

COULD HECTOR AVALOS BE WRONG TO SAY THAT THE MEDJUGORJE HOAX APPARITIONS ARE AS CREDIBLE AS THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS?

Summary of Argument Given by Hector Avalos:

Christianity seems to have been started by alleged visions of Jesus raised from the dead. We need to test to see if such faiths can start without real visions. Medjugorje a place of claimed visions of Mary offers a living laboratory for these reasons:

- A. The alleged witnesses are still alive.
- B. The Marian visions reported there have been better documented than any in history. Reports were audio-recorded and written down almost immediately after the first events. Audio-visual documentation overall is abundant.
- C. A Scientific team examined the visionaries during some of the alleged apparition events. No such systematic and thorough scientific study ever been performed for prior famous Marian apparitions (e.g., at Lourdes, Fatima).
- D. Millions of believers were produced within a decade.

These tests cancel out the tests by Christians which say the minimal facts about the alleged resurrection of Jesus are best explained by a real resurrection.

There were witnesses of a empty tomb and a risen Jesus who committed themselves to him forever and witnesses don't have to be alive to be listened to

The experiences of a risen Jesus were spoken of and finally written down

The sincerity of the witnesses seems to be beyond doubt and is as good a test as any

A persecuted and committed Church based on the resurrection started right away.

It is wiser to believe in these apparitions than in the resurrection for there are no witnesses alive and there is nothing that can be proven to be eyewitness testimony. The stories were written down and circulated around very few. And it took decades for them to develop and be written down. No tests were done on the Jesus witnesses of any kind. Christianity had many followers soon after the alleged resurrection but Medjugorje has millions which were gained within ten years.

Conclusion: Medjugorje is still a false apparition site so that shows we cannot take the resurrection of Jesus seriously.

Are Marian Apparitions Comparable to the Resurrection of Jesus?: A Response to Hector Avalos

Dr. Hector Avalos recently left a comment on a previous blog post of mine, informing me that he has responded to critique of an argument of his, namely his argument that arguments for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus can be used to justify the appearances of Mary at Medjugorje. The blog post in question was a draft of my dissertation on the resurrection of Jesus, where I used some of the main arguments, and also included a critique of Avalos' argument. Dr. Avalos' blog post was actually written in response to somebody else, but it nonetheless did address some of the points raised in my blog post, which is why I assume he let me know of such a response. Let's start with a brief summary of the arguments for the historicity of Jesus, followed by a brief summary of Avalos' original argument, followed by a summary of the critique of Avalos' argument. The argument for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is fairly simple: a) there are a set of generally agreed upon facts regarding the life and death of Jesus b) the best explanation of these facts is the hypothesis that the God of Israel resurrected Jesus. These facts are: a) Jesus was crucified b) Jesus was buried in a tomb c) the tomb was later found empty d) people later saw visions of the risen Jesus. It is argued that the resurrection hypothesis satisfies the criteria for the best explanation. Those criteria being: a) explanatory scope b) explanatory power c) plausibility d) less ad-hoc e) undisconfirmed by fewer existing beliefs. A second argument is that: a) Christianity was massively offensive to 1st century socio-cultural values, and got its followers persecuted b) despite this massive obstacle, Christianity nonetheless spread and thrived c) there therefore had to have been some kind of convincing evidence that Christianity was true to persuade so many people.

Avalos' counter is that the appearances of Mary at Medjugorje satisfy the criteria for the best explanation, which is something that a protestant such as William Lane Craig would not want to accept. The first major problem with such an argument is that, if true, would do nothing whatsoever to undermine the argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. At worst, it would demonstrate that those who accept the resurrection of Jesus but deny the reality of the appearances of Mary were simply employing double standards. Yet, this would do nothing to impact their arguments. To suggest otherwise would simply be an argument ad hominem. However, it has not escaped notice that the Marian apparitions do not

even come close meeting the criteria for the best explanation. There are at least four generally agreed upon facts that can be used to infer the historicity of the resurrection, yet there are none for the assumption of Mary. The doctrine of the assumption of Mary was not developed until the 5th century AD, whereas belief in Jesus' resurrection has been an integral part of Christianity since its beginning. There are no sources that directly state Mary was assumed, whereas we have numerous sources that state Jesus was resurrected. Roughly 500 people were said to have seen the risen Christ, whereas only six people were said to have seen Mary at Medjugorje. The belief in the assumption of Mary has been around for hundreds of years prior to the reported sightings of Mary, whereas the disciples had no such prior belief that Jesus would be resurrected prior to their visionary experiences. Mary made no radical personal claims, whereas Jesus did. It was concluded by the Catholic Church that supernatural appearances were NOT occurring here.

What then, does Avalos have to say in response? One of his main points is that we must take into account the earliest interview recordings, as most of the standard accounts are based on later interviews conducted years after the events. It is interesting that Avalos brings up this point, when the accounts that ignore these earlier recordings consist mostly, if not entirely of accounts that argue in favour of the authenticity of these apparitions. Indeed, one of the works that does take into account these earlier recordings, *Medjugorje Revisited: 30 years of Visions or Religious Fraud?* by Donal Foley, indicates crucial differences between these early and later accounts that casts serious doubt over the authenticity of the apparitions. Indeed, the precise nature of these earlier accounts stand in direct contrast to what Avalos says they reveal, as we shall see later on. One of Avalos' initial points is that one of the biggest sceptics of the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje was Pavao Zanič, the local bishop. Avalos claims that this is akin to the Jewish authorities being harsh critics of Jesus and early Christianity, but is this really the case? First of all, Zanic was a Catholic bishop who accepted Catholic Marian doctrines beforehand. The Marian apparitions at Medjugorje fit in with said Catholic doctrines, whereas Jesus' teachings, and the belief in his resurrection represent a sharp break from the standard Jewish beliefs of the day. Secondly, Zanič was initially open to the possibility of these apparitions being genuine, but began having serious doubts over a period of time. Whereas the Jewish critics of Jesus and Christianity were openly hostile from the outset.

Avalos goes on to say that the witnesses were subjected to medical and scientific analysis in 1984, and their apparitions were deemed not being the result of hallucinations. Deceit and drug usage were similarly ruled out as possible natural explanations. However, I find it odd that Avalos would mention these results, without discussing the results of earlier analyses. Indeed, the earlier transcripts to which Avalos refers reveal that the visionaries were subjected to police interrogation and medical inspection at Čitluk a mere three days after the apparitions, and were subject to medical inspection two days later. These earlier analyses were inconclusive, although they did ascertain that these visions were not pathological in nature, but that their 'ecstasies' weren't genuine. The study that Avalos references was one led by Dr. Henri Joyeux, and it seems as if there are some problems with it that cast suspicion on their results. Firstly, only one member of the team was in any way qualified to make professional medical pronouncements on the functioning of the human nervous system, namely Dr Jean Cadhillac, a neuro-physicist. The conclusions reached regarding the possibility of hallucinations, etc. would have required a full team of such specialists, including psychiatrists and psychologists. Secondly, there is evidence that Dr Joyeux had close ties with the Charismatic Renewal movement that had taken hold over the Catholic population of Medjugorje. This is important because, as Foley explains, such ties would have coloured Dr. Joyeux's attitude towards the visionaries, for reasons explained earlier in his book.

Avalos makes the claim that these witnesses have therefore been subjected to more scientific and medical probing than any of the witnesses to the resurrection. However, it seems as if the scientific and medical analyses conducted so far have not been as thorough, nor have they been as conclusive as one would like. Indeed, Bishop Zanič wrote to Laurentin stating that he was concerned regarding the possibility of simulation, and whilst Laurentin stated that their study ruled out such a possibility, there is no actual clear indication that any tests were carried out by the team lead by Dr. Joyeux in regards to this issue. Their reports further indicate further problems, which Foley cites, such as difficulty with communicating via translators, as well as difficulty with transporting their equipment from France. Thus, it seems clear that practical as well as ideological considerations make Joyeux's study less than meticulous. Avalos also makes the bizarre suggestion that willingness to suffer persecution and death for following Christianity is historically unconfirmed. This flies in the face of everything we know about 1st Century Near East and Mediterranean socio-cultural values.

A socially-deviant movement such as Christianity would have attracted persecution from the get-go:

"The group would exercise measures designed to shame the transgressor (whether through insult, reproach, physical abuse, confiscation of property - at worst, execution) so that the transgressor would be pressured into returning to the conduct the group approved (if correction were possible) and so that group members would have their aversion to committing such transgressions themselves strongly reinforced." - David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity, InterVarsity Press, (2000), p36*"That there was an intrinsic incompatibility between Christianity and classical values was apparent from the time Romans became aware of the presence of the new religion. Christians were criticized on a variety of grounds, but principally because they had rejected the gods of their ancestors and the civic values of the Greco-Roman world. Their religion was new; they had turned away from the traditions of their immediate ancestors, the Jews. In short, they did not fit into the system that had been sanctioned by centuries of classical use." - D. Brendan Nagle and Stanley M. Burstein, *The Ancient World: Readings in Social and Cultural History, Third Edition, Pearson, New Jersey (2006), p314-315*Not

forgetting, of course, the persecution of Christians by Nero as recorded by the Roman historian Tacitus, or the persecution of Christians at the hands of Pliny the Younger, who stated that those who confessed to being Christians were punished, with the Emperor Trajan commending Pliny for his actions. Thus, to argue that only six martyrdoms in the first 250 years of Christian history can be treated as historically reliable is simply false. Avalos also claims that the spread of belief in the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje greatly exceeds spread of belief in the risen of Jesus. However, this is ignoring the fact that the millions of pilgrims to Medjugorje were devout Catholics whereas people were converting to Christianity from belief systems that were hostile to it, and in a society whose socio-cultural values were fundamentally at odds with the central tenets and teachings of the Christian faith.

Dr. Avalos questions the source material used by Travis James Campbell, the author to whom Avalos is responding in his blog. Namely, *The Cult of the Virgin: Catholic Mariology and the Apparitions of Mary* by Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples. Avalos complains that these authors are well-known Protestant evangelical scholars, with a foreword by well-known evangelical apologist Norman Geisler. Avalos says that Miller and Samples' suggestion that the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje were, in fact, Satanic occurrences, is no different than the claims from the Jewish authorities that Jesus was possessed by Be-el-zebul. Of course, the Jewish authorities weren't suggesting demonic activity as an explanation for Jesus' resurrection, but his miraculous deeds. We aren't talking about Jesus' alleged miracle working here, we are talking about his resurrection, and Avalos' whole argument is in reply to arguments in favour of the resurrection of Jesus. The Jewish authorities' response to claims of Jesus' resurrection was that the disciples stole the body, a very naturalistic hypothesis. It is also ironic how Avalos questions Campbell's reliance on Miller and Samples, when he bases his claim regarding medical and scientific evaluations of the visionaries purely on the report of Laurentin and Joyeux, who had ideological ties that throws their objectivity into doubt.

Avalos continues by claiming that the minimal facts used by Campbell, myself and others are not facts at all, and claims that appeals to a consensus is nothing more than a shorthand for saying that there is a consensus amongst Christian scholars. This is, of course, patently false, and a blatantly obvious mischaracterisation. The consensus appealed to consists of scholars from a wide diversity of backgrounds and beliefs, not just Christians. Virtually every critical scholar accepts the historicity of Christ's crucifixion, his burial, and that the disciples had visionary experiences that they believed and proclaimed to be appearances of the risen Christ. Dr. Gary Habermas has spent quite some time analysing publications on the subject of the resurrection of Jesus from 1975 to roughly the present day, and has noted that roughly 75% of all critical scholars accept the historicity of the empty tomb, whereas 25% do not. To suggest that to appeal to such a scholarly consensus is to cite Islamic scholars for the veridicality of Islam, or Catholic scholars on the truth of Mariological doctrines is simply dishonest. This is also not even bothering to take into account the arguments presented for the historicity of these things. Avalos further compounds his error by claiming that the historicity of the empty tomb cannot be called a fact because it cannot be verified with either logic or any of our five sense, which is simply nothing but outdated verificationism.

Avalos then continues by grossly misrepresenting the case for the historicity of the empty tomb employed by Craig, myself, et al. Avalos claims that what Christian apologists are really saying is that the resurrection happened, because source X says it happened, and that this raises the question of why we should trust source X about the resurrection, but not the visionaries about the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje. This completely ignores the arguments in favour of the accuracy and reliability of the New Testament source material, not to mention the arguments in favour of the historicity of the 'minimal facts' employed that aren't even dependant on the NT sources being inherently reliable. I find it odd how Avalos argues that Craig, Campbell, and others argue that the empty tomb is a fact because it is stated in a source they find credible, when William Lane Craig has explicitly stated:

"Even documents which are generally unreliable may contain valuable historical nuggets, and it will be the historian's task to mine these documents in order to discover. The Christian apologist seeking to establish, for example, the historicity of the empty tomb need not and should not be saddled with the task of first showing that the Gospels are, in general, historically reliable documents." - William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd Edition, Crossway, (2008), p11 In other words, the reliability is not integral to the case for the historicity of the empty tomb. Craig uses a handful of historical criteria employed by critical scholars to judge the truth of individual elements within the New Testament narrative. He does not argue that the empty tomb is historical purely because he finds the New Testament reports credible and reliable. Avalos' contention that the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje pass the criteria for the best explanation thus rests upon a deliberate mischaracterisation of the argument for the historicity of the resurrection.

This complaint of Avalos' similarly ignores critiques of the alleged Marian apparitions at Medjugorje, some of which come from Catholics. For example, Donal Foley notes multiple problems with the reports, as well as the medical/scientific reports conducted by Dr. Joyeux. Avalos would need to show that the arguments made for the historicity of the minimal 'facts,' can be used to justify a core of minimal facts related to the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje, and then demonstrate that the best explanation is that the visions were genuine. Avalos continues by further mischaracterising Campbell's case against the veridicality of the Marian appearances at Medjugorje. He says that Campbell rejects the account of Mary's bodily resurrection purely because it is apocryphal, but there are apocryphal accounts treated as historical by New

Testament writers, namely the assumption of Moses. Avalos asks if apocryphal material can transmit historical data, what makes Marian reports apocryphal and the Jesus stories not. The problem is that Campbell is not dismissing accounts regarding Mary because they are apocryphal, but is rather noting a key distinction between the quality of the source evidence between the accounts on Jesus and the accounts on Mary. One of the historical criteria used to support the historicity of the minimal facts is the fact that they are multiply attested in a variety of early sources. Furthermore, noting that there are apocryphal accounts that may contain historical truths in them does nothing to demonstrate the quality of the Marian accounts, and so to appeal to such other accounts is simply a red herring. If Avalos wants to convince us that such Marian accounts are on the same standing as the source material on the resurrection, then he needs to actually show it.

Avalos' next complaint is that Campbell places a temporal limit on appearances, judging them not to be credible if they arose a certain amount of time after that person's death, yet there are accounts in the New Testament of post-mortem appearances of the figures Moses and Elijah who had been deceased for centuries prior to the 1st Century AD. This is simply misconstruing what Campbell and other apologists are arguing. The closeness of the disciples' experiences to the death and burial of Jesus is important because Jesus' body would have still been in the tomb had he not risen from the dead. In other words, people could have checked to see if Jesus' tomb was actually empty. Now, the examples Avalos cites could very well be genuine, but clearly not for the same reasons given in defence of the resurrection of Jesus. Secondly, Campbell is not dismissing other accounts because they are a significant amount of time after the death of the individual believed to have appeared. He is simply noting that Avalos' comparison in his original argument is invalid in this regard. Furthermore, the disciples' encountering what they believed to be the risen Jesus is only one of the minimal facts appealed to in defence of the resurrection. The arguments Avalos is appealing to are used to justify the truth of the minimal facts, not the resurrection, and so Avalos' counter-argument here is simply an invalid comparison once again. Avalos continues to make the absurd argument that, if Mary is as alive as Moses, Elijah, and as alive as angels, such as Gabriel, then there should be no theological objection to the continued existence of Mary. He furthermore makes appeals to Luke 20:34-38 to justify his claim that the dead are regarded the same as angels in Christian belief. It is simplistic statements such as these that lead me to question Dr. Avalos' understanding of Christian and Jewish theology.

Unfortunately for Dr. Avalos, the resurrection of the dead is believed by both Jews and Christians to occur at the end of time, i.e. when God brings about the day of judgment, and creates a new heaven and a new earth, etc. As such, there is the question of the state of one's existence between one's physical death and one's physical resurrection. The short answer is that we simply don't know, since there is no clear indication in the text of the New Testament itself. The passage that Avalos refers to is describing what it will be like for the resurrected, i.e. those who have received new bodies at the end of time. From what I have read, the leading opinion is simply that the dead will exist in some kind of disembodied state, either conscious or unconscious, until God provides them with new bodies. The view of heaven as a place of people lounging around on clouds is a modern invention that has no basis in historical Christianity or Judaism. As such, since Elijah and Moses were both bodily assumed into heaven, then that would allow for them to appear before Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament accounts. Thus, such an objection rests on a faulty understanding of the fate of the dead in Christian and Jewish belief, not to mention the equivocation of different states of existence between death and resurrection. One existing after death is not enough to grant them the ability of appearing to the living post-mortem in Jewish and Christian belief. Indeed, when the disciples first saw the risen Jesus, they assumed that it was Jesus' 'ghost,' i.e. not Jesus himself, but a being from the spirit world.

Avalos' next argument is that there is no historical evidence that supports the claim that belief in the risen Jesus was crystallised in an early creed. He seems to think that, because the manuscripts we have date centuries after the events, we cannot admit the Corinthians creed as being early, since they are not contemporary. This is nothing more than a palpable and blatant falsehood that betrays Avalos' ignorance of the relevant scholarship on this subject:

"In the case of 1 Cor 15:3ff., critical scholars agree that Paul's reception of at least the core of this proclamation, and probably the creed itself, go back to the mid-AD 30s, when he spent two weeks with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. But these two apostles had the material before Paul did, and the events behind the reports are earlier still. This is probably the chief argument that persuades the majority of scholars today that the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection originated in the earliest church. Virtually all critical scholars think this message began with the real experiences of Jesus' earliest disciples, who thought they had seen appearances of their risen Lord. It did not arise at some later date. Nor was it borrowed or invented." - Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus Time Line*, from Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, eds., *Contending With Christianity's Critics*, B&H Publishing Group, (2009), p125

Avalos might be operating under the delusion that immediate veridicality and contemporaneity are required components of historical reasoning, but real historians know otherwise. Documents can contain oral formulas that originated far earlier than the document itself, and historical analysis can reveal such oral formulas, such as the creed in 1 Corinthians 15. That the documents date a few decades later, and the earliest manuscripts date a few centuries later, does nothing to change this. It thus seems as if Avalos is fundamentally ignorant regarding textual analysis and criticism of the New Testament, as well as the arguments actual critical scholars make.

Avalos continues by arguing that an actual creed regarding the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje crystallised within 5-6 years of the alleged appearances there. The problem with such an argument is that, even if this were the case, this

completely ignores other factors, such as willingness to endure persecution, criterion of embarrassment and so on, not to mention the clear and obvious differences in socio-cultural context. However, let us assume that such a creed exists, and that it passes these other criteria. All this would do is show that the believers in the Marian apparitions were sincere in their belief. What Avalos seems to be oblivious of is that the earliness of the creed is but one piece of historical data used to justify the claim that belief in the risen Christ was early, widespread and sincere, and that, moreover, the early, sincere, widespread belief in the risen Jesus is merely one of the minimal facts used to infer the resurrection of Jesus. Of course, there is clear and obvious evidence that the visionaries who claimed to have seen Mary were not sincere, whereas there is good evidence that the disciples were sincere. Furthermore, belief in the risen Christ spread in an environment completely hostile to Christianity and the idea of bodily resurrection, and in a socio-cultural environment where critical scrutiny over the lives of others was a part of daily life, meaning the empty tomb, etc. would have been checked.

Avalos' next argument makes more sense, and that is the argument that belief in Marian apparitions aren't dependent on the dogma of the assumption of Mary. Indeed, belief in Jesus' resurrection did not arise until the disciples had encounters with what they believed was the risen Christ. Someone could feasibly have an encounter with the still living Mary, which would lead them to believe in the assumption of Mary. However, when we survey the Old and New Testaments, as well as inter-testamental and other extra-biblical Jewish and Christian documents, the dead typically only appear to the living if they have undergone some form of vindication. Simply using this as an argument against Avalos' would be begging the question, however. Nonetheless, such a fact does raise the salient point that there needs to be an explanation of how the dead can appear to the living, if we were to hypothetically assume such appearances to be genuine. For example, Jesus was able to appear to the disciples because he had been resurrected. Remember, the appearances of Jesus are one of the facts used to infer the resurrection. We need not assume them genuine, merely that the visionaries are honest (and there is good evidence that the disciples were honest.) It thus seems as if Avalos' comparisons are invalid, since the disciples' experiences are part of the evidence appealed to infer the resurrection, yet Avalos is saying that the Medjugorje visionaries' experiences can be used to infer that their experiences were genuine. The arguments of Christian apologists Avalos says can be used to justify the Marian apparitions are arguments used to establish that such a belief existed and was sincere, so Avalos is clearly muddled on this issue.

Avalos next points to cases he feels are examples of Marian apparitions occurring prior to the inception of the Marian assumption doctrine. Interestingly, if a little odd, is his suggestion that Revelation 12:1-6 is a New Testament account of an appearance, or at the least could be interpreted that way by believers in Marian appearances. Is there any actual evidence that favours such a hypothesis? The problem is, however, is that Avalos offers no textual analysis that even so much as renders such an interpretation compatible with the text. Indeed, such a suggestion carries no weight whatsoever unless Avalos can show that this is what the text meant, citing actual textual data, such as literary genre, and background socio-cultural data. Unlike the Gospels, which are ancient biographies (bioi), Revelation belongs to a genre referred to as 'Apocalyptic Literature,' and thus Revelation is an Apocalypse, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the 'Apocalypse of John.' Notable features of this genre include the prominent utilisation of metaphors and similar literary devices, and the heavy use of symbolism. How 21st century Westerners interpret the text matters little if such interpretations don't take into account what the author meant. Indeed, what the author meant is the only meaningful interpretation, since anything else is just reading what one wants into the text. Thus, literary genre, etc. are of utmost importance if we are aiming for accurate exegesis, rather than inaccurate eisegesis. Indeed, I find it amusing that Avalos suggests belief in the continued existence of Mary is comparable to belief in the Trinity, asserting that modern Christians read the Trinity into the text of the New Testament because the Trinity was not affirmed as dogma until 325 AD. Again, simple suggestion is meaningless. What we need is actual exegesis based on actual literary and socio-cultural data.

Another notable feature, of course, involved the author experiencing some kind of vision, typically involving being transported to heaven. The problem, however, is that such visions are not of the same category of the reports of Jesus' appearances, or of the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje. The appearances of Jesus and the appearances of Mary both took place on Earth and in the present, whereas the type of vision described in Revelation was a transportation to heaven itself, where the author experiences prophetic visions, i.e. visions of the what is to happen in the future. Seeing an apparition of someone alive on Earth is very different from having a vision of someone in heaven. If I were to come up to someone and tell them I saw someone who had died three days ago, we both could go and check where they were buried. Moreover, given the symbolic nature of the prophetic visions, which, as aforementioned, represent future phenomenon, it seems odd why the woman would be used to represent Mary, rather than, say Israel, or the Church, given the centrality of eschatology in Apocalyptic Literature. It also seems odd how the woman in Revelation goes unidentified by the author, if it was indeed meant to represent Mary, given Mary's prominence in Roman Catholicism. Avalos suggests Protestants are selective if they interpret this passage symbolically, whilst interpreting other parts as representing reality. Not being a Protestant, I'm not sure how such a criticism would apply to myself. Either way, such a complaint is ironic, given that it indicates that Dr. Avalos seems totally unaware of the literary features of Apocalyptic Literature, since one of them is the heavy use of symbolism in order to represent future phenomenon. Why Dr. Avalos would think an interpretation of the text that doesn't involve the woman being Mary could emphasise symbolism, but not reality, thus seems very strange.

Avalos, however, does point to a 4th century account of a vision that occurred in the third century to Gregory

Thaumaturgus, also known as Gregory the Wonderworker. Indeed, the account Avalos cites is earlier than the earliest iterations of belief in the assumption of Mary. However, Gregory's belief is based upon the heterodox belief that one existed as an immortal spirit being after death, an inheritance from his pagan heritage. Whereas, in orthodox Christian belief, the dead who exist in a disembodied state cannot return to Earth. Only those who had been subject to some form of vindication. So, whilst Avalos is correct in that not all Marian apparitions are based upon belief in the assumption of Mary, it is still a false comparison once again. Secondly, the all-important question of expectation is a particular problem here, since such visions did not defy Gregory's beliefs or prior expectations. Belief in resurrection in general was not particularly widespread, and amongst those Jews who did believe in resurrection, it was held that it would only occur at the end of time for all righteous dead. Avalos, however, challenges the idea that the visionaries at Medjugorje had a prior belief in Marian apparitions, citing their testimony, notably that of Mirjana Dragicevic, where they all claim to have no prior knowledge of the doctrine of the assumption of Mary, or even famous instances of Marian apparitions/miracles such as Fatima or Lourdes. He also claims that there were prior resurrection traditions in the 1st century AD that could have influenced the disciples.

It seems as if Avalos is not acquainted with the source material he claims Campbell is ignorant of, since in Medjugorje Revisited: 30 Years of Visions or Religious Fraud? author Donal Foley cites Fr. Ivo Sivic, author of The Hidden Side of Medjugorje, who reveals that according to Marija Pavlovic (one of the Medjugorje visionaries), Fr. Vlasic knew one month in advance and mentioned to the visionaries that 'the Gospa' would begin appearing in Yugoslavia. Vlasic had previously attended an important Charismatic conference in Rome shortly before the appearances started occurring. During said conference, he asked some of the leaders to pray with him for the healing of the Church in Yugoslavia. During their prayers, at least two of those present began prophesying that Vlasic would be seated in a chair before a great crowd at a twin-towered Church (an obvious reference to St. James' parish church at Medjugorje), and that Christ would send His mother in advance. How then, can Avalos say that the visionaries did not have any prior expectations if they were told beforehand by Fr. Vlasic that Mary would begin appearing soon? Even aside from this, there is every bit of evidence that the visionaries were fed suggestive ideas utilising charismatic worship methods that can allow for manipulation of individuals. Furthermore, the visionaries themselves were emotionally unstable individuals, and thus more susceptible to such suggestion and manipulation. Thus, Avalos' claims here are clearly contradicted by the available evidence, from sources Avalos himself mentions explicitly.

What then about Avalos' second claims that there were 1st century resurrection traditions that could have influenced New Testament beliefs? He specifically cites an example in the New Testament itself where Herod is said to have initially believed John the Baptist come back from the dead, as well as Jesus indicating that John the Baptist was supposed to be a "reincarnation" of Elijah. However, Avalos is simply equivocating here between different modes of vindication. Resurrection was a specific mode of vindication that was not just a simple return to life from death, but a transformation into an immortal form. By trying to say resurrection was anticipated from examples of people returning to life from death but without being gloriously transformed is simply invalid. Avalos also notes that there were sayings and deeds of Jesus not recorded in the New Testament that could have led to at least some of the disciples anticipating resurrection. However, this ignores the clear examples in the New Testament that clearly indicates that the disciples were not expecting Jesus to be vindicated at all, let alone resurrected. After all, they were all said to have fled, and even Peter denied Christ three times. In fact, it is recorded that the only reason the male disciples discovered Jesus' resurrection at all was because the female disciples went to the tomb to mourn and came back to tell the male disciples who initially did not believe them.

Avalos next refers to Campbell's usage of Ott, who is quoted by Campbell as saying that there is no direct, scriptural proofs of the assumption of Mary. Avalos questions whether such direct and scriptural proofs are needed, and argues that Ott is not saying that there isn't any indirect proof for the assumption of Mary. This is actually something I agree with Avalos on, although I would like to add that the word 'proof' is being used inaccurately. There is not direct and/or scriptural EVIDENCE for the assumption of Mary, but this does not mean that there is no indirect and/or non-scriptural evidence that could be used to infer the assumption. Unlike most Evangelicals, I do not hold the Bible to necessarily be infallible or even necessarily divinely inspired. I personally place such value on the New Testament documents in historically inferring the resurrection PURELY because they are the closest sources we have to the events. However, I feel other evidence CAN be used, whether it be non-scriptural, indirect, etc. So, if there is a case for the assumption of Mary, it can't be as strong as the case for the resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, simply speculating isn't enough, such a case would have to be provided. Thus, whilst Avalos is correct here, it does nothing to undermine the case for the resurrection of Jesus, nor does it bolster the case for the assumption of Mary.

Avalos next discusses Campbell's usage of Epiphanius, pointing out that Epiphanius was open to the possibility that Mary was still alive, despite his declaration that nobody, in fact, knew Mary's fate. This is a fair point, however, Avalos quotes Epiphanius referring to a heretical form of Mary whereby worshippers would offer loaves of bread to Mary as evidence of belief that Mary was still alive. This is, once again, nothing more than simple equivocation. In what sense is Mary believed to be alive? Is she believed to be an immortal spirit existing solely in the spiritual realm? Is she believed to be bodily existing in heaven? Offering of sacrifices says nothing to us about whether or not worshippers believed Mary was capable of appearing either physically or spiritually. It is also puzzling why Avalos thinks 3rd/4th century heretical beliefs are

early." Belief in Jesus' resurrection, began in the region Jesus was executed in, and spread throughout the Jews before rapidly spreading across Gentile populations. Assuming this heretical group believed Mary existed in a form that allowed her to make appearances to those still alive on Earth, such a belief did not form during Mary's lifetime nor even in the 1st century, nor did it originate in Judea. It thus seems as if all Dr. Avalos is doing is selecting just one of the criteria offered in defence of a 'minimal fact' or the resurrection itself in isolation at a time, and then applying it loosely to cases that are incongruent with the other criteria.

Avalos next complains that the argument that Mary made no radical personal claims about herself is 'bizarre.' He says that surely Mary's claim of being the virgin mother of Christ counts as a radical personal claim, and secondly asks why radical personal claims should be a mark of historicity at all. I can only wonder where in the New Testament documents Mary publicly claims her status as the virgin mother of Christ? Whereas there are clear examples of Jesus making messianic claims in the New Testament. The New Testament authors certainly claim that Mary is the virgin mother of Christ, but where are there examples of Mary making such claims herself? Avalos is thus rather muddled regarding this particular issue as he seems to think that people making claims about others constitutes that person making personal radical claims themselves. Furthermore, he does seem to realise that it is only PUBLIC claims we are discussing here. Lastly, his complaint that radical personal claims being irrelevant to historicity simply betrays his ignorance on the subject. Has Avalos not read the works of those he presumes to correct? For example, William Lane Craig writes:

"Radical critics deny that the historical Jesus thought of himself as the divine Son of God... The big problem with this hypothesis is that it is inexplicable how monotheistic Jews could have attributed divinity to a man they had known, if he never claimed any such things himself." Now, Avalos could dispute such a line of argument, yet it just simply seems as if he is entirely ignorant of such a line of reasoning, which is very odd considering he has written a response to William Lane Craig's work in his book *The End of Biblical Studies*, and it is this response that Campbell was responding to in *Defending the Resurrection*.

Avalos' next line of argument is to question Campbell's dismissal of the apparitions at Medjugorje as being unreal. Avalos claims that the initial appearances on the hillside are of a different nature to the appearances that occurred later, and thus is akin to the differences between the experience of the disciples and the apostle Paul. He says that, whilst there are those who may have had direct empirical evidence of the second encounters, they had no such evidence for the initial encounters. Furthermore, Avalos opines that these secondary apparitions are consistent with a God who does not reveal Himself in the same manner to everybody, citing Numbers 12:6-8 and the account of Paul's roadside encounter in Acts 9:3-7 and Acts 22:9, and the account of Stephen's vision in Acts 7:55-57. It is odd how Avalos claims that the later appearances are different from the earlier appearances, when he goes on to argue later on that the visionaries used "objective language" to describe all of their experiences. This is further compounded by Avalos' complaint that the encounter witnessed by Kenneth Samples could have been the type of encounters experienced by Paul and Stephen, and that Samples' dismissal is somehow a problem. On the one hand, Avalos wants us to believe that the visionaries' experiences were equal in both sets of instances, yet he is simultaneously suggesting that such visions could be different in nature.

Moreover, Avalos' suggestion that the encounter witnessed by Samples is akin to the experiences of Paul and Stephen, aside from contradicting his assertions of uniformity amongst visions, serves to undercut his argument that the apparitions of Mary at Medjugorje are akin to the appearances of Jesus in the New Testament, and is simply an invalid comparison. In the account of Paul's experience, whilst Paul's companions do not see or hear Jesus, they nonetheless perceive a bright light. Whereas in Samples' encounter, he saw nothing at all. Whereas the account of Stephen is that of a vision accessible only to Stephen, which strikes me as odd considering Avalos is trying to convince us that the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje are of the same type as the appearances of Jesus to the disciples. Avalos is thus clearly equivocating between different types of post-mortem appearances as if they were one and the same. On one hand, we have the resurrected Jesus appearing physically before his disciples, on another we have the ascended resurrected Jesus appearing to Paul whilst appearing only as a bright light to Paul's companion, and lastly we have the ascended resurrected Jesus appearing in a vision only Stephen can actually see. It does not matter if these appearances are consistent with other Biblical accounts, since we are discussing the account of Jesus' resurrection exclusively.

Avalos continues on to argue that the visionaries believed themselves to have had actual encounters with Mary, rather than simply visions, or a physical encounter whereby Mary appeared to different people in different ways, vis a vis Paul's roadside encounter. The problem is that this directly contradicts Avalos' earlier statements, as aforementioned. That aside, such an argument is problematic in that the transcripts of the recording of the earliest interviews that Avalos himself refers to directly refute such a claim. Indeed, the transcripts reveal that the visions are nothing like the appearances of Jesus before the disciples at all. The first vision allegedly took place whilst Ivanka Ivankovic and Mirjana Dragicevic were walking along a road near Bijakovici. However, whilst Ivanka claimed that she could see 'the Gospa,' Mirjana was apparently uncertain. Later on that day, they climbed up to Podbrdo where they apparently saw a vision. Two men were nearby, Ivan Dragicevic, whom they called up to see the vision with them, and another man, Ivan Ivankovic, who dissociated himself from the visionaries. Ivan Dragicevic reveals that the other two called to him, saying that 'the Gospa' had appeared, but states that he 'saw the light,' and apparently had a very hard time articulating what it was he actually saw.

Then there is the fact that Ivanka and Mirjana had gone to Podbrdo to smoke, but explicitly lied about it, denying that they smoked at all for quite some time. As Donal Foley notes, this calls into question their credibility.

Bizarrely enough, Avalos argues that Jesus possessing certain abilities, such as keeping those around Him from recognising Him, could be what happened at Medjugorje when Samples witnessed an alleged encounter and yet saw nothing. This is once again Avalos simply equivocating between different types of appearances as if they were all interchangeable. Jesus' ability to prevent the disciples from recognising him was an ability gained (presumably) through resurrection. Jesus is still physically located on earth in a specific geo-temporal location in our space-time. In the case of Stephen, only he can see Jesus, who is in heaven, and is thus a vision, NOT an appearance as Avalos suggests. The case of Paul, however, is more interesting, in that, whilst Jesus had at that point ascended into heaven, he nonetheless manifests Himself physically before Paul. The reason why it is physical is because Paul's companions can actually see Jesus. They simply cannot hear him, and Jesus is presumably using his supernatural abilities to prevent them from making out his distinct form. Thus, he would seem like just a bright light to them, which is what the New Testament describes. Out of these three examples, the 'encounter' witnessed by Samples is most like Stephen's, with the only difference being that the visionary claimed that the figure being perceived was actually in the same room as them, as opposed to somewhere else, such as heaven.

Avalos continues by complaining about "biased Protestant apologetics" and that Campbell, Samples, et al. hold different standards to Medjugorje than those they apply to the New Testament. However, as we have seen, Avalos either does not understand the standards being employed to assess the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, or is deliberately distorting them. Avalos has made no real attempt to cement a core group of minimal facts about the appearances at Medjugorje except for the most superficial of comparisons to New Testament and other Biblical accounts that don't stand up to scrutiny once examined. Indeed, one wonders if Avalos even grasps the case being made by scholars such as William Lane Craig at all? For those not familiar with the case for the resurrection, as well as for those who struggle with things of any length, I shall give a brief outline. A core group of 'minimal facts' are put forward, with a variety of arguments put forward for their historicity utilising historical criteria. These facts usually involve at least Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and the subsequent post-mortem appearances of Jesus. The criteria put forward by McCullagh and utilised by William Lane Craig, et al. is the criteria used to assess hypotheses, with hypotheses being the explanation of the facts.

However, Avalos has literally done nothing whatsoever to deal with arguments in favour of the 'minimal facts,' but has simply hand-waved them away with the flimsiest of excuses, and just posited any old claims as 'facts' with little to no argument whatsoever. Is this the hallmark of a critical scholar? In fact, it almost seems as if the writings of Dr. Avalos are nothing more than a collection of unsustainable reactionary opinions seemingly written to a deadline on Debunking Christianity, almost as if they weren't even real. Avalos claims that the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje meet the criteria of McCullagh, but the problems posited by Campbell, Samples, Miller, Foley, et al. all still stand. Where are the generally agreed upon facts about the apparitions at Medjugorje that the hypothesis allegedly explains? Moreover, where are the historical arguments? Avalos has done none of these things, and based his argument purely on a mischaracterisation of the case for the resurrection of Jesus. I'm not even sure why the historicity of Marian apparitions would be problematic, since they pose no direct contradictions to the central claims of Christianity. If Protestants continued denying them, then that would make them hypocritical, but that would do literally nothing to undermine the case for the resurrection of Jesus, since truth is not determined by the mental state of the arguer. In other words, trying to dismiss somebody's argument because they are a hypocrite is nothing more than an argument ad hominem.

From <http://apologeticsuk.blogspot.ie/2013/06/are-marian-appearitions-comparable-to.html>

My Comment: The Christians determine the minimal facts from how many of their favourite scoulers such as Habermas believe they are minimal facts. The fact remains that they are still not facts and not Bible believing scholars agree on what the minimal facts are and which ones matter. Most think the gospels are only giving hearsay and it is possible it is all factual but we do not know and must find the presence of the risen Jesus in our hearts to learn for sure that he rose.

That Jesus' body was not stolen from the tomb is the favourite "fact" that the minimal facts scholars present. They would need you to be able to prove that reliable people definitely saw Jesus laid in the tomb and did not turn their backs to allow any funny business. The gospels give no evidence that Jesus was really put in the tomb and their writers would tell us right now that they only assumed it. They do not say that there was no way he might have been taken to near the tomb and a false impression given that he was put in it. What if he was carried out when the others were not looking? The gospels do not rule out Jesus being stolen from the tomb as they say it was open and unattended when nobody had yet verified that the body was gone. A stolen Jesus no more undermines a resurrection claim than an entombed one does. It does not matter. The fact is a mere assumption.

We cannot know if the gospels ever were read by a single person who was in a position to test or rebut them and the circulation at the start would have been very small so it is unlikely.

Jesus was touched once or twice according to the New Testament. Medjugorje has more about a person being touched in an

apparition than the New Testament has.

If 500 saw Jesus how does that compare to the visionaries of Medjugorje who saw Mary countless times? What may have been a five second glimpse of Jesus cannot compare to that. And there are six regular visionaries of Medjugorje but in fact there are tens more seeing her there. The way the vision of something unclear at Medjugorje during the early days was translated as being Mary shows that the apostles too could have seen something unimpressive but which their own imagination and preconceived notions turned into Jesus.

Avalos is criticised for not recognising certain lines in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as a creed. That is a small error if it is an error at all. Christians make a big deal of this alleged creed for they want you to think Christians had their faith in the risen Jesus fully formed long before Paul wrote and were continually reciting that creed. But what if Paul himself wrote the creed a month or two before? What if it was not public but Paul's personal creed?

It is argued above that Avalos is wrong to compare the Jesus visions to the Medjugorje visions for the latter were not detectable to people other than the visionaries. That is a major weapon for the Christian who wants to hold that Jesus really was there with the apostles after he rose as opposed to him just being a vision they alone could see. But the New Testament never says that Jesus's visions were any different. The absence of evidence of the existence of hostile witnesses might indicate that only certain people saw him and passerbys would have thought they were just talking to thin air.

If Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus and do not make Medjugorje as good as the resurrection visions and that is a double standard is that really an argument ad hominem? Yes for Jesus might still have risen. But there is another side. It is no for Jesus tied the resurrection not just to history but to the spiritual fruits. Believers all being hypocritical believers would be a sign that the resurrection is false for a resurrection undertaken to infuse spiritual virtue and which fails is to be assumed to be a trick or scam or error. Avalos is not saying that the resurrection is false or probably false just because believers cherry-pick what miracles they want to believe in and would ignore or reject a better miracle if it did not fit. He is saying that the problem is with the resurrection ITSELF demanding a double-standard and thus proving it is no better than superstition.

<http://www.truthinmydays.com/do-apparitions-of-mary-undermine-the-case-for-jesus-resurrection/>