



CROSSWINDS
a foundation for faith and culture

CrossingCurrents

MARCH 2018

Volume 11 Issue 1

REZA ASLAN—CREATOR OR CREATIVE STORYTELLER BY BOB WALDREP

Once again Reza Aslan has performed a historical investigation into religion. In past books he has created controversy regarding his take on Islam and Jesus. In his latest book, *God: A Human History* (GHH), he goes big taking on the subject of God. But, is this truly meant to be an account of the historical record or is it an account of a record shaped by the author’s own ideas and beliefs?

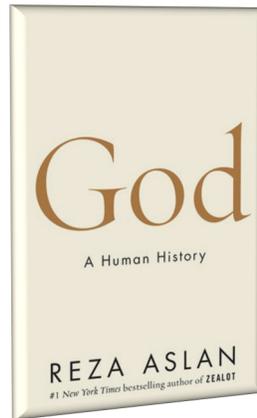
The inside front jacket of the book is telling as to the author’s presumption of how God is popularly viewed today – particularly, as we will see, among Christians: “As Aslan writes, ‘Whether we are aware of it or not, and regardless of whether we’re believers or not, what the vast majority of us think about when we think about God is a divine version of ourselves.’”

Interestingly, the author admits up front the goal of his writing isn’t simply to educate the reader about the historical record, – at least as he views it – but to lead us to the “truth” about God (spoiler alert, the view held by the author) which is, we are all God. As he writes in the introduction, “...this book is more than just a history of how we have humanized God. It is also an appeal to stop foisting our human compulsions upon the divine, and to develop a more pantheistic view of God.”¹ Pantheism, he later explains, is the belief that God is all or all is God which would mean, not only is the created also the Creator, but the Creator is also the created.

DEATH IS JUST ANOTHER LIFE

It is no surprise Aslan begins his history with a collision of particles that create the essence of life, which evolves as it oozes, slithers and ultimately stands erect as man and woman – mankind, or

Adam and Eve as he refers to them. These early humans, he tells us, are hunters; they are nomads who bury their dead with the few possessions they own. Aslan informs this is due to their assumption that, “the dead are not really dead but in another realm, one that the living can access through dreams and visions.”²



they are embodied souls...a belief so primal and innate, so deep-rooted and widespread that it must be considered nothing less than the hallmark of human experience.”³ It is this belief in a soul that will lead to belief in God.⁴

Aslan acknowledges his belief that the evidence or desire for God – whoever/ whatever that may be – is within man from the beginning. This would seemingly track with what the Apostle Paul wrote, “...that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.”⁵

Paul observed that, despite the evidence to the contrary, men began to believe that the created – “birds”, “four-footed animals”, “crawling creatures” –

was god. Rather than seeing that the creation clearly evidenced there is a creator, Paul said man came to believe the creation was the creator and worshipped it.⁶

It may appear that Aslan comes to a similar conclusion when he describes Adam and Eve fashioning their gods in the image of the animals they hunted/ observed and then, as they moved into a more agrarian civilization, finding their gods in the land and crops that they harvested. However, there is an important distinction between what Aslan believes and Paul is stating.

Whereas Aslan asserts man began worshipping the creation and later moved to worshipping someone/something other than the creation, the biblical record reports man began worshipping God as Creator and later some began to worship the created. As one goes through the book it becomes abundantly clear the real purpose is – not so much a history of God as it is – an attempt to “prove” the errors and inadequacies of Christianity (and, to a lesser degree, Judaism and Islam) while providing the correct answer to the question posed in the third section of the book: “What (not who) is God”.

We find that the author is not writing to give the reader an unbiased account of the historical facts; rather, he is schooling us on the correct view of god – his view. As Alexander Waugh appropriately notes in reviewing the book for *The Spectator*, “...[what] started as an informative history of an idea, transforms itself into a self-help manual and an autobiographical consecration, delivered from the pulpit of the author’s personal epiphany...God is everything that exists.”⁷

Continued, p. 2

Inside this issue:

Reza Aslan—Creator or Creative Storyteller	1
What Do Americans Believe About God	2
Help for Veterans!	4



INVEST IN CROSSWINDS

To give, send your check payable to Crosswinds Foundation P.O. Box 12143, Birmingham, AL 35202
Give by credit card using our secure online giving at:
Crosswindsfoundation.org/donate



ONE GOD—LONGTIME COMING

To prop up his own view, Aslan realizes he must discredit monotheism – the belief there is only one God. He knows to do this he must also call into question the Bible and those who believe it to be true. This is nothing new for Aslan. He took the same approach in his 2013 book *Zealot* – also offered as a historical record – in which he presents the central teachings of the Christian church as fabrications steeped in a desire for political power. He asserts the same in *GHH* writing, “The truth is the early Church’s desire to maintain a fealty to the Jewish belief in one God may have been as much for political reasons as it was for theological.”⁸ [Ed. Note: Find information on obtaining our review of *Zealot* after the Endnotes.]

While *Zealot* was intended only to call Christianity into question, *GHH* also raises issues about Judaism as a monotheistic religion. Aslan takes great pain to prove Judaism began with the worship of many gods and evolved into the belief in one God who, he claims, maintained many of the characteristics of the “other gods”. For example, he states, “...by no stretch of the imagination could the early Israelites be considered monotheistic. At best...they worshipped one God, El, without necessarily denying the existence of the other gods in the Canaanite pantheon.”⁹ He further writes, “While there’s some evidence for the presence of a ‘Yahweh-only’ sect in Jerusalem, the monarchy itself neither discouraged nor

encouraged the worship of other gods.”¹⁰

On this point he cites Morton Smith, who he refers to as “the renowned biblical scholar”. Some certainly disagree with this assessment of Smith – perhaps best known for his discovery of the controversial *Mar Saba Letter*, a document allegedly written by Clement of Alexandria and believed to contain parts of a secret gospel of Mark. The *Mar Saba Letter*, like the *Gnostic Gospels* it is associated with, is disputed among scholars – some of whom allege it is a fake forged by Smith.¹¹

the Mar Saba letter contains...language... interpreted by some as indicating Jesus was gay

As are the *Gnostic Gospels*, the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark is claimed to have been destroyed by the early church for having additional and conflicting information not found in the biblical accounts. For example, the *Mar Saba Letter*, or Secret Gospel of Mark, contains controversial language, interpreted by some as, indicating Jesus was gay. The text in question refers to the account of Lazarus being raised from the tomb.

In Smith’s translation the person raised was a young man who looked upon Jesus and “...loved him and began to beseech

him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.”¹²

It should be noted Smith also authored *Jesus the Magician* in which he theorizes the miracles Jesus did were nothing more than a magician’s tricks. Considering his own view of God, it is little wonder Aslan turns to scholars who promote the idea Jesus was a magician and who generate evidence of the Gnostic Gospels.

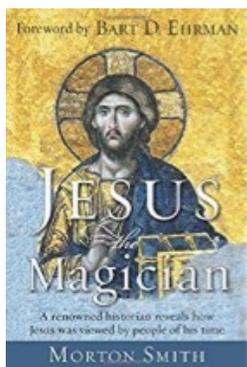
Relying upon scholars such as Smith, Aslan provides the answer as to where Judaism got this idea there was only one God? Aslan tells us it was born out of the Babylonian Exile and the desire to survive. As he puts it, “...for these monotheistic reformers suffering exile in Babylon, it was better to devise a single vengeful god full of contradictions than to give up that god and thus their identity as a people. And so all the historical arguments against a belief in a single god were suddenly swept away by the overwhelming desire for this tiny insignificant Semitic tribe to survive.”¹³

This all may sound well and good but it denies the fact that Judaism was founded on the belief in one God – the one God, not a bunch of gods, appeared to Abra-

Culture Tracks			
WHAT DO AMERICANS MEAN WHEN THEY SAY THEY BELIEVE IN GOD			
	BELIEVE IN GOD	DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD	NOT SURE
ALL ADULTS	80%	19%	1%
POPULATION SEGMENTS	BELIEVE IN GOD AS DESCRIBED IN THE BIBLE	BELIEVE IN OTHER HIGHER POWER/SPIRITUAL FORCE	DO NOT BELIEVE IN HIGHER POWER/ SPIRITUAL FORCE
ALL ADULTS	56%	33%	10%*
CHRISTIANS	80%	18%	1%*
PROTESTANTS	85%	13%	<1%*
CATHOLICS	69%	28%	2%*
JEWS	33%	56%	10%*
RELIGIOUS “NONES”	17%	53%	27%*

Polling Conducted by Pew Research Center, Released 2018 *In each category 1% either did not answer or were not sure

ham. The Shema recited by Jews attests to this, “Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut 6:4) This is the central tenet of Judaism. It is the first of all commands, “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3)



Did other people in that day, including some Jews, worship other gods? Of course they did. Does that mean there is more than one God or does it negate God’s declaration that He is the only true God? Of course not! With-

out question, throughout the Old Testament period there were Jews who were drawn to the gods of their neighbors. That fact does not make those gods real or mean the religion of Judaism was initially polytheistic (worshipping many gods) despite the fact it does not fit into Mr. Aslan’s narrative.

CHRISTIANITY RUINS IT

However, having finally arrived at the belief in one God, or monotheism, Aslan quickly points out it didn’t last long. Of this new concept of God, he writes, “It is an extraordinary development in the history of religions – one that took hundreds of thousands of years to evolve; one that would be overturned a mere five hundred years later by an upstart sect of apocalyptic Jews calling themselves Christians.”¹⁴ With that, he turns his attention to Christianity, this “upstart sect” which turns from the worship of one God to the worship of – what he believes to be three – the Trinity, displacing the new monotheism of Judaism.

Aslan now rewrites the history of the Christian Church in a single chapter pushing forth alternatives often claimed by detractors of Christianity, including:

An appeal to the Gnostics as evidence the Church originally believed Jesus was only a man.

Quoting from *The Secret Gospel of John*, (one of the Gnostic Gospels) as proof there was a lesser god – the Demiurge, “who foolishly believed himself to be the only god in the universe”.¹⁵

And, as do so many who believe Jesus was just a man, or not God, he claims

the lie that Jesus is God came from the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. and the Emperor Constantine.

Former lawyer, now author and Christian apologist, Roy Williams observed, “...as regards Christianity and I suspect the other major faiths also, Aslan has a tendency to attack straw men, or to posit theories not held by the vast majority of qualified experts.” Williams also finds, “...troubling errors and oddities creep into Aslan’s discussion of Christianity” and some of his assertions about Christianity and Judaism, “...are highly questionable, if not downright false”.¹⁶

WHAT ABOUT ISLAM

Having disposed of Judaism and Christianity, Aslan now turns his attention to the religion of his youth, Islam. Central to his discussion is the Islamic concept of “tawhid”, the underlying principle upon which Islam is based – God is one. In fact, Aslan refers to tawhid as Islam “kind of doubling down on the very concept of monotheism”.¹⁷ “What this means in principle”, he writes, “is that there can be no physical similarity between Allah and his creation, which is why...the Quran expressly rejects the belief that God created human beings in his image...[God] has no body, is of no substance, takes no shape in any form, human or otherwise.”¹⁸

This is an accurate representation of what Islam has taught, and Muslims have understood, about the nature of God since its beginning. Aslan recognizes this is the majority opinion among Muslims, yet he calls this interpretation of tawhid into question due to the Quran, at times, attributing human characteristics to God – i.e. “hands”, “eyes”, “face” – which he says should be interpreted metaphorically. He argues that most Muslims deny this interpretation and insist on the words in the Quran being taken literally. Supporting this he references Abu al-Hassan (a spiritual leader during the 9th century) as teaching, “Allah has a face because the Quran says so. And if such a literal reading happens to contradict the core tenet of tawhid and thus everything that Islam as a religion was founded upon, so be it.”¹⁹

The fact of the matter is, Aslan could not care less whether tawhid is to be taken literally or metaphorically. It is

brought into the discussion to show that this position, held by Muslim theologians and the vast majority of Muslims today, “not only proves just how durable our innate evolutionary impulse to humanize the divine can be; it also lays bare the paradox at the heart of the Islamic definition of God.”²⁰

And what is that paradox? Aslan believes, “If God is indivisible, and God is Creator, how can there be any division between Creator and creation? Are they not necessarily one and the same?”²¹ The implied answer, of course, is yes. This is quite a leap to make but the author appeals to Sufism for support. This is a small sect of Islam that asks not “who” is God but “what” is God.

GOD IS ALL

The answer they arrived at was, “if God is *one*, then God must be *all*.”²² In other words, he concludes, “God is not the creator of everything that exists. God is everything that exists.”²³ This is pantheism and, not surprisingly, it is the view of the author. It probably also comes as no surprise that he came to embrace pantheism through the teachings of Sufism.²⁴

With this conclusion as to what God is, we have come full circle in Aslan’s history. He writes, “This is essentially what our prehistoric ancestors believed. Their primitive animism was predicated on the belief that all things – living or not – share a single essence: a single soul, if you will.”²⁵ The last chapter simply affirms what we were told in the first.

The true purpose of this book is evident from its concluding paragraph – it is not to inform about history so much as it is to teach readers that they are God: “Believe in God or not. Define God how you will. Either way, take a lesson from our mythological ancestors Adam and Eve and eat the forbidden fruit. You need not fear God. You *are* God.”²⁶

As Waugh notes, it is little more than “a sermon from the pulpit of the author’s personal epiphany.” Similarly, in reviewing the book for the *NY Times*, Emma Green writes, “While [Aslan] claims he’s not interested in proving or disproving the existence of God, by the end, his metaphysical commitments become clear.” She also observes, “Aslan shows little interest in religious traditions that don’t fit his pattern, such as

Hinduism and Buddhism...Instead, Aslan bushwhacks his way through intellectual history in pursuit of his point.”²⁷

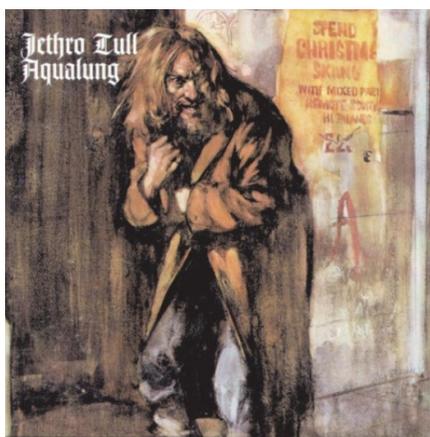
Bushwhacking history and presenting his own views and speculations under the guise of scholarship are not new to Aslan. Professor Dale Martin came to similar conclusions regarding *Zealot*. Martin, as an openly gay professor at Yale University, certainly could not be accused of partnering with Evangelicals or conservatives to discredit Aslan’s scholarship when he writes, “Some of Mr. Aslan’s other claims are just speculations with no supporting evidence, more at home in fiction than in scholarship...By profession, Mr. Aslan is not a scholar of ancient Judaism or Christianity. He teaches creative writing. And he is a good writer. *Zealot* is not innovative or original scholarship but it makes an entertaining read.”²⁸

Aslan’s speculations about God being a creation of some unknown “impulse” in man are nothing new and can be found in many writings. In fact, after reading a few pages of *GHH* I thought of something similar I had read:

“In the beginning Man created God; and in the image of Man created him. And Man gave unto God a multitude of names, that he might be Lord of all the earth when it was suited to Man... And Man became the God that he had created and with his miracles did rule over all the earth. But as all these things came to pass, the Spirit that did cause man to create his God lived on within all men...”

These are not words I had read in some religious text, nor are they the words of one starting his own religion. They are words I first read in 1971 on the back cover of the Jethro Tull album I had just purchased, *Aqualung*. The few verses penned by Jethro Tull took much less time to read and offered me as

much to reflect upon as Aslan did developing his theory over the first one hundred forty, plus pages. *GHH* offered nothing in its speculations about God that made it any more credible than those of *Aqualung*.



When I first read the verses by Jethro Tull I had little exposure to religion and had given little thought to who or what God is. I read “...Man created God” and simply thought “Cool!” and moved on. The musings of Jethro Tull, like the words of Reza Aslan, had nothing to offer me. Not true of the Bible.

A few years later I began to read the Bible. The words that I read impacted me profoundly and still do. Through them I know that Reza Aslan, while a creative storyteller, is not God, nor are you or I. They instruct me that there is only one God, that He is my Creator who made man in His own image (Genesis 1:27) and that I can know Him because He makes Himself known. As Paul said, God has placed within mankind the knowledge there is a God – He declares this in creation.

God did not give us this knowledge simply so we would have information about Him; He has made this known so we can know Him – enter into relationship with Him through Jesus. On this point, the Bible is certain, “For God so loved the world – loves you and me – He gave His only begotten son, that

whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”²⁹

I think Green makes a pointed observation in her review, “Readers searching for God in Aslan’s history will most likely be disappointed. But in this, there’s a hidden blessing. Unlike Aslan’s search, theirs will continue once the book is done.”³⁰

It should be evident that if you are looking for a good history book about God, it is best you look elsewhere. However, if you want to read how someone became a pantheist through Islam, and you want the story to be disguised as a history of God, this just might be the book for you.

If you don’t know Jesus, keep searching.

End Notes

1. *God: A Human History (GHH)* p. xvi
2. *Ibid.* p. 6
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.* p. 47
5. Romans 1:19-20
6. Romans 1:21-25
7. spectator.co.uk/2017/11/reza-aslan-doesnt-fear-god-but-should-he-fear-his-fellow-muslims/
8. *GHH* p.140
9. *Ibid.* p. 121
10. *Ibid.* p.126
11. www.nytimes.com/2007/03/31/us/31/beliefs.html
12. gnosis.org/library/secm.htm
13. *GHH* p.127
14. *Ibid.* p.128
15. *Ibid.* p.137
16. theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/reza-aslans-god-a-human-history-too-glib-on-contrary-views/news-story/71022594afb94ed64acafc47dea25b4
17. *Ibid.* p.156
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.* p. 157
20. *Ibid.* p.157-158
21. *Ibid.* p.158
22. *Ibid.* p.163
23. *Ibid.* p.164
24. *Ibid.* p.167
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.* p.171
27. nytimes.com/2017/12/19/books/review/reza-aslans-god-a-human-history.html
28. nytimes.com/2013/08/06/books/reza-aslans-zealot-the-life-and-times-of-jesus-of-nazareth.html?_r=0&utm_source=E-Letter+12-10-13+Vol+6:4&utm_campaign=09-T3+Newsletter&utm_medium=email
29. John 3:16
30. *Ibid.* nytimes.com/2007/03/31/us/31/beliefs.html

Read our review of *The Zealot*: crosswindsfoundation.org/newsletters/CrossingCurrents_Vol6_4.htm#LETTER.BLOCK22



Bob Waldrep is President and Founder of Crosswinds Foundation. Bob has written extensively about cultural apologetics. He is coauthor of *The Truth Behind the Secret* and *Spiritual Buffet*, and a contributing author to *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* and *The Complete Evangelism Guidebook*. bob@crosswindsfoundation.org



HELP VETERANS STRUGGLING WITH PTSD OR MORAL INJURY

This Memorial Day, honor those who gave their lives by helping veterans who are struggling with PTS or Moral Injury? **Give a gift of hope now** to help us continue providing free DVDs to our veterans. Learn more at: invisiblescarsproject.org

“I’m glad I showed this film to my children. I wish I had it ten years ago. It would have made our reintegration so much easier.” Staff Sergeant, US Army—Three Deployments