

## COMPARING THE LEGEND OF ST FRANCIS AND THE LEGEND OF JESUS

### ST FRANCES XAVIER AND LEGEND MAKING

FROM [debunkingchristianity.blog.org](http://debunkingchristianity.blog.org)

I regularly encounter pseudo-skepticism -- reflexive doubt in response to criticism of credulous belief -- on the question of how the legend of Jesus could have developed in the period between Jesus' death and the writing of the synoptic gospels. Many Christians just don't see how or why such fantastic inventions arose from the crushing disappointment of the crucifixion of the man they supposed the Messiah (assuming here, *arguendo*, the historicity of Jesus and his crucifixion by the Romans at around the time commonly supposed)? "Why would these people die for a lie?" goes a common retort.

That's a fair question, even if it is offered pseudo-skeptically. But I don't think it's nearly as difficult as Christians commonly suppose. Even granting the dubious claims that all of Jesus disciples except John died a martyr's death (and indeed, this is precisely the kind of narrative we might expect as a later bit of legendary embellishment), we need not suppose a deliberate, coordinated conspiracy of lies is demanded of the situation. Rather, we need only look to the social capacity and disposition toward legend-making.

Inevitably, the pseudo-skeptic demands an example. I've suggested the legend and folklore of King Arthur, and pointed to the invention of "Newton's apple" by Voltaire as casual examples of the tendency to mythologize and embellish real people and events that capture our passions and imaginations. Reading a bit about Andrew Dickson White this week, intrigued by his provocative phrase "an asylum for Science", used in reference to his ambitions for Cornell University, a school he co-founded, I came across White's book *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (which title I believe is familiar to me from the words of Bertrand Russell?). In the book, White recounts the case of Francis Xavier, co-founder of the Jesuits, patron saint of missionaries, and the man the Catholic church credits with converting more souls to Christianity than any other since Paul.

White's book (which can be read here, or at Google books complete with footnotes here) has a chapter on Xavier, in which he details the progression and development of legends -- miraculous legends -- about Xavier in the aftermath of his death. Here is why White chose to examine the case of Xavier:

"We have within the modern period very many examples which enable us to study the evolution of legendary miracles. Out of these I will select but one, which is chosen because it is the life of one of the most noble and devoted men in the history of humanity, one whose biography is before the world with its most minute details - in his own letters, in the letters of his associates, in contemporary histories, and in a multitude of biographies: this man is St. Francis Xavier. From these sources I draw the facts now to be given, but none of them are of Protestant origin; every source from which I shall draw is Catholic and Roman, and published under the sanction of the Church. " [1]

White provides his basic claim for the chapter here:

"During his career as a missionary he wrote great numbers of letters, which were preserved and have since been published; and these, with the letters of his contemporaries, exhibit clearly all the features of his life. His own writings are very minute, and enable us to follow him fully. No account of a miracle wrought by him appears either in his own letters or in any contemporary document. At the outside, but two or three things occurred in his whole life, as exhibited so fully by himself and his contemporaries, for which the most earnest devotee could claim anything like Divine interposition; and these are such as may be read in the letters of very many fervent missionaries, Protestant as well as Catholic." [2]

White continues with an example:

"For example, in the beginning of his career, during a journey in Europe with an ambassador, one of the servants in fording a stream got into deep water and was in danger of drowning. Xavier tells us that the ambassador prayed very earnestly, and that the man finally struggled out of the stream. But within sixty years after his death, at his canonization, and by various biographers, this had been magnified into a miracle, and appears in the various histories dressed out in glowing colours. Xavier tells us that the ambassador prayed for the safety of the young man; but his biographers tell us that it was Xavier who prayed, and finally, by the later writers, Xavier is represented as lifting horse and rider out of the stream by a clearly supernatural act." [3]

(emphasis mine in both quotes above)

According to White, Xavier is both quite keen on identifying divine providence, but claims or even mention of miracles is conspicuously missing from his writings. Not only are miracles absent from Xavier's own accounts, the man who knew Xavier best, fellow Jesuit and historian of the order Joseph Acosta, positively denies the presence of miracles in the Jesuits' missionary enterprise of the time:

"But on the same page with this tribute to the great missionary Acosta goes on to discuss the reasons why progress in the world's conversion is not so rapid as in the early apostolic times, and says that an especial cause why apostolic preaching could no longer produce apostolic results ``lies in the missionaries themselves, because there is now no power of working miracles." He then asks, ``Why should our age be so completely destitute of them?" This question he answers at great length, and one of his main contentions is that in early apostolic times illiterate men had to convert the learned of the world, whereas in modern times the case is reversed, learned men being sent to convert the illiterate; and hence that ``in the early times miracles were necessary, but in our time they are not." [4]

Over the course of the decades following Xavier's death, admiring biographers and sponsors for Xavier's canonization produced a rapid "evolution" of miracles and supernatural works that got attached to Xavier, increasingly fantastic as time went by. Here, White recalls the situation 70 years after Xavier's death:

"In 1622 came the canonization proceedings at Rome. Among the speeches made in the presence of Pope Gregory XV, supporting the claims of Xavier to sainthood, the most important was by Cardinal Monte. In this the orator selects out ten great miracles from those performed by Xavier during his lifetime and describes them minutely. He insists that on a certain occasion Xavier, by the sign of the cross, made sea-water fresh,

so that his fellow-passengers and the crew could drink it; that he healed the sick and raised the dead in various places; brought back a lost boat to his ship; was on one occasion lifted from the earth bodily and transfigured before the bystanders; and that, to punish a blaspheming town, he caused an earthquake and buried the offenders in cinders from a volcano: this was afterward still more highly developed, and the saint was represented in engravings as calling down fire from heaven and thus destroying the town.

The most curious miracle of all is the eighth on the cardinal's list. Regarding this he states that, Xavier having during one of his voyages lost overboard a crucifix, it was restored to him after he had reached the shore by a crab.

The cardinal also dwelt on miracles performed by Xavier's relics after his death, the most original being that sundry lamps placed before the image of the saint and filled with holy water burned as if filled with oil."<sup>[5]</sup>

This is just a small sample of the inventory provided by White in the chapter. What is striking is not just the breadth and depth of the body of legend associated with Xavier in the years following his death, but the "whole cloth fabrication" of the stories. For most, and possibly all of the miraculous accounts given later, there doesn't even seem to be the "seed" used for later embellishment, but a kind of ex nihilo creation of a *miraculum vitae* for Xavier (one can feel the account of the crab returning Xavier's crucifix resonating with Paul's miraculous survival of the viper's bite on Malta in Acts).

The import of the example of Xavier, and the spontaneous appearance and evolution of miracles attributed to him should be obvious to the Christian, to the pseudo-skeptic; given a couple decades, and a cult following, the invention and development of miracle accounts -- accounts of fantastic miracles -- isn't implausible, or even novel, and relevant examples are found right inside the history and culture of Christendom itself.

I do note that White's book is now well over a hundred years old, and as science proves, a lot can be discovered over the course of a hundred and more years. I've done some googling on this, but have not found anything that indicates that White's claims in the book have been overturned by the discovery of new evidence from Xavier's writings or reports by his contemporaries that substantiate the miracles later attributed to him. If readers are aware of such a case, I stand to be corrected. But as it is, I commend the case of Xavier and his admirers to the pseudo-skeptic, as a vivid historical example of "legendation" in action, the kind of inventions and embellishments we see accounting for the death of Jesus circa 30CE and the legend of Jesus emerging over the next 50-60 years.

[1] Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (Prometheus Books, 1993), lib ii, cap XIII, p. 5.