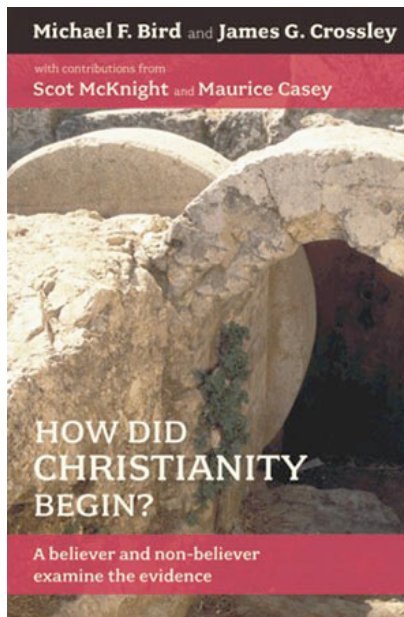


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Bird, Michael F., and James G. Crossley

How Did Christianity Begin? A Believer and Non-believer Examine the Evidence

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As the principal authors of this book indicate in its preface:

The book arose through the interaction of the authors on the internet through their respective internet blogs, called 'Euangelion' by Michael Bird and 'Earliest Christian History' by James Crossley. Then at the Society of Biblical Literature conference in Philadelphia 2005, Michael and James got together and came up with the idea of writing a book about the origins of Christianity together where they would have a chance to present the arguments and viewpoints of their own respective positions and enable readers to evaluate and size-up the relative value of each side of the argument. In many ways this book is similar to the volume by N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg called *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999). The differences are (1) whereas Borg and Wright represent a contrast of evangelical and liberal versions of modern Christianity, the differences between Crossley and Bird are more acute since the contrast is between an evangelical and a secularist; and (2) the subject matter is more comprehensive and covers the beginning of early Christianity from Jesus to the end of the first century. (ix)

The two authors—Bird and Crossley—each then say a little bit more about the other one as well as about himself before discussing in five chapters a very conventional set of topics regarding Christian origins: (1) the historical Jesus; (2) the resurrection (of Jesus); (3) the apostle Paul; (4) the (four canonical) Gospels; and (5) earliest Christianity, which means here basically two topics: the eventual separation of Christianity from Judaism and its subsequent “success” as a religion of the Roman Empire.

In the chapter on the historical Jesus, Crossley begins the discussion by demonstrating that “Jesus—for all the dramatic claims he may have made—does not do anything unparalleled in early Judaism”; in other words, he was “a ‘fairly ordinary’ human being” (16). Bird counters by defending the traditional Christian—nonmaterialist, less absolutely sociological and cross-culturally comparative, more matter-of-factly theological—view of Jesus as “a miracle-worker, a prophet, a rabbi, a martyr, the Messiah and Lord” (32). Crossley suggests in response: “In the abstract, we would actually seem to agree more than Bird seems to suggest” (33), before taking up again a few of the exegetical details construed differently by the two of them.

In the second chapter, on the resurrection of Jesus, Bird begins by arguing that the cause (origin) of Christianity “comes down to a religious and even supernatural reason: God raised Jesus from the dead” (48); “I believe in the resurrection of the dead because it is the hypothesis that makes the most sense of the historical data before me: the texts, the history and the sociology” (49). Crossley argues, contrariwise, that, while not a few people certainly may hold this belief, it did not actually take place: “But if people want to come to this *as historians*, there is no serious evidence in favor of the bodily resurrection of Jesus really happening” (63). Bird thinks that exactly the opposite is true; the problem is Crossley’s too narrow or tendentious understanding of the nature of history.

In the chapter on the apostle Paul, Crossley starts by discussing Paul’s contributions to the development of Christianity “as a religion in its own right” under the aegis of “its general abandonment of the Law, its major inclusion of Gentiles in the salvation history of Israel, and its full deification of Jesus in a system that believed in one God” (70). In contrast to Jesus, who “did little to contribute to these major developments ... Paul makes and/or reflects some of the most significant steps in these directions and provided the intellectual foundations for subsequent Christian theology” (70). In other words, Jesus was and remained essentially a Jew, while Paul effectively invented Christianity as something other than Judaism. Bird responds by arguing that Paul’s conversion was “not a conversion from one religion to another”; rather, “Paul was converted from the Pharisaic sect to a messianic sect *within Judaism*” (88). In other words, Paul and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity are basically continuous with one another: “Paul did not repudiate Israel’s Law, but he strenuously rejected its imposition on Gentiles and so laid the groundwork for

Christianity to be embraced by large numbers of Gentiles” (97). Crossley replies: “Strange as it may seem, I actually agree with a great deal of what Bird has to say about Paul, though I perhaps would be more reluctant to use the elaborate theological language” Bird uses (97). The ensuing discussion by Crossley elaborates this reluctance.

In the fourth chapter, on the Gospels, Bird explains how the four canonical books are all “rooted in the historical reminiscences, eyewitness testimony, communal memory, theological reflection, and evangelistic proclamation of the early Church” and therefore able to be “taken as history in much the same way as one understands ‘history’ written by Thucydides, Tacitus, Suetonius and Arian” (116). Crossley writes in response—less obviously in rebuttal—that, whereas “the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) do not have the developed view of Jesus that we find in mainstream Christian doctrine,” the Gospel of John “took some of the most important steps in the creation of Jesus as God” (117). Thus the Synoptic Gospels, at least in this regard, remain for Crossley decidedly within “the boundaries of Jewish monotheism” (124) and therefore, logically, would be seen by Crossley as more traditional than inventive documents; only the Gospel of John is distinctively Christian in its understanding of Jesus. Bird does not agree with Crossley’s sharp distinction between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John—in order to defend the historical trustworthiness of the Gospel of John. What difference does any of this make to the argument of the book? None, as far as I can tell, since it basically reiterates, now in the key of christological construction, the divergence of evaluation already made manifest in the first and second chapters on the historical Jesus and the resurrection.

Likewise in the fifth chapter, on earliest Christianity, essentially the same options presented in chapter 3 regarding the apostle Paul are here rehearsed again, only now as the reasons for the so-called “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity and, as Bird puts it, “Christianity win[ning] over the Roman empire” (159). In the case of Crossley, the answer is, essentially, because Christianity progressively ceased to observe Jewish practices and, following the Gospel of John, came to deify Jesus in a manner that made him ultimately “more or less the god of Rome” (152). In the case of Bird, the reasons given for the same facts—Christianity’s eventual separation from Judaism and its triumph in the Roman world—are different but equally predictable: the “split” starts already with the ministry of the historical Jesus (155; albeit not as a separate religion), and Jesus is understood to be God essentially from the very beginning, if not of time itself (161), then of the evidence that attests early Christian faith. Crossley is not persuaded by these judgments but: “Once again, there is much with which I can easily agree in Bird’s analysis of the ‘early Church’” (164).

The two “responses from other Jesus experts”—Scot McKnight versus Crossley and Maurice Casey versus Bird—in the sixth chapter add little to the preceding debate beyond reinforcing respectively the position of Bird as “believer” and Crossley as “nonbeliever.”

The final reflections of the seventh chapter—a two-page epilogue—affirm in conclusion the two principal authors’ mutual respect for each other’s point of view across their disagreement “about a great deal” (195) and their joint desire to engage in such an exchange “in a spirit of learning and not of animosity and fear,” especially since “we can still share a real consent” regarding some of “what creates and sustains reality and moral values” (196).

Bird and Crossley do succeed in demonstrating these various virtues vis-à-vis one another and the “evangelical” versus “secularist” narratives of Christian origins. Despite their own conviction of deep and significant differences between them, however, I found them strikingly alike in their historicism and for this reason most of the time not that far apart or all that different from one another in their practice of interpretation. The gap between them, in other words, is not wide enough to generate, in my opinion, very much intellectual electricity.

In fact, it seemed to me that both Bird and Crossley equally are true believers when it comes to history as the arbiter of what is really real or truly true; their differences, strikingly akin to confessional disputes within a single orthodox tradition. What would happen to their conversation, I finally wondered, if it were to include a more unbelieving practitioner of this eminently modern form of knowledge?