

# Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions – Part 2

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## 2. Historical Criticism of Non-Christian Resurrection Claims

It is the contention of this writer that researchers such as Price and Yogananda are not critical enough of non-Christian resurrection claims. Curiously enough, Price's entire effort referred to above [See Part 1] is directed to the application of historical criticism to Christian beliefs, yet his non-Christian parallels, which occupy much of his essay, are almost never subjected to similar criticisms.<sup>1</sup>

However, and strangely enough, Price's approach is duplicated by some other critical scholars. Whereas there is frequently an in-depth study of Christian claims, the same persons sometimes appear to be much less critical of non-Christian beliefs. John A. T. Robinson, for instance, in discussing the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus, relates a claim of Buddhist apotheosis. He tells the story of a saintly Buddhist man whose body, a few days after his death in 1953, disappeared from a blanket with only nails and hair left behind. And since a rainbow was seen over the house in which his body was locked, the local villagers assumed that he had been "absorbed and transmuted" into the next life. And yet, there is almost no critical interaction with the variety of possible critiques which one might offer of such an account.<sup>2</sup>

One more example is provided by Charles Hartshorne who, while also discussing the resurrection of Jesus, relates that all religions report miracles. Because of this, Hartshorne states, "I do not feel that I can choose among such accounts...."<sup>3</sup> But this last statement appears to assume that, just because miracle reports abound, they are on a similar footing. However, such a view (regardless of whether any miracles have ever occurred) forgoes the process of critical interaction. Are they all to be either accepted or rejected en masse simply because a variety of such reports does exist?

But as just asserted above, we must be critical of both Price's skepticism concerning all similar accounts and Yogananda's acceptance of many of them, precisely because such conclusions are too frequently held apart from analyses of the data itself. To be more specific, Price, Yogananda, Robinson and Hartshorne have all declined to apply rigorous critiques to non-Christian claims.

To begin with the accounts of apotheosis, several insurmountable problems immediately surface. First, the sources reporting the data are relatively late and otherwise questionable. While Suetonius did have access to some official Roman records, he wrote about 150 years after Julius Caesar and about 200 years after Augustus. While this alone certainly does not invalidate his work, habitual inclusions of the paranormal are a known feature of his historical writings.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the Roman belief in emperor worship helps explain references to apotheosis, as almost half of Suetonius' twelve emperors were said to have been deified later. Dio Cassius also wrote about 100 years after Hadrian.

Second, and more damaging, reports which claim that a spirit ascended to heaven or which assert that stars and comets indicate a person's glorified soul do not qualify as historical evidence anyway. At best, these are subjective testimonies which are hardly open to any verification at all.

Third, reports of apotheosis, whether true or false, do not necessarily involve a resurrection anyway. In other words, the belief in an afterlife is vastly different than the claim that an historical person was actually raised from the dead and appeared to his followers, which is the subject of this study.

As a test case, we will view Philostratus' testimony concerning Apollonius of Tyana, which is probably the major claim to apotheosis. Indeed, Price places repeated emphasis on the account of this ancient philosopher.<sup>5</sup> And yet here, in particular, we find an incredible series of problems with any attempt to validate Philostratus' account.<sup>6</sup>

(1) Philostratus wrote over 100 years after the end of Apollonius' life. Again, this in itself is not a horribly large gap, but it is enough to make one be careful to ascertain the author's sources and the actual substance of his reports.

(2) Critical scholars have judged that Philostratus' work is romantic fiction, one of the most popular literary forms of the second century A.D. There are several major indications, then, that the author's primary intent was other than to produce an exact historical chronology of Apollonius' life.<sup>7</sup>

(3) There are also serious historical inaccuracies in this work, such as Apollonius' lengthy excursions to then non-existent cities such as Nineveh and Babylon (which had both been destroyed hundreds of years beforehand). Likewise, the dialogues with the kings at each of these locations could not have occurred, at least in their present formulations. Such also brings other portions of the work into question.<sup>8</sup>

(4) Philostratus was commissioned to write his work by Julia Domna, wife of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, and it is popularly held by scholars that she did so "as a counterblast to Jesus."<sup>9</sup> Here we have some indicators that similarities with Jesus are more than coincidence.

(5) Some doubt if Damis, the disciple of Apollonius who is said to have written Philostratus' major source, is really an historical person at all.<sup>10</sup> And if Damis never lived (he is said to have come from non-existent Nineveh, for example), Philostratus' material is anonymous and thus certainly questionable.

(6) In regard to the supernatural claims, Damis (or the otherwise unknown author of this account) is “not altogether... credible” as a source and is known to have embellished Apollonius’ life, especially the claimed miracles. Philostratus himself added many fictitious items to the life of Apollonius and, again, miracles are among these items.<sup>11</sup>

(7) Philostratus freely admits that Damis’ account ends before Apollonius died and therefore neither his death nor any further claims are even recorded in the only extant source. So Philostratus contents himself to report explicitly contradictory “stories” that have been repeated about the death of Apollonius over a century later.<sup>12</sup>

(8) Lastly, Apollonius’ disappearance from a temple provides evidence for nothing supernatural, especially apotheosis. And a skeptic’s dream does not provide any evidence for a resurrection, especially when we are told that others who were present saw nothing.<sup>13</sup>

We conclude, then, that the ancient accounts of apotheosis are quite problematical on the grounds of historical sources, the lack of any verifiability and the fact that there are no actual claims to resurrections here at all. In our example of Apollonius, numerous serious problems, including Philostratus’ source ending before Apollonius’ death, invalidate the attempt to ascertain historically any evidence for post-death phenomena.

With regard to non-Christian resurrection claims, critical investigation reveals numerous other problems. Concerning the report about Rabbi Judah’s post-resurrection appearances, the most significant issue is the date of the testimony. While the Rabbi died in A.D. 220, the Gemara in which the incident is actually recorded is dated from about the fifth century,<sup>14</sup> a major gap. Additionally, there appears to be only one claimed witness to the phenomena (the maid) and there is no attempt to provide any evidence. This is not to say that such phenomena could not have occurred, but only that it would be virtually impossible even to begin to demonstrate it.

In the case of Kabir, the chief problem is also the lack of any early or eyewitness documentation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, with regard to actual historical data, no evidentially relevant records are available for examination. And, when attempting to reconstruct the events surrounding Kabir’s death there is even more of a problem. It can be shown that legend crept up quickly in the aftermath of Kabir’s life, especially at each of the points involving supernatural claims, such as a miraculous birth, miracles done during his life and his appearing to his disciples after death. In fact, it was found that this is a very natural and expected process in the formation of Indian legend.<sup>16</sup> Several other criticisms (especially alternative formulations) could be leveled at the case of Kabir, as we will do below with another such account. But the demonstrated presence of legend especially in the crucial portions of the reports and the absence of any verifiable historical documentation are, in this writer’s opinion, decisive enough at this point in our investigation since they effectively keep us from checking these later claims of resurrection.

Now the major point in this investigation is not an a priori rejection of the miraculous. Our critiques of Rabbi Judah and Kabir should therefore not be that miracles are claimed and are thereby legendary, but that there are no reliable historical data from early, eyewitness sources against which such later claims can be critically compared and ascertained. In other words, the crucial point is not that resurrections are claimed. This is certainly not an anomaly. What is important is the lack of verification for these claims. And in the absence of this crucial documentation, such conclusions are necessary.

Another of Price's favorite cases is Sabbatai Sevi,<sup>17</sup> but this example, like that of Apollonius of Tyana, reveals numerous problems for anyone who would argue for a resurrection or other supernatural elements. (1) Miracle stories concerning Sabbatai spread almost immediately after his appearance in various cities, with letters from Palestine being sent to various communities in Northern Europe. The letters, which were sent far and wide, contain many rumors and unsubstantiated reports. As Stephen Sharot states:

There were often wide gaps between the teachings of Nathan, the events around Zvi in the Middle East, and the content of the news. ...The letters and rumors told of miracles and mythological and apocalyptic events occurring in the present...<sup>18</sup>

Some of these reports concerned rather "wild" and incorrect claims that the lost ten tribes of Israel had reappeared in Arabia, that Mecca had been destroyed and that certain Christian churches had sunk into the earth.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, (2) Christian reports, dependent on the Jewish reports, "added distortions, exaggerations, and embellishments of their own."<sup>20</sup>

(3) Nathan, Sabbatai's "forerunner," argued against such miraculous reports himself on the grounds that faith alone should suffice.<sup>21</sup> Concerning Sabbatai's claims to be the Messiah, other problems surface.

(4) Some of Sabbatai's activities and claims can presumably be explained in that it is known that he was manic depressive.<sup>22</sup>

(5) But even more devastating, Sabbatai was imprisoned by the Turkish Moslems and was given the choice of either dying or converting to Islam. Sabbatai not only denied that he had made any messianic claims, but converted to the Islamic faith and then encouraged some of his disciples to do the same! Most of his followers admitted that they had been mistaken, with some even turning to Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

What about Sabbatai's death and afterwards? Again we find several more serious problems. (6) Although Sabbatai died in 1676, the major teaching of the Sabbatians was that he only appeared to die. In principle, this view may actually be close to the apotheosis described earlier, chiefly with regard to the Roman emperors.<sup>24</sup>

(7) Concerning the incident of Sabbatai's brother Elijah finding the tomb empty, Scholem notes the specific stages through which this legend grew, evidenced by the group's own internal documents.<sup>25</sup>

(8) While one letter notes Nathan's teaching that Sabbatai was still alive and that Nathan would soon meet him again, Scholem points out that even when this letter was written, Nathan had already died one month earlier without having met Sabbatai.<sup>26</sup>

(9) Lastly, there were apparently no claims that Sabbatai appeared after his death anyway, especially when it was officially taught by Nathan that he did not die in the first place! At any rate, there is no historical evidence here for Sabbatai's resurrection.

Concerning the claims that Lahiri Mahasaya and Sri Yukteswar rose from the dead, we again need to apply the same types of critical questioning which we have proposed above. Even though we are told that Mahasaya appeared to three individual persons and Yukteswar is said to have appeared to two, one of whom touched him, numerous queries need to be made.

For example, all five reported appearances were to single individuals while they were alone. Especially in light of this fact and the possibility of grieving in most cases, hallucination is certainly a very possible (if not a likely) conclusion. And what about other subjective theories such as autosuggestion, especially with persons who so readily accepted belief in such phenomena?<sup>27</sup> And could parapsychological phenomena such as occultic activity be a factor, which is certainly possible if not actually hinted at in some of these cases?<sup>28</sup>

Embellished accounts which grow over time are a known reality in religious literature, as pointed out earlier in this essay, but the above accounts certainly do not rule them out. The practice of Eastern meditation also needs to be mentioned as a possible contributory factor, at least in the example where Yogananda claims to have seen and touched his former guru Yukteswar while meditating. This is especially so in that Yogananda informs us that he saw Yukteswar "one week after the vision of Krishna," whom he saw above the roof of a nearby building as Krishna "waved to me, smiling and nodding in greeting."<sup>29</sup> To this writer, at least, this last element alone has some bearing on the credibility of the testimony given in the ensuing report of resurrection.<sup>30</sup> And we must not rule out even the possibility of plain misreporting of various types in some of these accounts. Price points out a blatant case of this in the Moslem tradition.<sup>31</sup> It must be remembered that no one alternative theory need account for all of the reported appearances. Different (or even combined) theories might be the answer.

Here again, as we did earlier, we must also note that it is not enough simply to report a miracle. Such a case must be substantiated and proved if it is to provide a basis for one's beliefs. And the burden of proof is on those who claim, in this case, that a resurrection has occurred. A miracle-claim requires strong evidence in that, by definition, such events are not the normal fare.<sup>32</sup> But the necessary proof is not provided in any of the non-Christian cases before us here. Simply to present a case of resurrection is not to substantiate or prove it and without this evidence to establish it, the miracle cannot, in turn, serve as a proof for a system of theological or religious belief.

### 3. Conclusion

It is an interesting phenomenon that some scholars who are otherwise critical in their approach to Christian claims<sup>33</sup> are somewhat less so when it comes to non-Christian claims of apotheosis and resurrection. But it must be said that such claims have not fared well in terms of historical investigation. Now this does not disprove such beliefs; it only reveals that they cannot be established (or known) by historical methodology.

But what if more evidence turns up for some of these non-Christian claims in the future or if entirely new cases are utilized? For instance, what if early evidence for the reports about Kabir turns up? Or what if there is evidence from several eyewitnesses at one time for accounts involving Indian resurrections?

Initially, it must be mentioned that such suppositions are somewhat arbitrary in that one could always postulate the possibility of future evidence for any proposition. But even beyond this, in the examples of Kabir and the Indian gurus (as well as with other instances pursued in this essay) such evidence might help to eliminate a major naturalistic alternative, but would not rule out some of the other possible hypotheses such as those already mentioned. But all viable naturalistic theories need to be addressed; simply a host of data would be required.

So to conclude briefly, non-Christian resurrection claims have not been proved by the evidence. Any of several naturalistic hypotheses is certainly possible and, in some cases, one or more can specifically be postulated as a probable cause. Simply to report a miracle is not sufficient to establish it, especially if that miracle is then going to be used to support a religious system. And to answer a question posed at the outset of this essay, non-Christian religions cannot use their resurrection claims to provide evidence for the system in question if these claims are themselves unsubstantiated.

### Notes

- 1 Robert Price, "Is There a Place for Historical Criticism?", pp. 2-3.
- 2 John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 138-9.
- 3 See Charles Hartshorne's response in Gary R. Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 137.
- 4 See Robert Graves' Foreword to Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, p. 7.
- 5 Price, pp. 19, 23, 28-9.
- 6 It should be carefully noted here that Price does not doubt that there is much legend in Philostratus' account, as he points out (pp. 23, 29). Yet again, he does not subject Philostratus' account to the same sort of historical criticism which he applies to Christianity.
- 7 For details, see Howard Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 253; Hastings, p. 699; S. A. Cook, editor, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 611.
- 8 For instance, it is also recognized by most scholars that Philostratus placed conversations in Apollonius' mouth which the latter could not have spoken, as indicated by the fact that some of these portions are taken from other works by Philostratus himself (namely from the *Lives of the Sophists*).
- 9 James Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 51. Cf. Cook, p. 613; Hastings, p. 610.

- 10 Ferguson, p. 182; Kee, p. 256; Charles Bigg, *The Origins of Christianity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 306.
- 11 For these problems, see Conybeare's "Introduction" to Philostratus' work, pages vii-x. Cf. Cartlidge and Dungan, p. 206.
- 12 Philostratus, VIII.29.
- 13 Ibid, VIII.31.
- 14 Personal conversation with Asher Finkel, Seton Hall University, 24 May 1988.
- 15 While some of Kabir's sayings were copied down about 50 years after his death, contemporary scholarship is not certain exactly which of these teachings are actually his and which are ascribed to others, especially since the poems and verses are frequently mixed with those of other authors. But at any rate, these writings do not include the historical data in question. See, for example, John Clark Archer, *The Sikhs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 50, 52-3.
- 16 Mohan Singh, *Kabir and the Bhagti Movement* (Lahore, 1934). See Archer (pp. 63-4) who summarizes Singh's demarcation of the steps by which legend appeared in the teachings about Kabir.
- 17 Price, pp. 4-5, 9-10, 27.
- 18 Stephen Sharot, Messianism, *Mysticism and Magic: A Sociological Analysis of Jewish Religious Movements* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 87-8, 90.
- 19 Ibid. p. 88.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid. pp. 87-8.
- 22 Ibid. p. 91; Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books), p. 90.
- 23 For Sharot's report of these events, see pp. 115-17.
- 24 Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, pp. 920, 922-4; Sharot, p. 122.
- 25 Scholem, *ibid.* pp. 919-20.
- 26 Ibid. p. 925.
- 27 Yogananda, pp. 313, 349.
- 28 For instance, one former Indian guru states: "My world was filled with spirits and gods and occult powers, and my obligation from childhood was to give each its due." See Rabindranath R. Maharaj (with Dave Hunt), *Escape into the Light* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1984), p. 24. This volume was formerly published as *Death of a Guru* (Philadelphia: H. J. Holman, 1977).
- 29 Yogananda, p. 413.
- 30 The simply incredible nature of the claim to have seen Krishna above a nearby building, I dare say, would bother many researchers. But beyond even that (because again, we ought not to reject claims in a priori manner), how could Yogananda recognize and identify Krishna, for instance, even if he had seen him? And if there is a problem here, what about in the next instance (with Yukteswar)? In other words, if Yogananda presumably cannot positively identify Krishna for sure (at least in any evidential sense), what can be said about the next appearance claim, which was also quite subjective? In fact, this writer, at least, would say that Yogananda has hereby seriously compromised his testimony as a reporter.
- 31 Price, p. 13.
- 32 Generally speaking, I think it is often true that persons require more evidence to believe an extraordinary event than to accept a regular occurrence. While I disagree with David Hume's position that virtually no evidence can ever establish a miracle, I think it is correct that we ought to have strong evidence for one. (For Hume's position at this point see "Of Miracles," section, part 10 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.)
- 33 Strangely enough, even though Price is quite critical of Christian claims, he concludes his discussion of Jesus' resurrection with the intriguing comment: "...one need not assume that there was no resurrection. Indeed it was precisely because of experiences of some kind... that anyone cared to glorify Jesus" (p. 20).