appears on television and writes for the national newspaper on current affairs. His latest book offering is subtitled *the urgent case for Jesus in our world*. The book published by Allen and Unwin is sold in bookstores across the country.

Sheridan's thesis is that Jesus changed all of history for the better – by changing the lives of the people closest to him. Sheridan is very much interested in history and the people who make history, especially Australian Christians. In Part 2 of his book, he provides short biographical sketches of some well-known Australians who hold or have held high office in the country. Included in this list of dignitaries is none other than the current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison.

Sheridan's book is printed with reviews from pundits as diverse as the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, the Senior Pastor of the Planetshakers International Church and various journalists, but notably not a single academic theologian or scholar of the New Testament. It becomes clear as one proceeds through the book why this is the case. The reviews on Amazon are equally thin.

Sheridan zealously prosecutes his case but employs the kind of arguments that anyone trained in critical thinking would naturally question. The argument from authority is probably his greatest weakness. If someone important – and a Christian, says something profound Sheridan accepts it without hesitation. The words of a Catholic or Protestant are treated with equal reverence, provided the speaker has some notoriety. The former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Benedict XVI, (the erstwhile Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) stand side by side. Other persons cited, the famous novelist and apologist C.S Lewis, the evangelist Billy Graham, the author Tom Holland are quoted...the list goes on. The actor/director Mel Gibson is praised for treating his audiences to the relentless emotional harangue

delivered in his savagely "realistic" film *The Passion of the Christ*. Sheridan devotes a chapter to angels, citing several more Hollywood movie productions. Pope Francis believes in angels, and this is good enough for Sheridan. It's all so much wishful thinking and pandering to authorities.

Another trick that Sheridan employs is the Catholic argument from antiquity – that is, if it's ancient it must be true. This was the same tactic that Inchofer used in 1633 to defend the Church's longstanding view that the Sun and the planets revolved around the Earth¹, or Plutarch used to defend the Egyptian god, Isis or Josephus, Moses and Judaism². Where is Isis now? And Moses? Most scholars admit now that he is legendary.³ Geocentrism? The world now agrees that Galileo and Kepler were right, and Ptolemy and the Church, unambiguously wrong. Hence Sheridan embraces the term *the modernist project* to describe the so-called intellectual conspiracy of the last two hundred years which, he says, seeks to bring down the ancient Church. Only the 'modernists' according to Sheridan have said that "Jesus, . . . may or may not have existed at all." Doesn't the author know that critics of Christianity are as old as the religion itself?⁴ Celsus of the second century whose writings have, by good fortune, survived in the refutation of the eminent church father Origen, is quoted as saying,

More and more the myths put about by these Christians are better known than the doctrines of the philosophers. Who has not heard the fable of Jesus' birth from a virgin or the stories of his crucifixion and resurrection?⁵

¹ George, 2020, p.11 ff.

² Contra Apionem 1.1.

³ Finkelstein, 2007, p.59ff.

⁴ The writer of the New Testament text called the second letter of Peter rejected the criticism that Christians follow "cleverly devised myths"(1:16) which shows that such criticisms had been made.

⁵ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 2.

In the early fourth century the church historian Eusebius extensively refuted another critic of Christianity, Hierocles who compared Jesus to the first century miracle worker, Apollonius of Tyana. Hierocles accused Christians of a "reckless and easy credulity,"⁶ a reproof which could well be applied to the author of the work under review. But according to Sheridan the ground has been cut from under the 'modernists' by recent discoveries. One of these is a piece of papyrus, "a fragment of John's Gospel, the last of the Gospels to be written . . . found in Egypt and confidently dated at the end of the first century or early in the second century."⁷

Sheridan is referring to the famous fragment found in 1920, which Bernard P. Grenfell acquired in Egypt, for the John Rylands University Library, Manchester. The fragment called P52 contains John 18:31–33 on the recto and 18:37–38 on the verso. The findings were published in 1935 amid much excitement as this appeared to be the earliest written evidence of any New Testament text. An expert in ancient script, Brent Nongbri of Yale University has studied the handwriting on the fragment and in the conclusion to his paper states that,

. . . any serious consideration of the window of possible dates for P52 must include dates in the later second and early third centuries.⁸

Sheridan's assertion that P52 'confidently' comes from the end of the first century is groundless. But even if it were true, that would *not* place the origins of the religion towards the beginning of the century which is the central thesis of the orthodox. According to Church dogma the Messiah was crucified during the Judean governorship of Pontius Pilate which ended in 36 CE.

⁶ Eusebius, *Philostratus*, 4.

⁷ p.3.

⁸ Nongbri, 2005, p.46.

But Josephus and that other Jewish historian from the first century, Justus of Tiberias make no mention of these events.⁹ Philo of Alexandria who died c 50 CE, is also silent. In the Dead Sea scrolls there is nothing alluding to the famous Rabbi from Galilee.¹⁰ The first century miracle-worker who changed all of history according to Sheridan, apparently left no trace in the historical records. His early followers likewise apparently left no trace. The persecution of Christians in 64 by Nero as reported by Tacitus and touted by Sheridan, has been soberly refuted by the scholar Shaw.¹¹ But this absence of evidence does not dampen Sheridan's enthusiasm for his Church and its important adherents. Belief without evidence, that is faith, has been the currency of the Church since its inception. Indeed, according to the apostle Paul, one is saved by faith.

Are the gospels 'history'? Biblical scholars such as Prof Helen Bond of the University of Edinburgh, say that despite their claims to the contrary they were *not written by eyewitnesses*.¹² Of John's gospel she writes,

John is anxious throughout his Gospel to show Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish feasts and institutions . . . Clearly, this deeply theological interpretation could only have been penned once Christians began to see themselves as something distinct from (and in their view, superior to) their Jewish neighbours, . . .¹³

Jerome, the 4th century author of the Latin Vulgate, quite candidly admits that the gospel was written to thwart the teachings of heretics.

⁹ Except for the Testimonium Flavianum which is a crude Christian interpolation.

¹⁰ George, 2020, p.19ff.

¹¹ Sheridan p.66, and Shaw, 2015.

¹² Bond, 2012, p. 50.

¹³ Ibid, p.132.

John . . . most recently of all the evangelists wrote a Gospel, at the request of the bishops of Asia, against Cerinthus and other heretics and especially against the then growing dogma of the Ebionites [or Jewish Christians], who assert that Christ did not exist before Mary.¹⁴

Sheridan believes that Jesus spoke powerfully to a woman who was caught in adultery (John 7:52- 8:11).¹⁵ However, it is now clear that the story was not originally part of the fourth gospel but was added by later scribes. And the same can be said of the final twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:9- 20).¹⁶ What we have before us is a set of writings of very human stamp and certainly not one that inspires confidence in its alleged divine origin.

It is much easier to refute wild or exaggerated claims imputed to your opponents than engage with their actual arguments and this is what Sheridan does. He claims,

The old modernist project, extant for the last two hundred years or so, held that the Christian scriptures had been written perhaps hundreds of years after the time they described, made up by scheming Church officials to retroactively fit up Jesus with orthodox religious views.¹⁷

I don't know of any New Testament scholars who think the texts were written hundreds of years after the events they purport to describe, and neither it seems does Sheridan. However, there is no question that the religious texts have been altered and in fact created *in toto* to promote certain ideas. Sheridan fails to mention the dozens of gospels, acts, apocalypses, and other literature created by Jews and Christians

¹⁴ De Viris Illustribus, John (9)

¹⁵ Sheridan, p.82.

¹⁶ Ehrman, 2006, p.3.

¹⁷ Sheridan, p.3.

in the period before and after the Messiah is said to have appeared.¹⁸ In other words the religion was born during a period highly fruitful in innovation and religious experimentation. The church historian Epiphanius lists no less than eighty separate heresies or Christian variations from the first and second centuries.¹⁹ What Catholics now espouse as "the truth" is just one version of the new religion among many equally legitimate competitors.

The background to the Christian *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is illuminating. It was written in the middle of the second century by a church presbyter in Asia Minor, and rightly condemned as a forgery by the church leader, Tertullian. The presbyter confessed. However, despite its spurious origins, belief in Paul's fictional companion could not be contained, the cult of Thecla flourished, and she was given a place among the pantheon of Christian martyrs — even though no such woman had ever existed.²⁰ The cult still exists in Syria and Lebanon today. Likewise, we see the cult of Peter in Rome and of course the cult of Jesus persisting everywhere to the present day.

Not only do the Gospels have a dubious origin, but even if they were real and true, there are innumerable contradictions between them, and all this without considering the frequent anachronisms, errors, falsifications, inconsistencies, and other irrational fragments that they contain. One example will suffice to illustrate the point. Supposedly there were several witnesses to the execution of Jesus and at the foot of the cross there were several people including the same John "the beloved," author of one of the gospels. Why then do all the gospels differ in the words of the inscription that lay over the head of Jesus? How can there be four different versions of a script that was visible to

¹⁸ See Schürer, E., & Glatzer, N. N. (1972). The website <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/> lists dozens of spurious Christian texts.

¹⁹ See *Panarion*.

²⁰ George, 2020, p.201.

all? ²¹ There is no agreement in the gospels as to the date or circumstances of Jesus' birth. Mark and John, and the apostles avoid the issue. The day and year of his death are also uncertain. An ancient text from the second century confidently states by the names of the incumbent consuls that Jesus was born in 9 CE, baptized in 46 and met his death in the year 58!²²

Sheridan cites the "moral beauty" of the Sermon on the Mount. Even the silence of Jesus possesses "great moral power." But from whence did these teachings come? At least twenty-four of the teachings elucidated in the gospels can be found in the works of the Roman statesman Cicero, and Cicero, who translated the great philosophical works of the Greeks into Latin, preceded the New Testament writers by at least a hundred years.²³

So how did the religion arise? If not by an itinerant son of God in the first part of the first century, as Sheridan and his Church preach, then when and how? The most significant event at the time was without question the catastrophe which was the destruction of Jerusalem and the magnificent Jewish Temple in the year 70. Sheridan spends a couple of pages on the topic, but without understanding its true significance.²⁴ It was then quite obviously that the political Messiah as foretold in the Jewish holy writings failed to appear to save the Jews from the Romans.²⁵ In the Jewish sage Maimonides' *Principles of Faith*, the twelfth principle is "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah (mashiach), and though he may tarry, still I await him every

²¹ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Matthew 27:37.

The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." Mark 15:26.

There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." [Other ancient authorities add *written in Greek and Latin and Hebrew.*] Luke 23:38.

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth,* the King of the Jews." *Gk *the Nazorean*. John 19:19.

²² George, 2020, p.254.

²³ George, 2020, p.319.

²⁴ p.70-72.

²⁵ Zechariah 14:1-3.

day." It was and still is the Jewish hope. From the time of Nero (c 60 CE) the expectation was palpable throughout the Empire that a leader would arise in the East. Then came the rumor that such a person had appeared, had suffered anonymously, and was now gone. This is how the religion arose. The same scenario plays out in the development of Pacific Island cults, and it has been observed by sociologists that failed prophecies, no matter how absurd, strengthen belief.²⁶

In numerous ways Greg Sheridan gets it wrong, and indeed I have struggled to find anything he gets right. The best explanation for the origins of Christianity is that the religion arose as an unintended consequence of the Roman-Jewish War of 66 to 70 CE. Jesus is a literary character whose existence was inferred from traumatic events and the Jews' holy books. The gospels are attempts to explain where the religion came from. They are not uniquely true or even half true. They are part of a larger set of pious forgeries which were created by early adherents to shore up faith and convince pagans of the truthfulness of their claims.

Yes Greg Sheridan, one could say that there is *an urgent case for something* in our world, but it is not for the pious fiction of the Church that we want – the *real* Jesus is most certainly a literary character. That doesn't mean we need to abandon the values that Christianity borrowed from its secular sources. The Church has failed. But humanity, indeed *humanitas*, will go on and hopefully under the right conditions succeed. The world needs truthful appraisal of itself as human and our true history as valuable. Unfortunately, your book *Christians* obscures rather than sheds light on that endeavor.

²⁶ Festinger, 1956, p.164.

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