

THE GOD WHO WASN'T THERE

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BEYOND BELIEF MEDIA
7510 Sunset Blvd. #504
Hollywood, CA 90046
(323) 874-1517
publicity@thegodmovie.com

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Bowling for Columbine did it to the gun culture.

Super Size Me did it to fast food.

Now *The God Who Wasn't There* does it to religion.

Holding modern Christianity up to a bright spotlight, this bold new film demands answers to the questions few dare to ask. Your guide through the world of Christendom is former fundamentalist **Brian Flemming**, who unflinchingly examines believers and the origins of their beliefs. He gets help from such luminaries as esteemed folklorist **Alan Dundes** (*Holy Writ as Oral Lit*), Jesus Seminar fellow **Robert M. Price** (*Deconstructing Jesus*) and neuroscientist **Sam Harris** (*The End of Faith*).

Along with Brian, you will discover:

- The early founders of Christianity seem wholly unaware of the idea of a human Jesus
- The Jesus passed down to us in the gospels bears a striking resemblance to other ancient heros and the figureheads of pagan savior cults
- Contemporary Christians are largely ignorant of the origins of their religion
- Christianity is as obsessed with blood and violence now as it was in the 1st century
- Fundamentalism is as strong today as it ever has been, with an alarming 44% of Americans believing Jesus will return to Earth within the next 50 years
- And God simply isn't there

Brian Flemming also explores his own experiences within fundamentalist Christianity at a cult-like school that taught him how how and what to believe. Ultimately, he confronts the man in charge of educating the school's 1800 students, and this superintendent's inability to justify what he teaches is revealing and distressing.

Dazzling motion graphics and a sweeping soundtrack help tell this tale of one person's journey from the darkness of first-century thinking to the enlightenment of reason.

Hold on to your faith. It's in for a bumpy ride.

LONG SYNOPSIS

(4 pages)

The film begins with a view of our solar system from a distinctly Christian perspective--with the sun revolving around the earth. Having established the religion's credentials in the field of science, the film goes on to examine how well the religion is doing in the field of history.

Christianity's main historical claim is that a man named Jesus actually lived in Palestine, conducted a traveling ministry, and was put to death by Romans at the instigation of Jewish leaders.

But how much evidence do we have that this claim is any more justified than the assertion that the sun revolves around the earth? Does the record we have of early Christianity justify the belief in a historical Jesus?

An interviewer asks Christians outside a Billy Graham event if they can tell him about how Christianity spread in those early days. Astonishingly, no Christian has a clear idea. Many stammer when asked the question--as if they'd never even considered it before.

The first century of Christianity is largely undiscussed in Christian culture, and Brian discovers why: It turns out that there is a gap of several decades between the supposed life of Jesus and the appearance of the first gospel account of his life.

The documents covering that gap were largely written by the apostle Paul, who is generally credited as the main architect of Christianity. Without Paul, most secular and religious scholars believe, there would be no Christianity. His zeal and love of Christ helped spread Jesus' message far and wide.

And here's what most Christians don't know about Paul: If Jesus was supposed to have been a real human who recently lived, *nobody told Paul about it.*

Paul's writings--80,000 words--never mention a historical Jesus. The story you know about Jesus? Paul never heard of it. He never heard of Mary, Joseph, a birth in Bethlehem, King Herod, any miracles at all, any ministry at all, no trial by Jews, no trial by Pontius Pilate.

If you could go back in time and tell Paul the story of Jesus, he'd have no idea what you were talking about. Until the crucifixion. Like other savior gods popular in Paul's time and region, Paul's "Christ Jesus" suffered on a cross, beat death, and then returned to his father. But it all took place in a mythical realm--just like the other savior myths of the day.

The person who invented Christianity had no idea his savior was supposed to have walked the earth.

Decades after the supposed life of Christ, the first gospel--Mark--appeared. But it's not at all clear that Mark thought he was writing history. The language and imagery of his account sug-

gests that not even Mark thought the events he described really happened. Allegorical literature of this type was extremely common during this period.

These are the roots of Christianity--one man who had no idea that Jesus was a human, and another who likely wasn't even trying to make that claim.

Which isn't surprising. There are zero contemporary accounts by historians showing any knowledge whatsoever of Jesus--even though he was supposed to have attracted crowds in the thousands with his miracles, almost incited an insurrection in Jerusalem, and was put to death by Pontius Pilate--after a Jewish trial *on Passover eve*.

Somehow, historians of the day didn't notice these remarkable events. And somehow Paul and his fellow early Christians forgot Jesus had lived. And then, apparently, decades later, people suddenly remembered.

There's a more plausible theory: That the Christian religion developed in the same way as virtually every previous religion with a dying and rising savior. Attis, Mithras, Osiris and other gods predate Jesus by millennia--but they also bear a striking resemblance to him. The similarities include: Being dead for three days and then rising, healing the sick and casting out demons, a ritual involving bread and wine representing the savior's flesh and blood. And many more.

No major event in the life of Christ lacks a strikingly similar precedent in another religion or myth.

Coincidence? Maybe, but Christian apologists of the second and third century didn't think so. They had to deal with complaints and accusations from actual practitioners of these other religions, and it was common knowledge that the Jesus story was similar to the pagan myths.

These early church fathers did not claim this was a coincidence. Rather: They claimed that Satan knew that Jesus would be coming, so he had planted those other gods--counterfeiting Jesus *in advance*.

Bizarrely, this remains the explanation to this day. But, as *The God Who Wasn't There* shows, Christian leaders don't have to use this Satan-did-it excuse very often. The movie interviews several Christians who admit they have never heard of the previous pagan gods who bear such a striking similarity to Jesus.

It seems that mankind has been obsessed with blood sacrifice rituals for a very long time. Christianity is another, relatively new iteration of the ancient ritual in which a designated person suffers and dies, and the others eat his flesh and blood, symbolically or otherwise.

But Christians today aren't obsessed with blood and violence, are they? If you answered "no" to that, you obviously haven't seen *The Passion of the Christ*. Using clips taken directly from Mel Gibson's film, director Brian Flemming analyzes the extreme gore and shows the steps Gibson took to emphasize blood and suffering as much as possible. This section is not for the squeamish.

What does it mean that the most popular Jesus film by far is one that contains nonstop bloody slaughter? Why was this film the single most powerful spiritual experience of their lives for countless Christians?

Well, Christianity has always had a dark side, and Flemming now explores it. Popular fundamentalist preachers pound their Bibles and exhort their followers to “raise up an army” for God. Christians burn books in a “Burning Celebration.” One regional leader of the Moral Majority calls for laws mandating the execution of homosexuals.

And all of this is a natural outgrowth of faith, *not* a perversion of it. If God really did write the Bible, as fundamentalist Christians believe, then it would be wrong *not* to have these attitudes. If everyone who has not accepted Jesus as Lord really is going to a permanent doom, then raising an army for God is a good idea.

This is where “moderate” Christianity fails. Either God wrote that book or he didn't. The middle ground simply doesn't make sense. He only wrote a little of it? Just the parts you like? How could that possibly be true, and how could you know?

God, of course, didn't write a book. There's no evidence that he even exists. But by ignoring logic and reason and paying lip service to religious faith, moderate and liberal Christians only empower the fundamentalists they claim to oppose. If faith is right, it's the fundamentalists who are correct, not the wishy-washy folks in the middle--and that's why so many people choose religious dogma that has the courage of its convictions.

In fact, 44% of Americans believe that Jesus is coming back--from the sky, to judge the living and the dead--within the next 50 years. The movie now examines a member of this 44% close up.

Scott Butcher operates a web site called RaptureLetters.com. The site is intended to be used by Christians who believe they will disappear from Earth in The Rapture--the End Times event in which all Christ believers will be taken up to Heaven by Jesus. A Rapture-ready Christian can go to RaptureLetters.com and enter the email address of someone close to them who is not saved--and, after the Rapture, the site will automatically notify that non-Christian via email that their friend or relative has been taken up in the Rapture.

Revealing his gullibility, Scott passes along “facts” he's learned, such as the policy of airlines not to let two Christian pilots operate a plane at the same time--because they both may disappear in the Rapture, leaving the plane in mid-air without a pilot.

Scott is a successful contractor, a nice guy with a stable family life and no signs of mental illness. He simply believes crazy things. And he's not alone. The End Times-themed “Left Behind” novels have sold tens of millions of copies.

But is Brian Flemming just criticizing something he doesn't understand? Not at all. On screen, Scott Butcher's face morphs into Brian's, and the director reveals that he, too, used to be a fundamentalist Christian--who believed exactly the same things as Butcher believes.

Brian learned to be a fundamentalist when he attended Village Christians Schools in Sun Valley, California. The school mascot was the Crusader--because the mission of the school was to battle the secular world. The school handbook even says that Satan works through other versions of Christianity to deceive people, so Village positions itself in opposition to liberal, moderate and Catholic Christianity as well.

But Brian relates that the most frightening aspect of his time at Village was having relentlessly pounded into him the idea that there was *one unforgivable sin*. Jesus would forgive you for almost anything, but for some reason the Bible says there's one sin that, if you do it, you can never go anywhere but Hell, no matter what you do.

The sin? Denial of the Holy Spirit. Deny the Holy Spirit, and you are doomed, according to a literal reading of two New Testament verses. Of course, the Holy Spirit is the easiest thing in the entire doctrine to doubt. Jesus was 2000 years ago, God is out of your reach, but the Holy Spirit is supposed to be with you right here, right now.

So you'd better feel it. And if your mind wanders to the fact that there's no more evidence for the existence of this "Holy Spirit" than for the existence of unicorns? That in and of itself may be denial of the Holy Spirit, because Jesus is in your thoughts, and he knows.

In school, Brian was paranoid that he'd accidentally denied the Holy Spirit by doubting its existence. He spent a lot of time in the school chapel talking to Jesus, asking if Jesus could still save him, even if he'd broken the one unbreakable rule.

Curious about why the caring adults who run Village Christian Schools would teach their 1800 students these terrifying ideas, Brian heads to the school, to interview the man in charge, superintendent Dr. Ronald Sipus.

In the superintendent's office, Brian asks Dr. Sipus to lay out the Christian doctrine taught at Village Christian Schools, and Sipus says the school only teaches that which is absolutely necessary for salvation--the need for the Holy Spirit, and the need for a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Then Brian asks a simple question: What evidence do you have that the world works this way? Sipus's answer? "It's a faith issue." He admits he has no "empirical data." Brian asks, then, if it isn't irresponsible to teach children a theory that he has no evidence to back up.

Sipus disagrees but can't explain why. And then he shows what someone in his position does when even mildly challenged to support their religious ideas instead of getting a free pass--he ends the interview. The man in charge of the education of 1800 children can't explain why he teaches them what he does.

On his way out, Brian notices that the school chapel is open. Inside, he turns the camera on himself, looks into the lens and says, "Here in the chapel where I first accepted Jesus as my personal savior, I just want to say one thing: I deny the Holy Spirit."

PEOPLE IN THE MOVIE

Where contact information is provided, the person has indicated a willingness to be contacted directly by members of the press regarding the issues in *The God Who Wasn't There*.

SCOTT BUTCHER is the creator of RaptureLetters.com. A general contractor, he lives in Southern California with his family.

RICHARD CARRIER is a philosopher and historian studying ancient science at Columbia University in New York, where he received a Masters degree and a Master of Philosophy in ancient history and is working on his Ph.D. He previously graduated Phi Beta Kappa at UC Berkeley. His articles have been published in *Biology & Philosophy*, *The History Teacher*, *German Studies Review*, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and the *Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*. He is a veteran of the United States Coast Guard and served as Editor in Chief of the Secular Web for several years. His latest book is *Sense and Goodness Without God*.

rcarrier@infidels.org

(510) 932-9536

ALAN DUNDES died six weeks after being interviewed for *The God Who Wasn't There*. An anthropologist and folklorist, he was Professor of Folklore and Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1993, he became the first American to win the Pitre Prize's Sigillo d'Oro, the top international prize in folklore and ethnography. His books include: *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964); *Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Study of German National Character Through Folklore* (1984); *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (1987) and *Folklore Matters* (1989). One of the most loved professors at Berkeley, in 1994 Dundes won the Distinguished Teacher Award, given to one professor each year by the students and staff of Berkeley.

SAM HARRIS, currently completing a Ph.D. in neuroscience, is one of the most compelling writers and speakers on the subject of religious belief. Writing unflinchingly about the dangers of Christianity, Islam and other religions in his book *The End of Faith*, Harris won rave reviews and is changing the terms of debate on the subjects he addresses. "Harris writes what a sizable number of us think, but few are willing to say in contemporary America"--*NY Times*

sam@samharris.org

BARBARA AND DAVID P. MIKKELSON are the founders of the Urban Legends Reference Pages at snopes.com. Snopes is generally considered the go-to source when you want to know whether an urban legend is true or false. But it is also a fine collection of writings from two dedicated and esteemed modern folklorists.

ROBERT M. PRICE is Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute as well as the editor of *The Journal of Higher Criticism*. His books include *Beyond Born Again*, *The Widow Traditions in Luke-Acts: A Feminist-Critical Scrutiny*, *Deconstructing Jesus*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*. Forthcoming titles are *The Crisis of Biblical Authority*, *Jesus Christ Superstar: A Redactional Study of a Modern Gospel*, *The Da Vinci Fraud* and *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*.

Criticus@aol.com

www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com

DR. RONALD SIPUS is superintendent of Village Christian Schools in Sun Valley, California. He did not want his interview used in this documentary.

DVD COMMENTARY TRACKS ONLY:

RICHARD DAWKINS, possibly the world's most famous atheist, is the author of a number of internationally best-selling books about evolutionary biology including *The Selfish Gene* (1976; second edition, 1989), *The Extended Phenotype* (1982), *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *River Out of Eden* (1995), *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996), and *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998).

EARL DOHERTY is a modern pioneer of the Jesus Myth theory. His 1999 book *The Jesus Puzzle* lays out in painstaking detail the evidence for a mythical Christ, with scholarship that to this day remains without refutation.

oblio@ca.inter.net

THE RAVING ATHEIST maintains a popular weblog at <http://www.ravingatheist.com/>

FILMMAKERS

BRIAN FLEMMING (*writer, director, producer, narrator*) is a film director and playwright whose work has been called "jaggedly imaginative" by the *New York Times*, "a parallel universe" by the BBC and "immensely satisfying" by *USA Today*. The Fox News Channel dubbed Fleming "a young Oliver Stone." He is the co-writer (with Keythe Farley and Laurence O'Keefe) of *Bat Boy: The Musical*, a stage play based on a story about a half-bat half-boy in the tabloid *Weekly World News*. It won the 2001 Lucille Lortel Award for Best Musical, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical Off- Broadway and six Drama Desk nominations in New York. *Bat Boy* has since been staged in London's West End, Germany and Japan. John Landis (*Blues Brothers, Animal House*) will direct the film adaptation of the play.

Brian also wrote and directed a faux documentary about the assassination of Bill Gates called *Nothing So Strange*, which premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival in 2002. *Variety* called it "a crackling good movie" that "may be the ideal prototype film for the digital age." The film won the Claiborne Pell *New York Times* Award for Original Vision at the 2002 Newport Film Festival and was released commercially in 2003. It is currently available on DVD in more than 200 countries.

Brian has also produced and directed nonfiction works for Bravo, the Independent Film Channel, Beliefnet and ABC.com.

Brian is currently at work on *The Beast*, a fictional feature film about a Christian high school student who stumbles across evidence that Jesus Christ never existed. The film goes into production this July and will be released on 6-6-06.

AMANDA JACKSON (*co-producer*) began her career in stage management for commercial and nonprofit theater in New York, working in such theaters as Playwrights Horizons, Primary Stages and the Union Square Theater. On the set of *Bat Boy: The Musical*, she met co-author Brian Fleming and later joined the crew of his feature film *Nothing So Strange*, which was then in post-production, as a coordinator. She has since collaborated with Fleming on the development of *The Beast* and the production of *The God Who Wasn't There*. Amanda was educated at the Idyllwild Arts Academy and Cornell University.

MUSIC

For the soundtrack, **DJ MADSON** composed original work and remixed music by **DAVID BYRNE**, **THIEVERY CORPORATION**, **ZAP MAMA** and **LE TIGRE**. Madson's remixing was made possible by the generosity of those four artists in making their work available via the Creative Commons Sampling Plus license. Madson and the filmmakers thank the artists for their vision and creative spirit.

MOVIES

La Vie et la Passion de Jésus Christ. This charming 1905 silent film is the first feature-length movie ever made. It is used to illustrate the story of Jesus in *The God Who Wasn't There*.

The Living Bible. Scenes from this 1952 miniseries by Family Films are also used to illustrate the story of Jesus in *The God Who Wasn't There*.

Life and Liberty...For All Who Believe. This 1982 film produced by People for the American way shows the roots of the present Christian fundamentalist movement toward theocracy. In it, Christians recite the still-common pledge: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands, One Savior crucified, risen and coming again with life and liberty for all who believe."

The Passion of the Christ. This 2004 depiction of Christ's suffering and dying is quoted in *The God Who Wasn't There* without permission, under the fair use exemption for quoting works for the purpose of criticism and comment. The film is ©2004 Icon Productions, Inc.

STILL PHOTOGRAPHS

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SOME FACTS

ABOUT JESUS

- There are no contemporary historical accounts of Jesus during the time he is said to have lived, despite many accounts of other figures and events in that region in the first century
- The earliest Christians, such as the apostle Paul, do not appear to have believed in a historical Jesus
- Paul's 80,000 words about Christianity represent most of the first religion's first documents, and Paul shows no awareness of a real, human Jesus who recently walked the Earth
- The first gospel account of a life of Jesus did not show up for at least four decades after his supposed death, and probably much later than that
- Many scholars question whether even the writers of the gospels thought they were writing history, as the books are filled with language and imagery consistent with the sort of fictional, allegorical literature common to the period
- The main defense of a historical Christ is a statement attributed to the Jewish historian Josephus (93 C.E.), but this brief passage is considered an obvious interpolation (i.e., forgery inserted later) by virtually every serious biblical scholar

ABOUT THE MOVIE

- Shot on DVCAM
- Motion graphics created with Apple's Motion application
- The 1906 and 1952 films used to illustrate the Jesus story are in the public domain
- The film developed out of Brian Flemming and Amanda Jackson's research for the fictional feature film *The Beast*, which will be released on 6-6-06 (thebeastmovie.com)
- Co-producer Amanda Jackson also attended a fundamentalist Christian grade school
- Despite the themes of *The God Who Wasn't There* and *The Beast*, conservative Christian activist Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family has chosen to target Flemming's play *Bat Boy* instead. Dobson has said he is "horrified" by the script and has launched an ongoing campaign to stop high schools from staging the musical, which criticizes intolerance

BEHIND THE MOVIE

Jesus didn't exist? Could this even *possibly* be true?

“That’s the reaction I had when I first heard the notion,” says *The God Who Wasn't There* director Brian Flemming. “It sounded crazy, but then I asked myself, ‘Why do I believe he *did* exist?’ I mean, I’m a former fundamentalist Christian, and even *I* didn’t know what the evidence was.”

Once he looked into the matter, Flemming was reminded of his research into the John F. Kennedy assassination for his last feature film, the faux documentary *Nothing So Strange*. Flemming delved into the literature on that assassination, walked Dealey Plaza himself, studied the forensic evidence closely and attended a research conference on the assassination.

“For *Nothing So Strange*, I began by looking into the evidence for a conspiracy in the JFK assassination, and I ended up being far more fascinated by the culture of conspiracy theorists, which is what the movie became about. Despite believing, going in, that there was probably a conspiracy of some kind, I ultimately found no evidence for one. All the theories, every single one, wilted upon close examination. But I found lots of evidence that the people promoting the conspiracy idea *wanted* there to be a conspiracy. It was very much like a religion.

“With my research for *The Beast* and *The God Who Wasn't There*, it was precisely the opposite. The more I looked into it, the more the idea that Jesus didn't exist gained credibility. It was really those who supported the idea of a historical Christ who were cutting corners and relying on clearly shaky evidence. The theory that he was a legendary figure at the beginning of the religion was supported by virtually every known fact.”

Once he realized how compelling-yet-unexposed this theory was, Flemming knew he had an idea for his next film. He began work with Amanda Jackson on *The Beast*, the fictional story of a Christian high school student named Danielle who comes into possession of irrefutable evidence that Jesus never existed--and then becomes the target of fundamentalist Christians who want to suppress that evidence by any means necessary. Flemming targeted the date 6-6-06 for the release of this feature film (which begins principal photography under a veil of secrecy in early July 2005).

While doing further research, Flemming realized he had the makings of a documentary on the subject, so he began work on *The God Who Wasn't There* in October 2004. But what began as a straightforward informational film on the Christ Myth quickly evolved into an exploration of his own battles with religious faith.

“There was no way to avoid it,” says Flemming. “The connection between the transformation of a mythical character into a real person and the fundamentalist Christianity we have today is very hard to ignore. You start by demanding--with force--that people proclaim this fictional story to be literally true, and ultimately you end up with Pat Robertson. Or you end up with Village Christian Schools, a cult-like place that shoved these bizarre ideas down my throat when I was growing up.

“The Holy Spirit is as benign as *Star Wars*' The Force when placed in a mythical context, where it belongs. But tell a kid that the Holy Spirit is really truly all around him, and he must say that he feels it or burn in hell forever, and really it stops being benign. I know this from personal experience. And it all stems from a literal interpretation of material that is simply, objectively, not literally true.”

But does Flemming really think he's going to change any minds with this movie?

“I really do think people will discover things they didn't know by watching this movie. I don't imagine that I'll change the minds of a Rapture-ready fundamentalist who has already dispensed with all logic and reason. And I certainly won't alter the course of the Christian leaders who profit so much from peddling fundamentalist doctrine. But I think perhaps I could reach a young Christian who is struggling with doubt about the bizarre worldview he or she is being taught.

“I think I could offer that young person some reassurance--it's okay to doubt, he probably didn't exist, he's not coming back to punish you, and there's no reason to be afraid all the time.”

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