

## Should believers write the history of their own religions?

In 2013, Reza Aslan appeared on Fox News to discuss his new book, a historical account of Jesus' life. Lauren Green's first question was, "you are a Muslim, so why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?" The interview illustrates the evidently contentious issue of whether the history of a religion should only be approached by a believer of that same religion. There is clearly no universal moral imperative concerning who *should* write a religion's history. Rather, the question gives rise to intellectual and religious issues regarding who may be better qualified to produce such a history. Judeo-Christian examples will be used throughout, although I think my conclusion, namely that anyone can legitimately write the history of a religion, is universally applicable.

Firstly, it is important to establish what writing a historical account *actually* entails. I would suggest any history (religious or otherwise) is never a *truly* objective reproduction of the past. Jane Austen's heroine Catherine Morland amusingly comments, "I often think [history] odd, that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention."<sup>1</sup> The issue, however, is more *interpretation* than invention. As E.H. Carr writes, "First get your facts straight, then plunge at your peril into the shifting sands of interpretation."<sup>2</sup> Although his conviction that, "a historical fact will turn on a question of interpretation"<sup>3</sup> is by no means universally accepted, it seems right that history consists of subjective interpretations of past events. This explains why, using the same evidence, historians reach such different conclusions. For example, Richard Swinburne concludes Jesus "claimed to be God incarnate and to making atonement for human sins"<sup>4</sup> whereas Geza Vermes suggests "none of the claims and aspirations of Jesus can be said definitely to associate him with the role of the Messiah."<sup>5</sup> Or, as Leonard Cohen put it, "Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water."<sup>6</sup> As it is practically impossible to accurately recover a past event, the historian has to *interpret* the facts to identify what she finds to be the most probable explanation, making a truly accurate account impossible. A second, closely related, notion is that every historian is influenced by pre-existing biases and opinions that arise out of certain biographical, sociological or ideological contexts. This appears to be the explanation for why disparities in interpretation exist – as seen

<sup>1</sup> Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Oxford University Press (2008) p.79.

<sup>2</sup> Carr, E. H. *What is History?* Penguin (1964) p.10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Swinburne, Richard. *Was Jesus God?* Oxford University Press (2008) p.113.

<sup>5</sup> Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew*. SCM Press (2001) p.195.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Leonard. 'Suzanne', track 1 on *Songs of Leonard Cohen*. Columbia Records (1967).

with Swinburne and Vermes. In something as powerfully held as religious conviction (or lack thereof), such contexts will invariably shape how a historian interprets the material. These two assertions of historical method will prove important in the following discussions.

History and religion are intimately linked. It seems to me they interact on two levels: biblical history plays a *foundational* role within religion, whereas in post-biblical times, religion has played a *formational* role. Biblical histories are the more contentious area, as theological doctrine is built upon certain historical assertions, and dispelling these historical claims can undermine religious faith itself.<sup>7</sup> For example, many Christians believe Jesus is God's revelation. For believers, there is a concern over how, or whether, to separate faith from history. Morton Smith argues, "the historian does require a world in which these normal phenomena are not interfered with by arbitrary and *ad hoc* divine interventions."<sup>8</sup> This is problematic for those who view Jesus' divine life as historical fact. As Vermes states, "The remarkable feature of the resulting portrait of the Jesus of Christianity is its total lack of proportion between history and theology."<sup>9</sup> Should a *history* of Jesus' life therefore include no mention of divinity? Despite Smith's conviction, there is not *necessarily* a distinction between historical accuracy and faith. Suggesting Jesus' divinity has no place in history would not be a statement of historical enquiry, but a criticism of Christian theology, thereby demonstrating the same religious bias objected to in the first place! Rabbi Michael Hilton provides an analogous reflection writing, "These are events in the world which we might attribute to God, but we can never be sure."<sup>10</sup> This inability to reach an objectively valid picture of Christ, because of the role of faith, is why a variety of historical perspectives are valid. Moreover, given the initial assertion that history is never an *entirely* accurate account, and historians approach their subject with preconceived views that shape the interpretation of the facts, Christian faith is one of many plausible starting points from which to interpret the material. Thus, the *possibility* and *unfalsifiable* nature of Jesus' divinity necessitates a diversity of approaches. Furthermore, one might argue that to grasp fully certain elements of biblical history, religious belief is required. For example, does one have to be an 'insider' to understand salvation histories recounted in the Hebrew Bible (such the covenantal significance of Exodus and Exile)? As established, different interpretations of biblical history can validly be taken, given the impossibility of

<sup>7</sup> See Hick, John. *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Oneworld Publications (1993) p.3, for this point.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Morton. 'Historical Method in the Study of Religion', *History and Theory*, 8 (1968), p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew*. SCM Press (2001) p.xvii.

<sup>10</sup> Hilton, Michael. 'Judaism is not about certainty, but about change', ed., Romain, Jonathan. *God, Doubt and Dawkins: Reform rabbis respond to 'The God Delusion'*. The Movement for Reform Judaism (2008) p.36. 2

uncovering absolutely what happened. Whilst certain religious readings require belief, for many approaches (like historical-critical or literary methods), faith is not a prerequisite. Indeed, part of the uniqueness of theology is that many different approaches can be taken, and sometimes the biggest advances in biblical scholarship require a step back *from* faith, or equally a perspective *of* faith.

It can equally be argued that anyone can write post-biblical history. A believer might naturally be drawn to their own history, because, in the words of Colin Gunton, “what we make of questions of history will often have a bearing on how we see the faith today.”<sup>11</sup> However, it would be naïve to assert that the significance *of* and interest *in* modern religious history belongs only to believers. Whilst Germans might understandably be interested in German history, it is obviously wrong to suggest A.J.P. Taylor shouldn’t write about Bismarck. Historians can be *academically* drawn to any historical event. It is just that the motivation might differ for the believer. Extrapolating this assertion, and bearing in mind the preceding discussion, anyone can write an *entire* history of religion: from Moses to Marx!

So far, it has been suggested that a particular faith is not a prerequisite for writing religious history. I would propose, even further, that divergences in approach are actually *desirable*. As established, one’s faith shapes how historical facts are interpreted and thus the account given. Taking this, J.S. Mill provides a compelling case for exposing oneself to different views, writing “silencing the expression of an opinion is robbing the human race [...] If the opinion is right, [the readers] are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose the clearer perception of truth.”<sup>12</sup> Although the dichotomy of right and wrong doesn’t entirely apply to historical accounts, Mill’s conviction that one must subject oneself to different viewpoints in order to reach a plausible conclusion remains valid. It is beneficial for believers to expose themselves to different religious traditions and views, in order to reach a clearer understanding of their own and other beliefs. As Martin Buber writes, “I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to [Jesus] in Israel’s history of faith.”<sup>13</sup> Simon Schama also holds this position suggesting his history is, “particular and universal, the shared inheritance of Jews and non-Jews alike, an account of our common humanity.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, for

<sup>11</sup> Gunton, Colin. ‘Historical and systematic theology’, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press (1997) p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Penguin (1982) p.23.

<sup>13</sup> Buber, Martin. *Two Types of Faith*. Harper Torchbooks (1961) p.13.

<sup>14</sup> Schama, Simon. *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000BCE – 1492*. Vintage (2014) p.iv.

scholars *and* readers, exposing oneself to the history of other faiths, *and* histories of religion written by different faiths, facilitates the drawing of plausible conclusions about ones own tradition and that of others. To return to Mill, “There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted”<sup>15</sup> as ultimately, “the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons.”<sup>16</sup>

To conclude, the study of the history of religions is not limited to a certain group of people. For me, this extends beyond the history of religions, into the majority of religious study. Despite being Jewish, I find it engaging and important to study Christian theology. It is appropriate here to return to Lauren Green’s initial question. Firstly, Aslan, like anyone, is entitled to be *academically* inclined towards Christian history, whilst someone else might equally be *religiously* inclined. Furthermore, considering all history is a subjective account of the truth, and all histories are approached from distinct contexts, different backgrounds allow for diverse but plausible interpretations of events that will forever remain at least partially unknown. Finally, such disparities are actually desirable, as it is only through such a dialogue that readers and writers alike can form better understandings of their own traditions and that of others, and scholarship can thus advance through tensions between these different views. To end, a point concerning interfaith dialogue is in order. As David Ford writes, “the flourishing of the world depends on how various religious and secular forces learn to live together,”<sup>17</sup> and for this to happen, an understanding of other beliefs is vital. This can and should entail both reading and writing the histories of another religion. It is therefore absolutely valid and beneficial for both believers and non believers alike to write a history of religion.

<sup>15</sup> Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Penguin (1982) p.27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.43.

<sup>17</sup> Ford, David. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*. Blackwell (2005) p.14.

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