

Review: JAR2412

A HUMAN'S HISTORY WITH — NOT A HUMAN HISTORY OF — GOD

a book review of

God: A Human History

by Reza Aslan

(Random House, 2017)

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In *God: A Human History*, Reza Aslan looks at how a number of human civilizations, past and present, have perceived their God (or gods). He begins with prehistoric man's conceptions, proceeds to more contemporary and mainstream religions, and concludes with pantheism, which supposedly holds the key to understanding God.

The book is clearly not *A Human History of God* but *a particular human's history with God*, namely Aslan himself:

Indeed, the history of human spirituality that I outline in this book closely mirrors my own faith journey from a spiritually inclined child who thought of God as an old man with magical powers, to a devout Christian who imagined God as the perfect human being; from a scholastic Muslim who rejected Christianity in favor of the purer monotheism of Islam, to a Sufi forced to admit that the only way to accept the proposition of a singular, eternal, and indivisible God was to obliterate any distinction between Creator and creation.

Thus, "I arrived at pantheism through Sufism" (pp. 166–67). The author's personalized approach has pros and cons — both of which ironically revolve around its inherent subjectivism. The most obvious pro is that, as it turns out, Aslan's claims and conclusions — his entire epistemological framework — are mainstream, meaning that a majority of readers will embrace them *a priori*.

To more objective readers, however, or those serious about religion, Aslan's subjectivism is problematic on several levels.

Annoying Tone. From the outset, one is struck by what comes off as an arrogant tone, wherein beliefs — almost all of which have an inherently anti-Judeo-Christian bias — are presented as facts. Here are a few examples:

- “There is no actual Garden of Eden, of course. As with so much in our ancient scriptures, the story is meant to be read as myth” (52).
- “Scholars have known for centuries that there were two distinct deities worshipped by the Israelites in the Bible, each with a different name, different origins, and different traits” (116).
- “Whoever wrote the Gospel of John (it was not the disciple John; he was long dead by the time the Gospel was written some time round 100 C.E.)” (130).

None of the aforementioned would be problematic had they been presented as beliefs — even widely held beliefs — instead of truths, which they simply are not.

Who Reflects Whose Image? Aslan’s subjectivism leads to more substantive problems, beginning with his first premise that “whether you believe in one God or many Gods or no gods at all, it is we who have fashioned God in our image, not the other way around” (xvi).

The only plausible way to substantiate this assertion is by lumping together all the world’s religions — many of which are antithetical to one another. This is, in fact, what Aslan does: “That [humanity has made God in its image], more than anything else, explains why, throughout human history, *religion* has been a force both for boundless good and for unspeakable evil” (xvi, emphasis added).

To be sure, the notion that many religions have fashioned — and continue to fashion — God in their own image is self-evident. That half of the book is devoted to showing how hunter and gatherer societies respectively worshipped hunter and fertility gods — because that is what was important to and thus reflected them — soon becomes redundant.

The author tries to approach the major religions with the same lens, but Christianity defies his paradigm. While all other religions seek to empower, support, or at least confirm the preexisting way of life of their adherents, the heart of Christianity is *agape* (often translated as *love* but better understood as *altruism*) for one’s enemies, and to one’s own disadvantage — even unto death, as seen in the sacrifice of its Lord. It is unclear why any part of humanity ever would come up with such a counterintuitive, selfless worldview.¹

The traditional Christian answer, of course, is that it comes from God; and in as much as we uphold this command, so do we reflect His image, thereby reaching our full human potential. As for all the other “bad stuff” taught by other *religions*, Christianity condemned and dismissed them as self-serving, man-made creeds two millennia before Aslan wrote his book (e.g., 1 John 4:5–8).

“Religions”? All this is missed by yet another subtlety: although convenient, the word “religions” — in the plural and as used by all and sundry today — is an inherently loaded, contradictory, and ultimately *antireligious* term. “Religions” implies that any and all belief systems in God are fundamentally the same. But if that is true — and considering that each teaches conflicting beliefs that obviously cannot all be right — then it follows that all must be wrong, hence the descent into relativism in the modern era.

It wasn’t always thus; many religions do not acknowledge other “religions” — certainly not as “alternative” approaches to God. In Islamic jurisprudence, *al-din* (Arabic for *the* religion) is synonymous with Islam; *din* as a generic is not used to refer to other “religions,” all of which are seen as various distortions of the truth (Islam).

Premodern Christianity also never acknowledged “other religions.” During their millennial war with Islam, Christians saw Muslims not as followers of “another religion” but as deluded followers of a “false prophet.” More generally, to follow anything short of Christianity (Truth) was to follow falsehoods, any form of which was unworthy of nominal recognition.

In short, those who believe in traditional Christianity already agree with the otherwise self-evident points that Aslan belabors. Conversely, those who see Christianity as “just another religion” — ultimately on a par with tree worship or human sacrifice — lump it with and blame it for the actions of the rest (as when liberals attack Christianity whenever Islam acts up, thereby making “religion” look bad).

Anti-Judeo-Christian Polemic. While the above rebuttals deal with subtle and widespread confusions that are hardly limited to Aslan, when it comes to his treatment of Judaism and Christianity, his “subjectivity” (now informed by his Muslim background) morphs into flagrant bias and reads like a thinly disguised polemic.

A critic of Israel, Aslan is contemptuous of the Hebrews — “this tiny, insignificant Semitic tribe” (127) — and their God: “Yahweh is a jealous god who regularly demands the wholesale slaughter of every man, woman, and child who does not worship him alone” (34).

A supposed Muslim convert to Christianity who, “feeling bitter and disillusioned,” later “abandoned Christianity and returned to Islam,” Aslan’s Muslim background is especially evident in his attempt to discredit Christianity. He relies on and presents Gnostic texts as more authentic than the Gospels and champions Islam’s chief complaint against its historic archrival: that Christ was not divine (Qur’an 5:17, 5:73, 4:171, etc.). After suggesting that only John ascribes divinity to Christ (without mentioning, say, Col. 2:9 or Phil. 2:5–8), he writes:

To be clear, John is claiming that the maker of heaven and earth spent thirty years in the backwoods of Galilee, living as a Jewish peasant; that the one and only God entered the womb of a woman and was born of her; that the omniscient Lord of the universe suckled at his mother’s breast, ate and slept and shat as a helpless infant.
(131)

In both sneering tone and content, the above quote is a verbatim duplicate of Islam's most standard polemic against Christianity since the late seventh century. Aslan so slips back into Muslim mode here that he even employs the Qur'an's most famous epithet for God — *rubb al-'alim*, "Lord of the universe" — in his tirade against Christ's divinity.

If the most hackneyed and discredited theories are employed to cast doubt on the Old and New Testaments, Aslan, a well-known apologist for Islam,² presents only the most orthodox, traditional account of Islam's origins — despite its being the most obviously manmade of all contemporary "religions": loyalty to fellow Muslims, enmity to non-Muslims, and raids (jihad) on the latter to empower the former are entirely built on the tribal mores of its seventh-century founder, Muhammad bin Abdullah.

Still a "Success." Despite its many shortcomings, *God: A Human History* complements the contemporary West's zeitgeist, typified by a vague New Age pantheism.

Atheism — itself once all the rage — has long been losing ground; an *atheology* that acknowledges only the physical has proven to be insufficient for humans who have both physical *and* metaphysical sides. As a result, since the 1960s, atheism has been steadily augmented with, and given a "spiritual" veneer by, pantheism, one sufficiently vague enough to bridge both atheistic and theistic impulses. Listen to Aslan himself:

One need not arrive at pantheism through religion at all, but through philosophy....Or ignore God altogether and look to science and its unifying conception of nature....Either way this fundamental truth remains: All is One, and One is all. It is simply up to the individual to decide what "the One" is: how it should be defined, and how it should be experienced. (168)

And there it is; atheism's war on monotheism was ever only a phase in a longer project. Having ousted God from His place — thereby creating a hole that materialism admittedly could never fill — pantheism has now come to the rescue and elevated man into the vacancy.

Listen again to Aslan: "I am, in my essential reality, God made manifest....Believe in God or not. Define God how you will. Either way...You need not fear God. You *are* God" (171).

How could such a message — even if full of holes — *not* appeal to the "itching ears" of the world? — *Raymond Ibrahim*

Raymond Ibrahim, a scholar of Islamic doctrine and history, is author of *The Al Qaeda Reader* (Doubleday, 2007), *Crucified Again: Exposing Islam's New War on Christians* (Regnery, 2013), and most recently, *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West* (Da Capo, 2018). He is a Writing Fellow at the David Horowitz Freedom Center, the Middle East Forum, and the Hoover Institution.

NOTES

- 1 Even Buddhism, which ostensibly teaches altruism, does so in an *egoistical* sense — because being selfless is good *for the self* — whereas in Christianity, love/ altruism transcends the self.
- 2 Aslan’s pro-Islamic, anti-Judeo-Christian biases — to say nothing of the many errors of facts this scholar often makes — are well documented in Robert Spencer, “Reza Aslan Blames Rise of ‘Islamophobia’ on Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, Frank Gaffney and Daniel Pipes,” Jihad Watch, March 12, 2017, <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2017/03/reza-aslan-blames-rise-of-islamophobia-on-robert-spencerpamela-geller-frank-gaffney-and-daniel-pipes>.