

# The not-so-successful faith

By **DOUG SHAVER**

*August 2011*

Richard Carrier has published a book ([\*Not the Impossible Faith\*](#)) rebutting a claim by the apologist J. P. Holding that Christianity was vindicated by its early success. The book is an update of an online essay that Carrier published in 2006, in response to material that Holding had published on his own Web site (“The Impossible Faith,” <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/nowayjose.html>). Like Carrier, Holding has since published his own material [in book form](#). (All quotations herein are taken from the authors’ Web sites, as they were on Aug. 13, 2011.) This essay will argue that a single point made by Carrier, and never refuted (to my knowledge) by any apologist, renders Holding’s entire argument irrelevant. This is not to imply that everything else Carrier says is superfluous. I found the entire book well worth my time to read, and I recommend it without reservation. Though I don’t doubt that Holding believes every word he writes, his entire argument is a tissue of errors, and Carrier presents a wealth of factual data showing exactly why this is so. What I argue in this essay is that even if Holding were right about everything else, the failure of his key premise would render all the other premises moot, and so his conclusion remains unproved. This is not tantamount to a claim that Carrier proved Holding’s conclusion to be false. It is merely an assertion that Holding failed to present a compelling reason to think his conclusion is true.

Just what is his conclusion? His ultimate conclusion, of course, is “Christianity is true,” but the point of *The Impossible Faith* is to present a particular argument to that conclusion. He has summarized it thus: “The only way Christianity did succeed is because it was a truly revealed faith—and because it had the irrefutable witness of the resurrection.” And why is that? According to Holding, practically nobody, at the time and place where Christianity originated, would have believed what the first Christians said about Jesus unless it had been practically impossible for them to deny it, and since they could not deny it, it must have been demonstrably true—the evidence had to have been incontrovertible. To establish this conclusion, he offers “a list of 17 factors to be

considered—places where Christianity ‘did the wrong thing’ in order to be a successful religion.”

But what is the right thing to do in order to be a successful religion? Obviously, the right thing is not necessarily telling the truth. History offers plenty of examples of successful religions that have told falsehoods. Furthermore, just what constitutes success for any religion? How many people have to join it for it to be considered successful? Clearly, Christianity was successful by anyone’s criteria—eventually—but are we then to infer that it was always successful? I don’t think so. The original New York Mets were famously unsuccessful, notwithstanding that the team eventually won the World Series. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, but that doesn’t tell us whether it was successful during its first two or three centuries.

Now, one could argue that merely surviving long enough to become the empire’s official religion is all the success you need, and so in that sense Christianity was indeed successful from Day One. But rather than quibble over that construal, let’s take another look at Holding’s thesis. What he is claiming is that (a) Christianity converted people who, because of certain of their mindsets or worldviews, would never have come to believe Christianity’s definitive doctrines unless confronted with irrefutable proof of those doctrines and (b) had it not done so, “it should have clearly failed or died out.” What were those definitive doctrines? Certainly the resurrection, if nothing else. Holding also has something to say about convincing people that Jesus was the messiah, but that doctrine was apparently contingent on the truth of the resurrection, and so we can focus on the latter. So then, what was that irrefutable proof? According to Holding: “enough early witnesses (as in, the 500!) with solid and indisputable testimony . . . and ranks of converts slightly after the fact (the thousands at Pentecost) who made it harder to not believe than to believe.”

Now, these two data—the number of witnesses and the number of initial converts—are not independent. By Holding’s own argument, the “thousands at Pentecost” were converted because, and only because, they were being told by witnesses that Jesus had risen from the dead: They would never have believed it, he says, if they

had not heard about it from people who saw it happen. But at the same time, he argues that we know there were witnesses because there were so many converts. And so the question now becomes: How many converts were there *in those places where, and during the time when, the witnesses would have been available for prospective converts to confront?*

According to Christian tradition, one purported witness to the resurrection lived until near the end of the first century. It is unlikely that any of others outlived him—there is no testimony that they did, at any rate—and so we may confine our inquiry to the first century. And so, how many people were converted during that time?

Carrier argues, in reliance on several sources, that it was almost certainly less than 1 percent, and his argument looks cogent to me, but there is a problem with that number. It is not nitpicking to ask: 1 percent of what? Carrier never makes this clear. However, any discussion about conversion rates has to disregard those regions of the world that had no opportunity to hear about Christianity. It is obviously irrelevant to this discussion that the conversion rate in China was zero. I'm going to assume, then, that Carrier is talking about conversion rates in those parts of the Roman Empire and adjacent regions that Christian missionaries actually reached.

Let's now review Carrier's sources.

*Josephus.* Near the end of the century, he attests to the existence of Christians but says nothing about how many there were.

*Acts of the Apostles.* The author claims 3,000 converts after Peter's inaugural sermon on Pentecost. At some unspecified time later (perhaps a few weeks, perhaps many months), he says the number had grown to around 5,000. Several years later, a church elder in conversation with Paul (Acts 21:20) puts the number of Jewish converts still only in the thousands. Speaking strictly logically, the elder's statement would have been true if, in his day, there had been 500,000 Jewish Christians, but if Christianity had grown this rapidly within just the first two or three decades of its existence, it seems improbable that Josephus either would have not known it or would not have thought it worth mentioning. His offhand remark that "the movement hasn't died out yet" would have been an incredible understatement.

3. *Tacitus*. From him we get no specific number, just that there was a large number of Christians in Rome during Nero's reign. What Tacitus would have considered a large number is anybody's guess.

4. *Pliny the Younger*. Carrier's argument merits quoting at length:

Pliny had been governor in Asia Minor for over a year already, and before that he held the post of Consul (the highest possible office in the entire Roman Empire, short of actually being the Emperor). He had also been a lawyer in Roman courts for several decades, then served in Rome as Praetor (the ancient equivalent of both Chief of Police and Attorney General), and then served as one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years before he was appointed to govern Bithynia. . . . [But] he never once saw a trial or a riot, nor had a Christian brought before him, nor ever heard the issue discussed in the Senate, courts, or porticoes, or by any of his peers—not in Asia (until this occasion), nor as top legal advisor to Trajan, nor as the leading law officer in Rome, nor as a lawyer, not even when he held the highest office in the land. That is simply impossible—unless Christians were barely there.

*Rodney Stark*. According to Carrier, Stark claims that the highest estimate ever produced by "bona fide scholarship" puts the number of Christians worldwide, in the year 300 CE, at around 15 million, which would be roughly 25 percent of the Roman Empire's total population. From this, an average growth rate can be calculated using elementary math. The result depends on the value chosen for the initial membership and the year in which the growth is presumed to have begun. Assuming an initial membership of 5,000 sometime in the 30s, the result is in the neighborhood of 35 percent per decade. That is certainly respectable, but it still produces a Christian census in the year 100, empire-wide, of at most around 40,000. That would have been well under 1 percent of the empire's total population. After 60 to 70 years, that was hardly a jaw-dropping performance. Respectable? Yes. Miraculous? No.

*Keith Hopkins, Thomas Finn, and Robin Lane Fox*. According to Carrier,

Hopkins' research supports Stark's conclusions and Finn's research corroborates both Hopkins and Stark. Fox meanwhile "surveys every kind of evidence of Christian numbers one could expect to find (especially archaeological), and finds that Christians were practically invisible until the 3rd century."

*Origen.* According to Carrier, Origen asserts that by around 200 CE, "only a very few" had become Christians. Here is Origen's statement in its context from *Contra Celsus* (emphasis added):

We say that "if two" of us "shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of the Father" of the just, "which is in heaven;" for God rejoices in the agreement of rational beings, and turns away from discord. And what are we to expect, if not *only a very few agree, as at present*, but the whole of the empire of Rome?

*Cornelius, Bishop of Rome.* In a letter quoted by Eusebius, according to Carrier, Cornelius presented a census of the priests, staff, and dependents of the church in Rome around the middle of the third century. From his data, according to Carrier, "the Church at Rome probably could not have claimed more than 11,000 believers." He notes that others have produced higher extrapolations, but none more than 50,000, and even in that case the church would have constituted barely 7 percent of the city's population at most. The number of Christians in Rome at the end of the first century, 150 years earlier, had to have been correspondingly less.

Of course, these are all just guesses, each guess being based on a pack of assumptions. The assumptions seem justifiable to me, and anyhow, neither Holding nor anybody else can say one word about anything in the past without assuming a few things themselves. Anybody wishing to challenge Carrier's estimates will have to bring some different assumptions to the table—and justify them. But the fact that we are just guessing is a point that Carrier makes repeatedly, and the reason for all the guesswork is simple and uncontested: We are forced to guess because we can't do anything else. We have no good information on how many Christians there were by the end of the first century. Indeed, we have essentially none. It is not the case that the information is

unreliable. It is the case that there is no information, except only that we know the number was greater than zero. There were Christians during the first century. That is what we know. What we don't know is how many there were. And until we can know, Holding's argument is worthless, quite regardless of whether any or all of his "17 factors" are matters of historical fact. It doesn't make a bit of difference what we might infer from Christianity's extraordinary success until it is proven that Christianity was extraordinarily successful. It could have been, for all we know, but we have zero evidence that says it was.

There are those apologists prepared to deny that they need evidence. They think any belief is justified so long as no one has proved it false. I won't argue with them in this essay. I will simply claim that if it is reasonable for someone to believe *X* solely on grounds that there is no incontrovertible evidence contrary to *X*, then it is no less reasonable for someone to believe not-*X* solely on grounds that there is no incontrovertible evidence to the contrary of not-*X*.

That said, I think there is a positive argument to be made against Holding's claim of Christianity's extraordinary early success. In this case, absence of evidence is evidence of absence. According to Holding, on the assumption that Christianity was false or even just not provably true, its growth rate during the first century was contrary to anyone's reasonable expectation. Now, according to one of Christianity's own doctrines, every religion other than Christianity is false, and so the expectation should be that Christianity's growth would have been, at most, no faster than that of any other new religion of the time. For Holding's claim to mean anything, then, it must be taken to mean that Christianity's growth rate during the first century was significantly greater than that of any other contemporary religion of recent origin. But if it was, then somebody would have noticed, and it's reasonable to suppose that at least one document recording such notice would have been preserved. What we find instead is that of all the contemporary sources who mention Christians at all, none has a significant word to say about how many of them there are. For a religion picking up converts at an unprecedented pace, that is what should be contrary to our expectations.

Of course, my personal judgment about who probably would have said what

about Christianity's success is proof of nothing. But it is my judgment, and until I'm confronted with a good reason to think it's in error, I'm entitled to believe its implications. Anyhow, I am not claiming that Holding's Christian beliefs are unreasonable. He is entitled to his epistemological paradigm, whatever it is. All I am claiming is that he has failed to show there is anything unreasonable about my disbelief in Christianity, which he might have done if there had been a cogent argument in *The Impossible Faith*.

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