

Yesterday I talked about arguments Muslims and Christians sometimes make about their written texts - that the only way to explain the preservation of the "originals" is that it was a divine miracle, with the corollary argument that for that reason, these writings really do contain the truth. It is a very, very bad argument, for reasons I explained.

A number of religious traditions also boast of the unbelievable accuracy of the oral traditions of their religion. In this case, the claim is usually not made in order to prove that the tradition must have a divine origin, but to show that what is said in sacred texts found in writing today is exactly what was said back *before* there were any written texts, that the religion hasn't changed an iota over all these centuries. I am always entirely skeptical of these claims. Then again, historians are always skeptical of claims and ask for evidence. If there's good evidence, then there's no reason to be skeptical on principle. But if historians simply accepted what "everyone says," then you wouldn't need historians. You could just listen to what people say!

This issue came up a few weeks ago when a scholar wrote me about the amazing Vedic traditions of India. Let me say at the outset, I am NOT a scholar of Hinduism, and have not studied the Vedic texts. But I am a historian who believes in evidence rather than accepting what everyone says just because everyone has been saying it forever. And so I have my doubts. I will stop doubting as soon as I have evidence. Good evidence, not evidence convincing only to insiders.

Here is what this person said to me in an email:

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