

## **God: A Human History**

Reza Aslan, **God: A Human History**, London: Bantam Press, 2017. xvi + 298 pp. ISBN 978-0-5930-7983-6

Reviewed by: Mr. Usman Hasan\*

Reza Aslan has stirred up the debate on the history of religions and their emergence in different cultures and civilizations. In contemporary environment, his recent book “God: A Human History” has given a different and interesting perspective. This book sheds light on human history by discussing many theories about the evolution of religion and the concept of God. Primarily it is his own spiritual journey described with a historical perspective. Giving a good insight on the different concepts about evolution of the human’s concept about “God” he has tried to evaluate different existing theories.

The book is divided in three parts along with the introduction. First part “The Embodied Soul” deals with the debate of idea about God in human mind during the evolution. Second part “The Humanized God” gives an interesting overlook about the concept of “humanized God”. The third part “What is God” features the conclusion of the author about the concept of “Oneness” as found in history. All three parts are further divided in three chapters each.

Aslan has beautifully described how the concept of God was intertwined with the human traits and characteristics in different cultures and civilizations during the course of history. He says in the introduction, “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” (p. xiii). Giving an evolutionary perspective, he has made an effort to connect the concept of God with human mind and soul. He has further elaborated different efforts on the course of history to dehumanize the concept of God and described his own journey as “the only way I could truly experience the divine was to dehumanize God in my spiritual consciousness” (p. xvi).

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Evolution of idea about God is one of the most interesting aspects debated in the book which challenges many philosophical notions including the cultural notion, concept of fear and theory of mind. Aslan links the very first idea about God with the idea of human soul “what seems clear, however, is that belief in the soul may be humanity’s first belief. Indeed, if the cognitive theory of religion is correct, belief in the soul is what led to belief in God” (p.47). He has questioned the modern theories that how in the first place humans understood the idea of soul? Aslan has also touched the ideas of evolution of agriculture. He has argued that the rise of agriculture seems more probably to be arisen by the gathering of people for religious practices (p. 64). The empirical evidences presented along with the discussion have made his arguments more sound and appealing.

The third part of the book has tended to differentiate between generally considered three monolithic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Aslan has more relied upon the historical evidences instead of religious ones and then moved into the debate on how the effort of moving towards Oneness occurred for the first time in Judaism. However, with the passage of time it lead towards the concept of “council of gods” instead on one and only deity (p. 125). Then he has given an insight about Christianity which later on faced the theological questions, and the political influence settling those questions could not end on the true Oneness and also defined God again as humanized (p.146). At the end Aslan concludes his journey in Islam and has given a brief overview of theological debate which emphasized over the Oneness of God that lead the debate to explain the relation of creation with the Creator. He has described that the issue of reconciliation of God’s unity with that of His creation lead to Sufism (pp. 158-159). He has given his view that such questions were under discussion in Sufism since beginning but the description in philosophical terms came from Mohi-ud-Din Ibn-e-Arabi to whom Aslan called as “one of the greatest philosophical minds in history.” This solution lies in term of the doctrine Wahadat al-Wujud, or the Unity of Being. In conclusion the author has concluded his journey on the concept of “Pantheism” that “Nothing can be substantially independent of God because there is nothing else but God” (p.166).

While reading the book one can argue that neither it is a philosophical discussion neither it covers all the religions and cultures emerged over history. However, it would be enough to describe what an individual will like to explore about the idea of God through the concept of evolution. From religious point of view, there is perhaps much focus on critical discussion and ideas which rather seem contradictory to the notions of religious doctrines. For example, the concept of Pantheism and that of Oneness described by Ibn-e-Arabi are differentiated by many scholars<sup>1</sup>. However, the soft and convincing style of the book is appealing especially for those who are interested in finding the spiritual journey of humanity in historical perspective with available scientific and empirical evidences. The book is capable of appealing a general reader as well a scholar alike. Furthermore the diversity of discussion given has made the book more interesting to read.

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<sup>1</sup> For example see Wiliam Chittick at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/> and Suhey1 Umar at <http://muslim-institute.org/PublicationDetail?publication=172/Report-of-Seminar-On-Science-&-Metaphysics-A-Muslim-Perspective---Session-02>