

Flat Earth Myth: Ancient Allegation on the Church Busted

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Introduction

Much has been said and attributed to the Christian Church, now and historically from various sources, angles; religious or not. Some statements are good, amiable and commendable such as the role in forcing the ending of the slave trade through the untiringly valiant and persistent efforts of the towering Christian Parliamentarian, William Wilberforce. Other good attributions would include the initial instigations of human rights campaigns, University education among others. But there have equally been dark allegations and innuendoes leveled against the Church over time, some of which may be true, others utterly false. Among these image damagers include the Crusades that Muslims never cease to recall, the justification of several terrible practices such as apartheid exploiting the Bible, among others. Some of these bad attributions have over time, died a natural death due to neglect but others seem to grow from strength to strength with the passage of years. One of these is the allegation that the Church opposed and oppressed the proliferation of independent enquiry through the scientific method. The other that has survived time is the allegation that the Christian Church, using the Bible, fostered the belief that the world is flat like a disc and dared anyone that ventured out to the far reaches of the earth. This view has been held and passed on to succeeding generations as having been the official position held by the Church. People have scarcely taken time to verify these allegations so as to establish the truth whether this was so; whether the Christian Church and Bible were truly mistaken or what. This paper unveils some surprising findings drawn from written evidence as far back as Aristotle to prove that the flat earth myth was propagated/invented far much later.

What the World Believed

From investigations thus far adduced, it is increasingly becoming apparent that the Christian faith may not have necessarily held the flat earth view from the earliest stages. It could be true that the belief system could have fluctuated but from the evidence before us, the Christian Church, and indeed the Bible held that the earth was spherical rather than flat with a precipice at the end of the table like earth plate. Granted, some surrounding extant traditions may have favoured and

held that the Earth was flat like a plate while others could have championed the idea that the earth was shaped like a semi-circle or even a shield, in some cases. To authenticate the official position of the majority view then, we shall cite or quote several authorities that Dr Jonathan Safarti has ably brought to the fore. For now we content ourselves with the fact that various views could have prevailed in different epochs of time.

The earlier Established Popular Views about the Earth's Shape

Contrary to what many of us in the current context have been made to believe, thanks to wrong writing and recording of history, the majority of the ancient world, even up to the end of the dark medieval age, held and believed that the earth was spherical rather than flat like a disc or any other shape. Evidence forth coming to the fore is that as early as the fifth century or earlier, as far back as Aristotle held that the earth was round, spherical. However, the *minority view* was that the earth was flat like disc and if one went to the furthest reaches of this disc, they could irretrievably topple over the edge; never to return. This myth (i.e. flat-earth) probably was given impetus by the sheer numbers of sea voyagers that went to sea but never returned, perhaps perished for want of supplies or some such reasons. If one cannot explain something, the tendency is to have some possible hypothesis which, if not carefully managed, is consequently assumed to be the truth, much like what evolution have become today. Others sources claim that Washington Irving (1828), in his book *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* actually invented this myth that has lived on into this day (Blakemore 2018). That said, when Columbus set sail, the generally held view was that the earth was round, hence his desire to travel west to arrive at the East, to India. What was not clear however at the time was the exact size of the earth so that this sailor and explorer could carry sufficient supplies for the round trip, since the intervening lands in between were unknown. Columbus' calculations for each latitude were 56.67 nautical miles instead of the official 59. 5. This variance was accounted for by an error. Columbus made second error; mistaking an Arabic unit for a He set sail westwards and eventually landed on the American continent that had already been named America after one Amerigo (<https://www.history.com/news/christopher-columbus-never-set-out-to-prove-the-earth-was-round>).

Ancient Source Evidence that *the flat world* Idea was foreign to the World or Church

As earlier intimated, we now turn to the written evidence at hand to prove that the Christian church has never held the myth so much attributed to it, if anything, the Church (in its healthy state) always primarily refers to scripture as well as secondarily, to verified scientific evidence at any given time. We kick start our evidence with the venerable Bede from the 7th century. Note that this evidence is

not chronologically arranged nor do we attempt a narrative description beyond listing sources but aims at proving a point: The Christian Church is innocent of the age old allegation. Readers need to consult the writings of the following sources:

1. Bede writings
2. Thomas Aquinas' writings
3. Aristotle's writings
4. The Nobilities' (Kings) of England

From the foregoing list, it is clear that the flat earth idea could have been a later novel idea. Where then did this theory or idea emanate from? In the course of our discussion, we shall, in sync with our earlier hints, bring to the fore the primary proponents of this defective but widely held idea that has become all pervasive throughout historical writings, academic or otherwise.

The Prime Proponents of “*the world is flat*” Idea

The primary proponents of the above myth are primarily three individuals, two of who clearly disgruntled or disillusioned with a strong aversion for Christianity preferring a secular kind of setting separate from religious influence. We list each of these individuals giving a very brisk narration as we go along:

- **Washington Irving (1783-1859¹):** This gentleman was a timeless and unbounded bestselling author, of his age whose enduring work on Columbus first begun as a tale but progressively acquired an academic status. The popularity of his book suggesting the flat earth idea attributing it to the Christian faith gained credence (on American soil to the point that it was erroneously taught as fact!) and is with us today. It is clear that the flat earth myth was not historical but a product of Irvings'. Irving was not necessarily a regenerate person in the sense we know it from scripture but a renowned poet, diplomat, accomplished author, entertaining short story writer, a historian of sorts and evidently, a literary monumental polymath exploiting the *romantic history* genre; a mixture of fiction and fact. This explains the success 1828 & 1831 Columbus books (among other numerous works), where some claims do not match up to established Scientific facts such as the world's shape or make up.

¹ He wrote a book called “*The life and voyages of Christopher Columbus*” in 1828; https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Irving, accessed on 02/11/2021.

- **John William Draper** (1811-1882)²: An accomplished Chemist and photographer with a lot of accolades, this gentleman turned out an avowed enemy of the faith effectively championing and fostering Irving's imagination in a bid to bash the faith. He resolutely used this false premise to bash and attack the Christian faith.
- **Andrew Dickson White** (1832-1918): One of the prime anti-Christian propagators of the flat earth myth alongside William Draper. Andrew was initially frustrated in the Episcopalian church went on to write a book, "*History of warfare of science with Theology in Christendom*" in 1886. Further, he established the Cornell University as the first exclusively secular institution in the USA. Such was his detest for the faith! He clearly had an axe to grind and set out to discredit the faith. His views certainly sat well with naturalistic educational philosophers like John Dewey.

These three individuals zealously and unflinchingly advanced their cause, though independent from each other triggered by different motivations, but with one agenda. Draper and White relied heavily on Cosmas & Irving to revive a minority view of the world being flat. It must be noted that science was, at the time, in the theistic cradle and held the spherical earth majority view.

The Prime Motives for this False Propaganda

The prime motivations for releasing such propaganda and inscribing it into writing could be attributed to a clear aversion, disregard or hatred for the Christian faith. A second reason could be that they wanted to express themselves in as fanciful a way as they liked. This is especially true of imaginative Irving. In the absence of standards and verification for data sources (although Irving claims to have sourced some of his claims from the Spanish original sources whilst resident there) these unsubstantiated claims were taken in and attributed to the Christian faith, eventually being absorbed into main stream history where they have solidified and cast in concrete. A third reason could be that they needed attention, publicity and support to champion a cause-setting up an independent secular University-Cornell. People have different affinities for fame, celebrity or acknowledgement, much like in the present times, including among men of the collar! In the quest for such accolades or benefits, people sometimes will do or say all sorts of things, including pure lies, to secure support for a cause. Sadly, as just hinted at, even some clergy in our day have fallen for this trap of either exaggerating a need or simply telling half-truths or full blown lies. Since supporters often operate on basis of trust and cordial relationships, they do not take time to verify claims, at times realising too late. Lastly, these men wished Christianity to die a natural death so that no divine rules could exist or influence their society any more. One way was to permanently discredit the faith using

² He authored a poorly researched book called "History of the conflict between Religion and science" (1874) in a bid to attack the faith

popular and effective means such as the print media, and to some extent, it worked! But like Jesus asserted, the Church cannot be vanquished by antics of men more than a man inscribing his hand written signature on the Pyramids of Egypt (Ryle 1990).

Later promoters of the Flat Earth Idea

From the first prominent three, the misinformation and disease caught up into popular media and later into school curriculums including the tertiary institutions. That is what has consistently been taught as the truth, to which this author can attest to. He was pleasantly surprised to learn the opposite upon reading Safarti's write up! So we can safely conclude that the learning institutions are the primary propagators of this view, the global electronic media and others now carry on this work of spreading this false assertion and attribution. To reverse this will take a lot of time, resources and energy. Thankfully, the World Wide Web (WWW) is still free and increasingly accessible to many more people across the world. People need to rise to the occasion and use whatever means they have to correct the impression much like what people have been taught that the missionaries came with a subtle colonizing agenda more than to preach Christ! In some cases, they even obliterate the mission work that some prominent missionaries like Dr David Livingstone did! Instead, they are posited as explorers with an economic or in some extreme cases, political agenda only! Before transitioning, we need to state that some people, in the present day, believe and tenaciously hold on to a flat world view, though in a minority still. We distinguish between Thomas Friedman's 2005 book *The World is Flat* from Washington Irving's 1828 work. The former relates to globalization and it's attendant off shoots while the latter focuses on the physical shape of this terrestrial ball. Either views have support at the present time.

Christopher Columbus and his Adventure to the West

Christopher Columbus was and is a famous Sea Explorer that sailed across the Atlantic Ocean intending to reach India. Instead of sailing south to the tip of Africa and then heading north east along the coast, Columbus elected to sail west in order to get to the East. He, accordingly, left and landed on the north American continent thinking he had arrived in India and sailed along the coast southwards until he reached the southern tip. He then returned. Unknown to him, *Amerigo Vespucci (1451-1512)* had visited the continent before him but for some reason, Columbus' trip was highly regarded and acclaimed. None the less, he was one of the pioneers of this west-east route, no wonder one of the space shuttles was named after him, a path finder of sorts!

Point of Contention about his Epic journey

The primary contention of Columbus epic voyage was the adequacy of his vessels to carry sufficient supplies for the long voyage across the Atlantic Ocean and beyond. The issue was the exact mileage to India and how long each latitude was. The contention, according to credible sources, was never at any time the shape of the earth or the impending doom for any person that ventured to the West in order to get to the East or any point of the earth for that matter.

Rebuttals to this False Imputation on the Christian Church

Dr Sarfati and others have risen to the occasion to prove the following:

1. The 'Earth is flat' myth has wrongly been attributed to the Christianity.
2. A few individuals hatched and promoted this wrong view.
3. Their prime motive was to discredit the Christian faith.
4. Their evil motives were propelled by several motives including hatred, ridicule or sheer disregard for the faith, bad hind relations or frustration as well as the desire to see an independent America from religious influence, hence the setting up of Cornell University as a fully secular institution. Other institutions would follow suit in ensuing generations.
5. The presence from ancient records strongly suggests and proves that the belief that the earth was flat was a minority view rather than the major as propagandists have made many believe.
6. Christopher Columbus contention with people before leaving his port was about the adequacy of supplies in relation to the earth's size rather than the shape of the earth. This needs urgent correction as the wrong ideas have been sent abroad.

What Others have Written or Said on the Flat Earth Theory

Dr Sarfati has done a commendable job in exposing the age long myth by digging deeper. This is highly appreciated deserving everyone's applause. Sarfati effectively proves in a short but succinct piece of writing, quoting right and ancient authorities including modern writers proving that the earth is flat myth has wrongly been attributed to the Church when in fact the original source and cause of this misinformation were at least two disgruntled individuals with an evil agenda to discredit the Christian faith. Draper, White and Washington Irving set in motion a wrong notion that has and will take long to uproot. The Church is now on the defence on what it ought not to be. That is the price of procrastination.

Historian Jeffrey Burton Russell did a marvellous work when he effectively demolished the flat earth claims but the lie still persists. It is interesting that even one of the leading evolutionists, Steven Jay Gould commended this landmark work by Russell.

Value and Benefit of This Consideration

This critical evaluation and exposure of an age old false claim brings sobering lessons and yet a breath of Fresh air. It was sobering in the sense that the Christian Church need not sit idly by while the enemies of the cross have a hay day damaging what is true and then seek to counter react. Much damage is done and has gone into the history books, meaning history has to be rewritten, and that at great cost. Nero once did it over torched Rome with deleterious effects. On the other hand, it was a breath of Fresh air because for a long time people have lumped all sorts of atrocities on the Church, some of which are unjustifiable. This is a case in point that has been exposed and busted at last. Interestingly, some of the flat earth proponents today are avowed evolutionists! A study of history, using relevant sources is most helpful not only at dispelling but corrected wrongly attributed notions. This study achieved both ends.

Takeaway lessons

Below are some more lessons (in point form) worth grasping:

- Never look to mere reacting, be proactive in about everything in life, especially for truth
- Contend for the faith at all times with facts and tangible evidence where possible.
- Be adequately prepared for the contending work
- Do a lot of prior research before undertaking an apologetics task
- It is good to be in the know at all times
- Never take at face value what opponents say or blurt out. At times some assertions cannot be substantiated.
- The Christian faith has always had adherents and enemies all the times. There is need to watch out.
- Washington Irving, John W Draper and Dickson A. White intentionally had a bone to chew with the faith and went out with an evil agenda to discredit

the faith over the earth is flat myth. Draper & White made their aversion manifestly clear, intentionally working to minimize or exorcize religion's influence. Washington Irving appeared not directly working against established religion but some of his writings pointed away from the faith.

- What began as a private affair, put in writing eventually became “gospel truth”.
- We need to be careful what we write, though we must write for the record.
- Christopher Columbus sailed west and discovered America thinking it was India.
- The primary contention between Columbus and the people was the size of the Earth not the shape as this was already a settled matter. Only a minority population held that the earth was flat.
- Ancients used evidence from observation and scripture to demonstrate that the earth was spherical rather than flat like a disc. Some of this evidence included writings of Bede, Aquinas and others, the earths' shadow shape on the moon, the statements in scripture and the symbolism from the English monarchs showing that Jesus was Lord of all sitting and reigning above the circle of the earth.
- Archaeology is handy on many matters and must be treated as an ally rather than as an enemy. It however is a handmaid of the theologian not the reverse. Scripture is above all things, including opinions of men.
- It is awfully important to correctly cite the right reliable sources as we write lest we mislead future generations.

Critique and Suggested ways to deepen our Thoughts

This was a great study and was most helpful to the reader. Exposure helps matters and one wishes many more could have access to helpful materials such as used in this review. Continuous research, reading as well as tracking the evolving scenarios around the world would mitigate the ferocious attacks allayed against the biblical citadel from every angle. We could further add that once one is theologically grounded in the faith, it may be high time to read some works from the opposing side despite being toxic. Like Mcheyne of old once quipped, we need to handle error or heresy like a skilled chemist handles deadly chemicals; wear protective clothing, careful not to contaminate oneself. Repeated exposure to right truth builds ones' discernment to anything different.

Conclusion

From the foregoing evidence, it is abundantly clear that this false attribution to the Church is unwarranted needing to be cast out with the contempt it deserves. What grew out of a private malicious damaging propaganda against the Christian faith soon got into the public domain but has now been arrested and is to be corrected, notwithstanding the damage already done.

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