

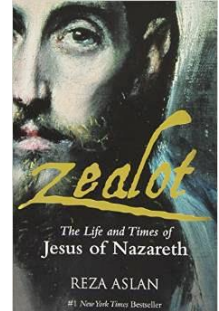
# Aslan, Reza, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*

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*Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

In a most charming and incisive TED presentation, Chimamanda Adichie reminded her listeners of "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)." This is nowhere more true than in the cultural identity narratives created by religion and reactions to them. If one were to take an overview of these reactions we might come up with rough categories like:

1. Those whose faith is part and parcel of their full culture and daily existence, an unquestioned identity narrative. "It's life."
2. Those who consciously choose, commit to and practice a religion or spirituality inherited or chosen. "I believe... I practice..."
3. Those who have religion in their inherited identity narrative but for whom it rarely invades every day life in a conscious way. "I'm not a practicing..."
4. Those who are aware of it, but have no sense of belonging to it. "I know it's there, but I'm not involved in it."
5. Those who consciously reject any specific religious belief with a contrary belief system (atheism) about the nonexistence of a god and irrelevance of religion and either passively or militantly resist it. "There's no compelling evidence." Or, "It's a pack of lies."
6. Those who proclaim they cannot or do not know about the existence of a god or the validity of a religious belief system (agnosticism). "I dunno'."



Both commitment and resistance stemming from one or more of the positions stated above have complicated the hard work of the search for the historical Jesus. Aslan's book takes us to a new level, perhaps a new perspective to add to the existing ones. This perspective is made by the most powerful unified presentation that I've seen to date, both scholarly and readable (even the endnotes are compelling) of the social, cultural, political, economic and religious context that Jesus was born into, how it evolved during his short life, and in which he carried out his activity. It is a context of military occupation, repression and oppression, social inequality, religious and financial elitism, popular and revolutionary movements, messiahs, gurus, magicians and charlatans. It is credible to the reader not only because of the historical evidence provided, but because it could be a description of times much like our own, testimony to the fact that human behavior has not changed a lot, if any. In other words Aslan's detailed contextual account gives us a much better sense of the historical Jesus than we are likely to come by elsewhere.

Jesus is not the sole subject of Aslan's presentation. Rather, Jesus can be understood neither historically nor in his influence on history without a close look at the other figures both contemporary and subsequent. Thus there is incisive treatment of such characters as James the brother of Jesus, Paul the "Apostle to the Gentiles" and those Roman and Jewish figures who were actors in the context and affected the course of how the identity of Jesus was perceived and developed in subsequent generations and centuries.

Is the Jesus of history less credible than the Jesus of faith? If history can show accretions and shifts, even the contradictions that have gone into the documents and built traditions of

Christianity from the very outset, what then do we make of the Jesus of faith? Should we assume a naked scientific bias and declare that it is all poppycock? Or, should we be cynical about the historians like Napoleon who insisted that, "History is a set of lies that we all agree on," perhaps echoing Voltaire's view of history as, "the pack of lies we play on the dead." Or, should we take a "true believer" perspective and dismiss the historians as somehow depraved and lost in the past, deprived of meaningful faith? Is there a peaceful, even enriching coexistence possible between the two?

Perhaps the life story of the author, revealed in the opening pages of the book, provides a clue as to how we manage not just a religious identity, but the many cultural identities we bear that vacillate between data and aspiration. Born into a dispossessed Muslim heritage, Aslan became what one would describe as a "true believer" in a rather fundamentalist Christianity. When the logic of this was no longer tenable, he abandoned it, but later renewed his research into the meaning of this Jesus, who shaped so much of history, to discover how he himself and the Jesus of his research were shaped by history. In other words, our identity will, throughout a lifetime, travel like rivers merged from many streams. Our identity waters may become dammed up by contradictions in places and may cut paths through unfamiliar places to arrive at the sea of our current if not ultimate meaning and destination. Aslan's closing line is both personal and reassuring: "... Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the *man* – is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as is Jesus the Christ. He is, in short, someone worth believing in."

Aslan's Jesus-in-context will provide relief and new perspectives to many readers. It may appear blasphemous to others. Yet here, in both the author's story and the story he tells of Jesus, it seems to me that we have a clue into how we both develop and live out our cultural identities, religious ones as well as the many others we carry with us or enter into. Frederick Douglass (US Abolitionist, 1818-1895) insightfully remarked, "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present." This is what both religious believers and historical researchers attempt to do while as practitioners they bear a common human propensity for deviations into dogmatism, possessiveness, power, pied pipers and dictators, corrupt practice and the dismissal or repression of others. Neither religious belief nor scientific assertions relieve the itch for fleeing complexity.

Inevitably we are all, at our best, both believers and searchers. Whether searching for the truth in tradition or claiming that tradition is truth, we continue to build our identity narratives, inevitably shaped by the contexts we are immersed in. Conflict about these things can lead to further enlightenment as well deteriorate into violent jihad, crusades, and genocide. Both science and faith have shown their capacity for creating tools that can be used in either direction.

Aslan thus confirmed for me that there can be a rich co-existence if not intermarriage between history and faith. In the case of Jesus, this belief led me to create a Christmas message last year for my friends, wedding both history and tradition, as I take meaning and inspiration from them. It read as follows:

*"Do you know this guy? He's having a birthday soon and a lot of my friends are marking it. If you are making merry, enjoy the celebration and think a bit about the kind of guy he was..."*

- *He had impressive ancestry, but was born under suspicious circumstances into a small-town, working class family.*
- *Lived in an occupied country, run by an insecure, ruthless puppet governor.*
- *Was a child refugee in a foreign country, yet became a precocious student.*
- *Followed an activist who was jailed and executed.*
- *Achieved insight through meditation, discipline and self-denial.*
- *Refused to be tempted by consumerism, lived on the road, advocated simple lifestyle.*
- *Went by foot or used inexpensive, shared transportation.*
- *Loved and admired by his friends, he could attract a crowd and hold their attention.*
- *Demonstrated how sharing creates abundance, had a healing touch.*
- *Protested the abuse of women, loved his buddies, was good with kids.*
- *Partied with disreputable riff-raff, unflagging advocate of poor folk and the down and out.*
- *Told great stories, delegated well to his team, calmed turbulent waters.*
- *Prized humility, revolution and peacemaking, probity, transparency and generosity.*
- *Respected tradition and decried its perversion and corruption.*
- *Fished up enough money to pay his taxes.*
- *Overcame ethnic bias, accepted and assisted outsiders and foreigners.*
- *Opposed oppressive legislation and legalism, saddle burr of the rich and powerful.*
- *Blew the whistle on hypocrisy, upset the high and mighty. Could hold his own in an argument.*
- *Betrayed by a trusted friend for hard cash, condemned by a kangaroo court, tortured and executed as a political prisoner.*
- *Down for the count of three, he made a comeback and lives on in those who share his spirit."*

Aslan's book does not explain in any great detail why the movement initiated by Jesus of Nazareth succeeded in his times and why Christian identity narratives persistently morphed their way into the present, while those of so many Messianic and revolutionary activists before, during and after Jesus' life were short-lived and disappeared. This is another book, no doubt, but I want to read it when it is written.