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Jesus on Trial! Priest Taken to Court for Saying Jesus Existed

By Nicole Winfield
Associated Press

ROME - Lawyers for a small-town parish priest have been ordered to appear in court this week after the Roman Catholic cleric was accused of unlawfully asserting what many people take for granted: that Jesus Christ existed.



The Rev. Enrico Righi was named in a 2002 complaint filed by Luigi Cascioli after Righi wrote in a parish bulletin that Jesus did indeed exist, and that he was born of a couple named Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth.

Cascioli, 72, a lifelong atheist, says that Righi violated two Italian laws by making the assertion: "abuse of popular belief," in which someone fraudulently deceives people, and "impersonation," in which someone gains by attributing a false name to someone.

Cascioli argues that for 2,000 years, the Roman Catholic Church has been deceiving people by saying that Christ existed, and that the church has been gaining financially by impersonating as Christ someone by the name of John of Gamala.

He also asserts that the Gospels - the most frequently cited testimony of Jesus' existence - are inconsistent, full of errors, and biased, and that other written evidence from the time is scant and does not hold up to scholarly analysis.

Prosecutors, who in Italy are obliged to investigate such complaints, initially tried to have the case dismissed, saying no crime could be verified.

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But Cascioli challenged them, and Judge Gaetano Mautone set a hearing for Friday in Viterbo, north of Rome, to discuss preliminary motions in Cascioli's bid to have the court appoint technical experts to review the historical data and determine whether Jesus really did exist.

Asked why he went after Righi - a schoolmate when he and Cascioli were boys - and not any number of bishops, cardinals or even the Pope, who have asserted the very same thing, Cascioli said it didn't really matter whom he named in his complaint.

"When one demonstrates that Christ didn't exist, attacking a simple priest is the same thing as attacking a bishop or cardinal," Cascioli said.

Cascioli is quick to stress that he has no problem with Christians freely professing their faith. Rather, he says in his complaint, he wants to "denounce the abuse that the Catholic Church commits by availing itself of its prestige in order to inculcate - as if being real and historical - facts that are really just inventions."

Righi, who has been a priest for 50 years, declined to be interviewed on the advice of his lawyers. But he set out his rebuke of Cascioli in a recent issue of his parish bulletin "Risveglio," or "Awaken," and said by telephone that the article encapsulated his position.

Righi argues that the existence of Christ is "unmistakable" because of the substantial historical evidence - both pagan and religious - testifying that he indeed lived.

Cascioli says he recognizes that his case has a slim chance of succeeding in overwhelmingly Catholic Italy, but not because his argument is lacking. "We aren't optimistic - unless the Madonna makes a miracle, but I don't think that will happen," he joked.



The Historical Record on Jesus

Early evidence historians cite for Jesus' existence: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John appeared variously four to seven decades after Jesus' time, scholars say, and Paul's earliest epistle was written around A.D. 50. These are unusually well-attested ancient texts (the earliest surviving fragment was copied around A.D. 130). Other Christian writings date from the early second century.

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' "Jewish Antiquities" (A.D. 93) says James, "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ," was executed in A.D. 62.

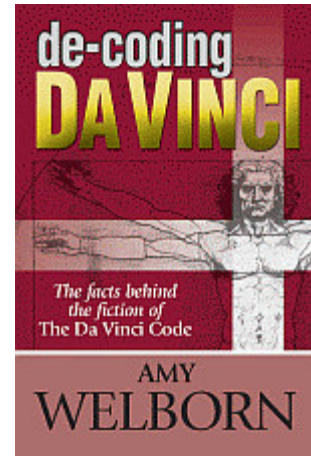
Pliny the Younger wrote the Emperor Trajan from present-day Turkey (around A.D. 111) assailing the "contagious superstition" of the Christians "reciting an antiphonal hymn to Christ as God."

SOURCE: "Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament" by professor F.F. Bruce, University of Manchester, England.

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