



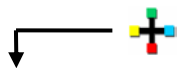
Does What Happened Matter?

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When I was a young missionary I used to spend evenings in the local headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, sharing with the Hindu scholars there in the study of the Upanishads and the Gospels. I remember that at the end of one session I said to the leader of the mission: "If it could be proved that Jesus never lived I would join you. It seems to me that the Vedanta offers the most persuasive and all-embracing account of the human situation that has ever been conceived – if Jesus never lived". He said: "You must be crazy if you tie up your hope of eternal salvation with a disputable historical record!" I said, "That is the whole point: I do". That little exchange has often come back to me as I have tried to understand the resistance of "modern" and "postmodern" culture to the Gospel. It brings to view the deep rift that runs through the culture that has developed in Europe in the past 2,000 years, It is vividly exemplified in two often-quoted sayings of Lessing and Pascal. Lessing: "Accidental happenings of history cannot prove eternal truths of reason". Pascal: "NOT the god of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". The former represents that element in European thought which derives from the classical world of Greece and Rome, a world continuous with that of India. For that world, reliable truth, "the eternal truths of reason" is to be known not by attention to events in history, but by the exercise of those mental and spiritual powers which enable us to go beyond the passing events of history to the realm of supra-temporal realities accessible to human reason and to our powers of contemplation and reflection.

To accept Lessing's dictum is, of course, to remove the Bible from any place of authority in the arena of public discourse. It can be at best a source of examples and illustrations of truths which are known otherwise. It cannot call into question the findings of the philosophers. In the contemporary climate in which it is assumed that Christianity is a system of belief and practice to be set alongside other comparable systems, it seems obvious that "dialogue" is the proper model for inter-faith relations. But it is usually understood not in the Socratic sense of a rigorous probing of truth claims, but as a mutual sharing of "experience", with a view to the enrichment of all. In this climate of thought, it is very difficult to convince our partners that we are not talking about "religious experience", but about events which have taken place and which need to be told. A news agency does not function by the method of dialogue. Its business is to communicate the

facts. Of course there is need for discussion and argument about how the effects are to be understood. All "facts" are known in the form of events (*facta*) interpreted. But this does not mean that the interpretation can then be detached from the events and held as a free-floating "world-view". It is enormously important that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate is named whenever the Church publicly affirms its faith. The anchorage in secular history is of the substance of the faith.

Pascal was surely right. The god of the philosophers is a product of the human mind in its quest for unity and coherence in a bewilderingly complex and changing world. The Bible, in about contrast tells us the story – the true story – of which our lives are a part and in which alone they have meaning. And the story is the story of God, whom we can come to know only by attending to what he has done and what he has promised. As we do so, we learn a kind of coherence which is not that of a timeless and changeless but impersonal reality. Rather, we find it in the unchanging faithfulness of one who meets our ever-changing sins and follies with both wrath and judgement, with both mercy and grace. As we so learn, our daily living becomes a continuing dialogue with this living God

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