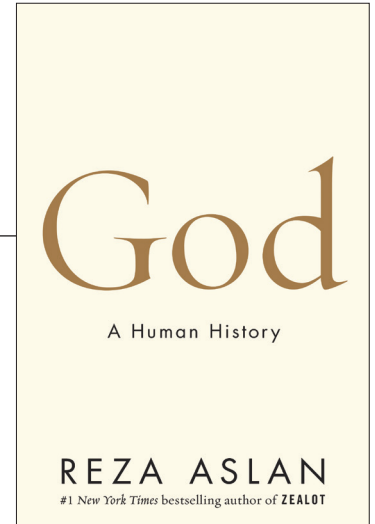




God

A Human History

by Reza Aslan



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Also available as an E-Book

“Reza Aslan offers so much to relish in his excellent ‘human history’ of God. In tracing the commonalities that unite religions, Aslan makes truly challenging arguments that believers in many traditions will want to mull over, and to explore further. This rewarding book is very ambitious in its scope, and it is thoroughly grounded in an impressive body of reading and research.” —Philip Jenkins, author of *Crucible of Faith*

• about the book •

In layered prose and with thoughtful, accessible scholarship, Aslan narrates the history of religion as a remarkably cohesive attempt to understand the divine by giving it human traits and emotions. According to Aslan, this innate desire to humanize God is hardwired in our brains, making it a central feature of nearly every religious tradition. 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.”

But this projection is not without consequences. We bestow upon God not just all that is good in human nature—our compassion, our thirst for justice—but all that is bad in it: our greed, our bigotry, our penchant for violence. All these qualities inform our religions, cultures, and governments.

More than just a history of our understanding of God, this book is an attempt to get to the root of this humanizing impulse in order to develop a more universal spirituality. Whether you believe in one God, many gods, or no god at all, *God: A Human History* will challenge the way you think about the divine and its role in our everyday lives.

• about the author

REZA ASLAN is an acclaimed writer and scholar of religions whose books include *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* and *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. He is also the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (published in paperback as *Beyond Fundamentalism*), as well as the editor of *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and three sons.

• chapter summaries

introduction: in our image

Research shows that children, regardless of whether they come from religious family backgrounds, conceive of God in terms of a human being with superhuman capacities. Their tendency to imagine “up” from human to divine and to imagine God as a super-human figure echoes German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who suggested that humans’ tendencies to anthropomorphize God stems from an innate desire to see God and God’s divine characteristics in terms of humans and human characteristics.

In other words, the human brain inherently conceives of the divine in human terms. Human spirituality, from the earliest days to contemporary times, can be understood as a series of efforts to understand the divine—whether conceived of as one God or many gods—by putting divine attributes, motivations, and even physical aspects into human terms.

Humans’ ongoing efforts to humanize God and the divine are not an indication that God does not exist; they are better understood as pointing toward one consistent, common metaphor for understanding the divine: the “humanized God.” Even Islam, which explicitly rejects ascribing human properties to God, is full of anthropomorphizing elements; humanizing God appears to be a universal impulse.

Efforts to humanize the divine encompass ascribing to God all the best elements of human nature—generosity, love, compassion—as well as all the worst—jealousy, vengeance, violence. These efforts in turn work to add a divine aspect to those attributes—legitimizing them, in some cases, and the human behaviors that they engender. Religious conflicts can be understood as the consequence of humans first ascribing human attributes to God and then taking divine legitimacy from the desire to act on human jealousy, desire for vengeance, or capacity for violence.

Can humans resist the impulse to humanize God and develop a more pantheistic understanding of the divine—one in which God is commensurate with the natural world, rather than with humans alone? Could this reconceptualization support a more peaceful and less human-centric form of spirituality?

I. the embodied soul

Adam and Eve in Eden

Adam and Eve might most effectively be imagined as paradigmatic representatives of *homo sapiens*, who began migrating from Africa around 100,000 BCE. Both hunters, they make their tools and trade their skilled creations for carved objects and pendants.

They bury their dead, a labor-intensive process made more “costly” by their efforts to lay out the body and to include valuable objects in the grave. They commemorate the dead person with rituals—fires, offerings, stone markers, visitations. These practices are taken as signs that Adam and Eve, the earliest *homo sapiens*, recognize themselves as embodied souls—with an understanding of the soul as a distinct, separate element of the person that persists after the human body perishes.

Adam and Eve understand the soul as a spirit and see the world as permeated by spirits. Spirits inhabit and animate every element of creation, from birds to rocks. They consider themselves to be connected to creation and see the natural world—including themselves—as part of one organic whole. This unifying viewpoint is characteristic of *animism*, likely the earliest human expression of what we later call religion.

The records left by the earliest humans are filled with indications of their spiritual beliefs—especially the painted caves that stretch from Southeast Asia to Western Europe, of which the Volp caves in the French Pyrenees are one of the most important examples. The caves must be understood in the context of animist religious practices: they are sacred spaces, not dwelling places.

The images found within these caves remind us that early humans saw the world as divided into thirds: an ordinary world of earth, a subterranean world of the underground, and an upper realm of spirits and divinity, accessible only with the help of a shaman or other mediating power. The cave paintings suggest not random decorations, but a carefully laid out pathway, for physical and spiritual purposes, with images serving as symbolic guides to the humans who moved through these cave spaces for spiritual purposes. The cave paintings do not represent the existing world or middle-tier earth; they served to help point humans toward the upper, spiritual tier. It might not be too much a stretch to think of them as a physical, visual iteration of scripture.

At the end of the Volp caves, in what has been dubbed “the Sanctuary,” is the caves’ most significant image. It is a human-animal combination: with the lower half of a human man, but with the upper torso of a hybrid animal: an owl’s eyes, stag deer’s antlers, as well as a horse-like tail. It is painted and engraved in the cave walls and appears to have had been drawn and redrawn over the years. The French archeologist, Henri Breuil, who re-discovered the caves in the modern era, assumed that the figure represented a shaman and christened it “The Sorcerer.” However, this is a misunderstanding: like the many other human-animal hybrids that appear on cave walls across Europe and Asia, this figure was not meant to represent an actual human dressed up with animal parts. Like the other paintings, its role is symbolic: the figure is one of the first images that humans created to represent God.

The Lord of Beasts

The human-animal hybrid image found in so many cave paintings around the world represents one of the earliest and most universal human understandings of the divine: God as Lord of the Beasts, who rules over animals and the forests. Later conceptions of God, including Ahura Mazda, Shiva, and even Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, all include references to the powers held by the Lord of the Beasts.

The figure of the Lord of the Beasts also represents the evolutionary human understanding of the divine, from the animism of prehistoric humans to a much more complex set of beliefs centered around one or a small number of gods. It also points to the deeply rooted nature of the religious impulse in humans, reaching as far back as the Middle Paleolithic Period (41,000–200,000 years ago), and with some material evidence to suggest religious practices among Neanderthals as well. Some archeological evidence suggests ritualized grave practices for *homo erectus* that date back nearly 500,000 years. (More complex religious ritual practice seems to have developed in the Upper Paleolithic, 10,000–40,000 years ago.) These finds suggest that the religious impulse dates back to the moment that humans became human—or before.

What the evidence suggests is that religious belief should be considered a defining, foundational part of our experience as humans. We are *homo religiosus* as well as *sapiens*, characterized by our sense of ourselves as embodied souls and our sense of the world as having some divine transcendence. From a scientific perspective, this could mean that religious belief is an evolutionary asset, or an adaptive advantage.

In the nineteenth century, several European anthropologists attempted to identify the adaptive advantage that religious belief provided, using a Darwinian model. Many came to the conclusion that religion helped humans by providing answers to questions that otherwise appeared unanswerable and by instilling a sense of order and meaning on an unpredictable world. Yet comfort or a sense of meaning is not itself an evolutionary asset. Further, there is no human emotion unique to religion, suggesting that religious belief does more than provide humans with a sense of meaning. Other scholars, like Emile Durkheim, suggested that religion’s role was social: it bound communities together through ritual acts, which helped communities survive. However, religious feelings and beliefs have historically been as divisive as they have been unifying; religion works by excluding as well as including. Finally, psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung suggested that the human soul was better understood as the individual psyche and reduced the religious impulse to violence, trauma management, or wish fulfillment. But religion afflicts as much as it comforts; the idea that religion promotes morality is quite recent in human history.

In short, it is likely that religion is not an evolutionary asset in and of itself. Cognitive science increasingly suggests that it is the outcome of an earlier adaptive advantage.

The Face in the Tree

Cognitive science suggests that a biological process termed the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD) has played an important role in promoting religion as a foundational human activity. HADD pushes humans to interpret unexplained events as the product of human agency, and thus as having a human cause—or, at least, an animate one. This impulse is what encourages caution at an unfamiliar sound in the night, or a shadow in a parking lot. But it also suggests the basis for humans' belief in God or the divine.

The cognitive science of religion argues that the religious impulse is neurological in origin. This is true of every impulse and does not deny the legitimacy of religious belief—it simply explains the process—but it suggests that the origins of the religious impulse lie within the human brain.

Cognitive science also argues for the importance of the cognitive process known as Theory of Mind, an executive brain function that encourages humans to understand other humans—and non-humans—in terms that relate their actions, thoughts, motivations, and impulses back to the self. Hence humans assume that others will act, think, and believe the way they do—and, also, assume that dolls, animals, statues, or anything that looks sufficiently “like me” to them, will as well. HADD and Theory of Mind connected historically and today, scientists theorize, to produce the belief among early and contemporary humans that just as they had souls, so must other beings—including trees, rocks, and animals.

Presumably, HADD and Theory of Mind produced many individual iterations of this process, with individual humans seeing spirits in particular objects. Those that gained traction and took hold among communities, however, all seem to have been perceived as useful: a tree that speaks and can tell the future, for example; or a human-animal hybrid that could control the hunt. The most successful iteration of this, throughout human history, is that of the god-man: a human who is elevated above others in terms of knowledge or abilities, but who is also still recognizably human.

Cognitive science thus provides compelling arguments for the emergence and adoption of particular human concepts of divinity. It has yet to explain successfully how or why the earliest humans believed that they had souls. What this suggests is that the origin of the religious impulse in humans is our belief that we are embodied souls: that we are more than our physical bodies, and that our souls persist after our bodies perish. It is this foundational impulse that laid the groundwork for all human efforts to conceive and understand the divine.

II. the humanized god

Spears into Plows

The Biblical story of the Garden of Eden is generally understood today as a myth—a symbolic story that helps explain to believers why the world is the way it is. Like the many flood narratives found across the ancient Near East, the Garden story falls within a category called “folk memory”—a universal myth that developed from a society's collective memory. In the case of the Garden, it addresses questions of why humans struggle to produce their own food, why women suffer in childbirth, and why humans do not have divine beings as daily companions. In doing so, it invokes the memory of a time when human life was relatively easy. Historically, this time correlates with the period in human history before settled agriculture—when most humans were hunter-gatherers.

Near Urfa, considered the closest historical example to the Biblical Garden of Eden, the oldest religious temple sits at Gobekli Tepe. An elaborate complex, the temple features complex carvings of animals mixed with geometric designs and abstract symbols that are presumed to communicate through an as-yet untranslated symbolic language. This complex was created between 14,000 and 12,000 years ago, by hunter-gatherers living in the Stone Age—and appears to have drawn worshippers from afar, bringing different tribal affiliations and different gods. What brought them together was the unifying concept of the humanized god, represented by the multiple carved, T-shaped pillars at the center of the temple complex. Given the cognitive processes of HADD and Theory of Mind, it is unsurprising that these early humans conceived of the divine in humanized form.

One consequence of humans' tendency to humanize the divine is that we also project our characteristics upon them. If we experience jealousy, our gods will likely do the same. If we value altruism, we will likely see the same attribute in our gods. We build temples to shelter our gods because we as humans need shelter, and so on. We will construct religious rituals and practices

to honor them—and it is this that pushed Upper Paleolithic humans to invent agriculture and to abandon the nomadic hunter-gatherer life for the settled one.

Humans were foragers—hunters and gatherers—for almost 2.5 million years, or almost all of human history. They conceived of gods as gods of the hunt. Yet around 12,000 to 10,000 years ago, humans as a species shifted from hunting to farming, from scavenging for found food to growing and producing it. Farming changed humans from masters of space to masters of time, and from focusing on gods in the sky to gods in the earth (which itself seems to have involved a shift in gender, as sky deities were generally male while the earth was conceived of as female). The myths associated with them also changed—stories about fecundity and fertility, stories about consuming the body of a god through eating the produce that grew from his broken body.

The introduction of agriculture brought about far-reaching changes: it encouraged permanent settlement, fostering the rise of cities. It promoted the efficient division of labor, enabling social stratification and the accumulation of wealth. Yet the switch was not necessarily positive: agriculture was far more costly in terms of time and human labor than hunting. It seems to have caused a sharp decline in human consumption of vitamins, minerals, and protein, while leaving humans far more vulnerable to disease and early death. Given the evolutionary disadvantages, why did humans leave the relative ease of hunting and gathering for the difficult drudgery of farming?

The material evidence from Gobekli Tepe and other sites suggests that previous assumptions about the relationship between agriculture and human settlement were inverted. Humans did not settle and found cities because they had shifted to farming; they formed permanent settlements and only turned from hunting to farming over a longer period of time. It seems plausible that this process was connected to the rise of organized religion. The human effort required to build and maintain temples, and to carry out elaborate ritual practices, pushed settled hunter-gatherers to cut the time needed for food foraging, whether by penning hunt animals into a smaller space to make it easier to obtain meat, or cultivating whatever plants grew wild nearby to supplement their daily meals. Farming and animal domestication thus emerged ad hoc as a response to the daily needs of settled life.

However, the shift from these ad hoc efforts to a full commitment to agriculture suggests more than convenience—it suggests a “revolution of symbols,” as French scholar Jacques Cauvin explains. Humans’ belief in humanized gods in turn seems to have elevated human ideas of their own position within creation: no longer simply one element among others, but increasingly understanding themselves as the center and pinnacle of creation. Hence mastering nature, transforming nature, became characteristic of a newly-conceived relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Lofty Persons

Flood narratives are some of the oldest and most universal stories in human history—and seem to date to ancient Sumer, the first great human civilization, located in the Fertile Crescent. The Sumerians founded what is regarded as the world’s first major city, Uruk, around 4500 BCE. They followed this with a series of critical inventions: the wheel, the sailboat, and human writing. They were thus the first Neolithic civilization to write about their religion, among other subjects, and writing—narrating—seems to have had its own particular impact on how the gods were envisaged. *Ilu*, the Sumerian word for “god,” meant “lofty person,” and gods were conceived as human in form, dress, emotion, and behavior. Just as *ilu* became *Elohim* in Hebrew and *ilah*, then *Allah*, in Arabic, so did the Sumerian understanding of gods as super-humans influence the communities that used those words.

Mesopotamia’s Sumerians envisioned a pantheon of gods, each with his or her story and specialties. The richness of the Sumerian divine community is a reminder of the complexity and sophistication of polytheism, and a testimony to how the religious impulse had evolved in the 7,000 years since Gobekli Tepe. It seems also to have coexisted with the practice of venerating one’s ancestors—especially in hopes that they might intercede on behalf of their living relatives—which may also have provided the original incarnation of some Mesopotamian deities.

Several Mesopotamian gods were considered incarnations of the forces they influenced—hence Shamash was understood as both the god of the sun and the sun itself. The major gods were also considered linked to a particular city-state, with temples that were considered their home or shelter on earth; the linkage afforded an early instantiation of the powerful connection often drawn in later eras between polities and gods, or polities and sects. Many gods were represented by idols,

the continuation of a Paleolithic development. But while the idol was understood to effectively and accurately represent the god, it was not considered the sole instantiation of that god. Idols channeled the divine, but did not exhaust it.

In ancient Egypt, gods were consistently represented as part human, part animal, a practice distinct from that of the Sumerians. The animal pointed to some of the god's function or power; but the gods were described in human terms—as having human characteristics and attributes, not animal ones. Indo-European gods were described in terms of nature—sky god, fire god, etc.—but also depicted with human characteristics and with very human behaviors. The humanization of even the most abstract gods—what would the sky look or act like, after all?—seems to have worked in tandem with public ritual and other religious practices to render gods comprehensible to human beings—as epitomized by the Greek gods.

In ancient Greece, the gods began as the personification of natural forces as well but evolved into divine iterations of human characteristics: love, war, wisdom, and so on. Their relationship to one another evolved into that of an extended family, and for this they were criticized. Could gods truly be gods when their behavior was so clearly on the same level as that of non-divine humans? Some Greek thinkers, like Xenophanes, argued that religion must embrace the idea of non-human gods—and not gods, but one god. One, singular, non-human god would remind humans of the gap between human and divine, and of the unity of the natural world. The monad, the Pythagorean ideal, would be echoed by the religious conception of one, dehumanized god; but while compelling in its theoretical purity, this concept found very few adherents.

The High God

One of the most intriguing experiments in monotheism—the positive affirmation that there is only one god, and the negative rejection of any other—came under Pharaoh Akhenaten (born Amenhotep), of Egypt's New Kingdom. Taking office in the mid-1300s BCE, he ruled a polytheistic kingdom in which one incarnation of the sun, known as Re, had successfully merged with a city-state deity, Amun, to become the dominant king-god Amun-Re. But Akhenaten preferred an older incarnation of the sun god, Aten—the Sun Disc—which seems to have been personalized into what in later eras would be described as a theophanic conversion experience.

While many pharaohs preferred one god over others, Akhenaten insisted on worshipping Aten and no other. He changed his name to honor Aten, moved the dynasty capital to a newly-built city dedicated to Aten and, within a few years, declared worship of any other god illegal. While his repressive efforts limited public worship of other gods during his lifetime, upon his death, Aten's temples were demolished, monotheism was declared a heresy, and Akhenaten's tomb and legacy were attacked. This first human attempt to instill monotheism in a society was an utter failure.

Around 1100 BCE, the world witnessed a second effort at monotheism, via the teachings of the Iranian prophet Zarathustra. Generally assumed to be a member of the Iranian priestly class, Zarathustra abandoned his post in early adulthood and began wandering on a quest to discover a deeper knowledge of the gods. He was struck by a light and the presence of an unknown god who identified himself as the one and only god—not first among many, but the sole divinity. Zarathustra called him Ahura Mazda, “wise Lord,” but noted that the god had no name. Zarathustra was charged with transmitting a revelation from this god, which he then wrote down as the foundation of the Zoroastrian scripture. As the first human to fulfill this cycle of divine revelation, human scribing, and human transmission, Zarathustra served as the world's first prophet.

As with Akhenaten's efforts, Zarathustra's efforts to spread the word of this new god met with utter failure. It became a success only several centuries later, when the Achaemenid Empire adopted it—with major changes—as its court religion. The six evocations of the unnamed god in the world became six divine beings, the “Holy Immortals,” and the two emanations of good and not-good or evil that Zarathustra explained as inhering in Ahura Mazda became two battling deities. As pure monotheism, Zoroastrianism failed to gain an audience. As dualism, it succeeded.

Monotheism dominates the religious expressions of the contemporary world but is a historical anomaly: belief in one, sole, singular deity has been the conception of any human community for only 3,000 years, and a minority view for much of this time. While monolatry—the worship of one god without rejecting others' worship of other gods—has been relatively common, monotheistic experiments routinely failed. It failed because monotheism does not accord well with humans' impulse to humanize the divine. How would one god be born? What characteristics would one god have, when its experiences were so alien to human experiences? How could one god encompass all

the various needs of human life for which humans prayed or supplicated to various gods?

With monotheism came the innate connection of the one sole God with the powers of judgment and of the enforcement of morality, as well as the consequent notion that the world of the dead would be a sorting-out space, rather than a continuation of life on earth. Zarathustra's description of Ahura Mazda as the locus of human morality and the determiner of whether humans would end in heaven or hell was revolutionary.

Humans seemed eminently capable of endorsing the idea of one high god—much like a king or other overlord on earth—who governed the other gods. Henotheism, the worship of one god without denying the existence or worship of other gods, appears to have become the dominant form of religious conceptualization across ancient civilizations because it accorded well with human expectations of a hierarchical society. Each civilization appears to have understood its divine pantheon in light of its own political order—politicomorphism, or the divinization of earthly politics. As politics on earth changed, people in each civilization over time began to understand their gods differently, moving from a more democratic to more hierarchical order. But distributing various divine attributes among more and less powerful gods, and even piling on additional attributes to the high god, does not lead to monotheism.

If super-charging a high god with human attributes does not lead to monotheism, what about the Greek approach: dehumanizing god? A god stripped of all human qualities, emotions, motivations, and actions seems to be devoid of appeal to most humans. How can humans connect with such an alien divinity? Only in a crisis might a community be willing to put its faith in one, singular god, with no human relatability.

III. what is god?

God Is One

Somewhat like the association of particular gods with ancient city-states, tribes in the Ancient Near East maintained covenants with one particular god—a contractual relationship in which the tribe worshipped the god and the god in turn protected the tribe. Battles and wars were thus understood less as tribes fighting one another than gods competing to determine which was more powerful. The Babylonian destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, then, could understandably have been interpreted by Israelites as the destruction of Yahweh as their god. Instead, a small group proposed a new way of conceiving of divinity.

The Hebrew Bible depicts the ancient Israelites as worshipping two different deities: Yahweh, who appeared to Moses, and El, a Canaanite deity worshipped by Abraham and other patriarchs. The first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch, are a composite, with each book assembled from different sources (hence, for example, the contradictory elements within the flood narrative in Genesis). The Yahwist material is textually older, but the Elohist tradition focuses on an older deity—and one historically much better known. El was the High God of the Canaanites and the original god of the Israelites; the “el” of Israel refers to El.

While the Israelites' self-narrative distinguishes them from polytheistic Canaanites, some scholars believe that the Israelites were originally a Canaanite clan that broke away from the larger community, maintaining some elements of Canaanite culture while developing a distinct identity. As with the Canaanites, the early Israelites likely practiced monolatry, worshipping El as a high god without rejecting the existence of other gods. Even the Biblical condemnation of Israelite worship of other gods testifies to the non-exclusivist stance of at least some Israelites.

For the Israelites, the adoption of monotheism came only after the merging of El, the Canaanite god of Abraham, and Yahweh, the Midian god of Moses. In part, these seem to have reflected regional differences, with Yahweh worship located in the southern part of Canaan and El worship centered in the north. After the kingdom of Israel was established around 1050 BCE, the merging process continued, with the names of Yahweh and El often joined together. As Israelites' conceptions of their gods evolved to reflect their new political reality—a monarchy—Yahweh-El took on the role of high god or divine king, ruling over heaven and other gods. The Ark of the Covenant, representing Moses' covenant with Yahweh, was placed in the newly built temple, and a national cult developed around Yahweh.

While Yahweh's status continued to rise, this did not translate to monotheism. The Israelites and, in particular, their kings worshipped Yahweh but seem to have little concern over what other

peoples worshipped. They considered Yahweh the superior god, not the sole god. But when Nebuchadnezzar's forces overthrew Jerusalem, suggesting that Marduk was the stronger god, the Israelites had a choice. Some transferred their loyalty to Marduk. Others followed what became the first expressions of pure monotheism in the Hebrew Bible: the claim that Yahweh was the sole god. Monotheism for the Israelites emerged from the political and spiritual crisis of identity wrought by military defeat, in a world in which defeat was generally seen as the defeat of one's god. Judaism in its monotheistic form emerged as the testimony of faith after political defeat.

Judaism's monotheism also resolved the problem that made Xenophanes' monotheism so unappealing. The God of Judaism was both singular and personal, dehumanized but creating humans in God's own image; both radically different from humans in God's immortality but like them in terms of emotions and motivations. This was a game-changing development in the history of human religious expression.

God Is Three

The Christian addition to the Bible, known as the New Testament, begins with four Gospels, testimonies about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Three of them—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are considered to derive from similar source materials. The fourth, John, tells a very different story, with different elements and a different timeline, and contains the first clear statement that Jesus is to be considered the human incarnation of God. The word he uses is *Logos*, a Greek philosophical term describing the primal, divine force of creation, and his argument is that this force took the form of a human man.

In some ways, this articulation of the status of Jesus fit within older Greco-Roman conceptions—including the fairly standard practice of deifying defunct or living emperors and the older Greek notion of the demigod. This practice could also be seen in the ancient practices of divinizing human mediators—priests, prophets, mystics, and other redeemers. Judaism stood out among religions in the Ancient Near East for its lack of deified humans.

The humanization of the divine could be understood as the obverse of the practice of divinizing humans. Yet the deification of Jesus was something different: Jesus was described as the one and only human manifestation of the one and only God, rather than one god-man among many. This was a controversial idea, even among Christians, and canonical church positions—of which there are multiple—developed only over time and with much debate.

For several centuries, Christians remained divided regarding whether Jesus was part of God or a second God and, if the latter, what the two gods' relationship was. Marcion considered Jesus and Yahweh opposed: the latter a cruel creator god, full of pettiness and vengeance; and Jesus the *Logos*, loving and merciful. Unable to see the two as connected, he conceived of them as enemies—a position that also supported the early Christian movement in its efforts to distinguish itself from Judaism. Marcion's views found no supporters in Rome, but his followers formed a large Christian sect that continued until the 400s CE.

Why would the early Roman church have worked to preserve the idea of monotheism? Emergent Christianity was already distinct in many respects from Judaism, so what value did Jewish monotheism have? Looking through the lens of politicomorphism, it appears that one key reason was that reaffirming the Jewish concept of one, sole, singular God supported the emergent Roman structure of a church united by governance under one bishop—the Pope.

In 312 CE, Constantine had his famous dream, which he believed promised him the imperial crown in exchange for adopting Christianity. As emperor, he legalized Christianity and seems to have considered monotheism as its key tenet. It must have been surprising to him to learn of the many debates within the church, on the nature of Jesus as well as on what Jesus' relationship was to God. Constantine seems to have had little interest in debate and much in unity. He convened the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, which established the compromise position that Jesus and God the Father shared one substance.

Based on the writings of Tertullian, the Nicean compromise position described God as a substance with three distinct but commensurate manifestations: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost. Thus, the doctrine of the trinity was born. This position raised further questions: were the three manifestations equal? Did one precede the others? Augustine's work provided what became the definitive Church position: the three forms are part of God's eternal being, co-equal

with one another, and the believer's task is to embrace and accept this divine mystery. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE confirmed these positions and added what became the Roman Catholic position on the nature of Jesus Christ: that Jesus was both truly and completely divine and truly and completely human.

God Is All

By the early 600s, the two major powers in the Near East—the Roman Christian Byzantine Empire, and the Zoroastrian Sassanid Persian Empire—had been rivals and co-combatants for centuries. Their battles were inconclusive but incessant; each fought for political supremacy, bolstered by a distinct religious ideology. They were confronted in 630 CE by the message of a religious reformer based in the Arabian peninsula: Muhammad, known to his followers as God's final Messenger.

The rise of Islam and of Muslim-led military bands, who defeated the Byzantines and the Persians in the 640s, can be seen as the contestation of an insistent monotheism—God as one, based on the Judaic model—against Roman Christian trinitarianism and Zoroastrian dualism. It was understood by its adherents not as a new religion but as the religion of Abraham and Adam—and thus the call to Islam was seen as a call to return to the worship of one God, against the seductions of polytheism, whether understood as multiple gods, a triune God, or two gods.

Muhammad, son of Abdallah and grandson of Abd al-Muttalib, was born in the late 500s CE in the town of Mecca. He lost both parents at a young age and was raised by his uncle; recognized as a capable and trustworthy man, a wealthy widow some years his senior proposed marriage. Yet despite his secure social and financial position, Muhammad remained concerned about the social inequities and injustice that characterized Meccan society, which had grown wealthy as pilgrims came to worship at the Kaaba, the black building that, Islamic tradition holds, held idols of over 300 gods. He frequently retreated to the hills outside Mecca to meditate and reflect; as Muslim tradition has it, it was on one of those retreats that the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and instructed him to “recite”—to repeat the words of God that Gabriel transmitted.

Allah, meaning simply “the god” in Arabic, was a term for the divine that already circulated in Meccan society. Arabs believed that Allah had created the heavens and the earth and thus functioned as a kind of high god, who—like Zeus—had children and companions in the pantheon of Arab gods. Arab gods were much like Greek gods, with human desires, behaviors, and actions, and associated with particular powers or characteristics. However, Arabs were also familiar with Judaism and Christianity; representations of Abraham, Jesus, and Mary were included among the idols worshipped by pilgrims to the Kaaba.

Hence, Muhammad's declaration that Allah was the one and only God would not have been entirely revolutionary, nor necessarily offensive to Mecca's inhabitants. Allah was described in terms familiar to the Arabs: as creator, lord, and master of fate—which fit with Islam's message. However, Muhammad's message was one of exclusive monotheism: Meccans were called not only to recognize God as one, but to reject every other god. This was an attack on the henotheistic worldview as well as Mecca's economy, which was based in part on pilgrim trade.

Muhammad's message also shifted Meccans' understanding of God by directly connecting Allah to Yahweh, identifying them as one and the same God. It was the same God, whether known as Allah or Yahweh, who made the covenant with Abraham, appeared to Moses, sent the Angel Gabriel to Mary, and so on. The scriptural history of the Jews, and of the Christians through the death of Jesus, was thus refigured as part of Meccans' spiritual heritage as well. Presumably, Muhammad as well as most Meccans were well aware of Judaism—and likely also of eastern forms of Christianity. Hence the Qur'anic assertion, repeated over and over, that God is one and indivisible, neither begotten nor begetting. And hence also the Qur'anic style of narrating Biblical stories: rather than retell the story of Moses in narrative form, for example, it references the highlights of the story—expecting listeners to remember the rest.

Monotheism in Islam echoed the Judaic form, but became more emphatic: God was not just one in numerical terms, but also in essence: God's essential nature was oneness, as well as God's form. This was not only a critique of Christian trinitarianism and Arab polytheism, but a foundational statement about the relationship between God as Creator and all creation: God is radically other than God's creation, from an Islamic perspective, in nature and in form. Yet while Islam does not suggest that humans are created in God's image, the Qur'an and Islamic tradition are suffused

with anthropomorphizing descriptions of God—physical attributes (the ability to sit on a throne), embodied elements (hands or a face), and emotions or motivations (mercy). While many Muslims have interpreted these references metaphorically, this runs against the grain of human inclination as well as of the fundamental principles of Islamic legal interpretation, which assume a meaning and a purpose to the words themselves, because they are the Word of God.

Islam presents a particular challenge to believers in this respect. If God is radically other than God's creation, and yet is described in the Qur'an as having physical and intellectual/emotional attributes, then those attributes must somehow be part of God. If God is indivisible and eternal, those attributes must be an essential part of God, and be eternally part of God. Thus, if creating is one of God's attributes, is God truly separate from what God creates? These philosophical questions run deep for some Muslims, while others have dismissed them as "babble," or theological pontificating. Yet the idea of God and creation as connected is what inspired many impulses toward Sufism, the spiritual or mystical approach to connecting with God through ritual practice as well as study to unlock what Sufis believe are secret truths that help believers to understand God.

Sufism is an internally diverse, multi-faceted set of approaches. However, collectively, Sufis attempt to address some of the most universal questions about God: is God an animating principle joining together all living beings? Is God the deification of nature? An abstract, depersonalized force? A deified human? For some Sufis, the answer emerged from the Islamic concept of God's unity: If God was a unified being, God's creation must also be a unity. God must be both one and all—a concept known in Arabic as *wahadat al-wujud*, the Unity of Being. This concept, which is espoused by some Sufis, argues that Creator and creation share the same inseparable essence—eternal and indivisible. God is the collective sum of all existence—the Creator and creation together.

conclusion: the one

The Jewish scriptures and Old Testament tell the story of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve are banished from Paradise after eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their banishment has been understood as punishment for disobeying God, and more accurately for trying to obtain the knowledge that would allow them to become like God—or to become God. Humans today have lost the understanding of our early ancestors: that humans are the image of God in the world, in essence if not in form.

The Sufi concept of the unity of being, which erased any perceived difference between Creator and creation, is expressed today in the modern concept of *pantheism*, which means that God is all and everything, or that everything and all is God. In other words, there is no division or separation between God and the universe—they exist together, as God, because nothing can exist independently or outside of God. The world is God's essence, or self-expression. Pantheism can be found in varying forms and articulations in most religious traditions, from Hinduism to Christianity. It can also be found in strains of western philosophy and in science and its unifying conception of nature: energy and matter are inseparable, for example.

Today, many people conceive of God as a dehumanized, non-material divinity, with no humanizing characteristics. Forming a meaningful relationship with this concept of God is particularly challenging: our brains are designed to connect with a humanizing concept of God. Perhaps our focus should instead be on recognizing the relationship that already exists. The dehumanization of God goes hand in hand with the assumption of an essential difference and unbridgeable chasm separating God and humans. Recognizing that humans—creation—are the manifestation of God removes the chasm. Worshipping God thus involves less fear and trembling and more awe and wonder at the majesty of the universe—at God's self-expression.

Understanding the universe as God imbues all of creation with a divine aspect. Knowledge and understanding of God comes from knowledge and understanding of creation—including of ourselves. This process should start from, and be rooted in, a focus on the soul. Belief in the soul as separate from and persisting after the body is our first and most fundamental belief—known as substance dualism. Our belief in God derives from this belief—not the other way around. We are born believers; it is our choice whether and how we remain believers. There is nothing implausible about the existence of a spirit that animates the universe—each individual spark of creation as well as the world as a whole. Belief is a choice and a challenge for us all.

• suggested reading timeline

Advanced high school/undergraduate students:

Introduction and “The Embodied Soul;” “The Humanized God;” “What is God?,” and Conclusion

Advanced undergraduate/graduate students:

Introduction through “Lofty Persons”; “The High God” through Conclusion

• pre-reading assignments

The Lord of Beasts, also known as the Master of Animals, appears to be humans’ first attempt to understand and represent God. What information can you find about this figure, including: parts of the world/ancient societies in which this figure of divinity is found? Other religious conceptualizations of God (Hindu, Jewish, etc.) that also use this term as one description of divine powers? Contemporary efforts to recapture and celebrate this figure in religious, literary, or artistic terms?

Monotheism is a relatively recent human approach to understanding and worshipping God. What information can you find about the percentage of people today who identify as monotheists? What religions and religious communities follow a monotheistic approach to religion?

Pantheism is the belief that God and the universe are co-identified or that the universe and all creation are manifestations of God and the divine. Learn more about this concept via Stanford University’s online Encyclopedia of Philosophy: plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism. How would you explain this concept to a friend? How does it support or conflict with some of the major religions followed today?

• guided reading and discussion questions

1. Research on religious beliefs in children suggests that from an early age, humans see God in terms of human characteristics. What do you remember of your understanding of the divine as a child? What does it mean to say that the “humanized God” is the most common metaphorical approach by which humans have and continue to try to understand the divine?
2. The earliest humans likely engaged in religious activities and practices that reflect an animistic outlook. What does animism mean, in this context? How does animism point toward a recognition of humans’ earliest religious belief: that our bodies and our souls are separate, and that our souls continue to exist even after the death of the body?
3. The figure of the Lord of Beasts, found in the Volp Caves and in varying forms elsewhere around the world, represents one of the earliest and most universal human understandings of the divine. What does this figure look like? How does it represent God—what are God’s powers, in this iteration? How do God and humans relate to one another?
4. Religious belief can and should be considered a foundational aspect of our experience as humans. Yet despite scholars’ efforts to identify it as an evolutionary advantage, no evidence exists for this. Explain some of the arguments used to explain why religion is a universal human phenomenon and why none of them adequately supports the argument that religion provides an adaptive asset.
5. The cognitive science of religion suggests that religion is the outgrowth of two related human adaptive assets: our Hyperactive Agency Detection Device and Theory of Mind. Explain how each of these human tendencies could have led in the days of early humans to identifying humanized, divine elements in natural phenomena.
6. The site of Gobekli Tepe offers a key example of humans’ commitment to elaborate, complex religious commitments even prior to sedentarization and the rise of cultivated agriculture. What are the important features of Gobekli Tepe as a religious site? What insights does it suggest about early humans’ religious practice and about their shifting understanding of their relationship to the rest of the universe: toward an idea of mastery and control?

7. The story of humans' shift from hunting and gathering to a sedentary lifestyle supported by cultivated agriculture and animal husbandry is being re-examined today by scholars. Read this short report, which explains French scholar Catherine Perles' argument that humans' belief in the divine pre-dates the agricultural revolution: news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/04/scholar-cave-paintings-show-religious-sophistication. How are human religious practices linked to this shift in the food, societal, and economic organization of early human societies?
8. The major civilizations of the ancient world—Sumer, Egypt, Greece, etc.—have similar characteristics in terms of religion: elaborate, complex pantheons of gods, each with particular attributes or powers, requiring particular sets of rituals; and each deeply humanized in terms of characteristics, behaviors, and motivations. Describe some of the shared elements of each civilization's religions, as well as some of the major distinctions.
9. Akhenaten in ancient Egypt and Zarathustra in ancient Iran each promoted particular understandings of pure monotheism—the worship of one sole god and the rejection of others. What did each propose as the proper understanding of and relationship to God for humans? And why did each fail (or, in the case of Zarathustra, succeed in a highly modified form)?
10. Aslan argues that monotheism was historically much less appealing than monolatry or henotheism. Define each concept and explain why henotheism better fit the historical model of humanizing the divine, in multiple forms?
11. The history of early Judaism shows the merging of two gods—El or Elohim and Yahweh—into one, and shows the emergence of a commitment to strict monotheism arising from the crisis engendered by the Babylonian defeat of the Israelites. What made this effort at monotheistic belief successful when previous efforts in other societies failed?
12. Christianity has encompassed a variety of theological positions, which vary by sect and region. Historically, Christianity posed two radical changes to normative concepts of the divine: first, that God could become human, not as one of many divinized humans but as the one and only human manifestation of the divine. And second, by articulating what became the canonical position of most Christian sects: that Jesus was not a separate god, but a manifestation of one God, who encompasses three aspects in an equal, trinitarian relationship. How do each of these concepts challenge the human tendency to humanize God? How do they support it?
13. The Islamic conception of monotheism grounded itself in the Judaic concept, but intensified it: God is not only one, but the essence of oneness. God in Islam is—at least in principle—profoundly other than humanity and all creation, and profoundly depersonalized. How have Muslims managed to conceive of God in humanizing terms—including Sufi approaches?
14. Pantheism proposes that God and the universe are not separate—they are deeply and intimately connected, because nothing that God creates can be separate or independent of God. How might a modern concept of pantheism be similar to animism? Different? What might it offer to humans today in providing a newly humanized relationship with the divine that does not insist on seeing the divine in humanity's image?

— topics for further discussion

1. A growing number of Americans describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious). How do you think this trend connects with Aslan's argument that a depersonalized god is harder for people to connect with?
2. One contemporary reaction against modern forms of organized religion has been to return to an imagined version of earlier forms—as with neo-paganism. Read about the central beliefs of neo-paganism (www.beliefnet.com/faiths/2001/06/what-neo-pagans-believe.aspx). How does it build on Neolithic religious practices? What elements seem uniquely modern?
3. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are considered Abrahamic religions—cousins to one another. How do members of each religious tradition see the others' views on monotheism today? How do their overlapping views on God promote interreligious harmony? How do their differences inhibit interreligious understanding?

4. This book focuses on the development of human religion from the earliest humans through the Abrahamic religious traditions, which religious studies scholars term “Western” religions. What more can we say about Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other “Eastern” religious traditions? How do their followers’ views of the divine support or complicate Aslan’s argument?
5. Most major world religions today still refer to God in terms that echo the human political structures of absolute monarchy—examples of politicomorphism, in which humans envision the divine world as echoing the human political order. Yet the world today has few absolute monarchies; nearly two-thirds of the world’s countries are organized as democracies. How might humans’ understandings of God evolve over the next century, to accord with modern forms of political organization?
6. What do you see as the potential appeal of a pantheistic religious outlook, both for people who identify with existing religious traditions and for people who identify as spiritual or secular? What might make a pantheistic outlook harder for these populations to adopt?
7. Can, as Aslan asks, moving away from our inclination as humans toward a humanized God help us move as a species toward a more peaceful and integrative—less human-centric—form of spirituality?

→ activities

1. Visit the official website of the Volp Caves (cavernesduvolp.com/en) and examine the “map” of the three caves (“Plan of the Cave System”) to understand their layout: www.donsmaps.com/troisfreres.html. Scroll further down amateur archeologist Don Hitchcock’s webpage to find his translation of Henri Begouen’s 1920 article describing the figure that Breuil first dubbed “the Sorcerer” and Aslan describes as the Lord of Beasts. How does seeing the contemporary description of the caves and the conservation work done on them, examining the map of the three caves, and reading the description of the Lord of Beasts image better help you understand the intended impact that these cave layouts and their images might have had on the people for whom they were intended?
2. Read “Gobekli Tepe: The World’s First Temple?” on the *Smithsonian Magazine* website (www.smithsonianmag.com/history/gobekli-tepe-the-worlds-first-temple-83613665) and watch a short video depicting the modeling of Gobekli Tepe by a National Geographic staff artist (tiny.cc/gobekli). Why might Gobekli Tepe have been so easily dismissed by anthropologists working in the 1960s? What evidence do we now have to suggest that this site was, in fact, important? How does seeing the model of the site help support the argument that this site was a temple site with a religious purpose?
3. Aslan describes Akhenaten as the first major proponent of strict monotheism—the worship of one god and the rejection of all others—in human history. Watch this Khan Academy video describing and analyzing a house altar depicting Akhenaten, his wife Queen Nefertiti, and their three daughters: www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/egypt-art/new-kingdom/v/house-altar-depicting-akhenaten-nefertiti-and-three-daughters. What kinds of repercussions did Akhenaten’s new religious commitment have for artistic conventions, including the depiction of family members and their relationship to one another?
4. Judaism provides the first successful example of a strict monotheistic concept of God—known as Yahweh or Elohim. Read “How the Jews Invented God, and Made Him Great” in Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (www.haaretz.com/jewish/archaeology/.premium-1.723616). Yet polls show that an increasing number of American and Israeli Jews identify as Jewish without believing in God. Read “Can There Be Judaism Without Belief in God?” (www.haaretz.com/jewish/archaeology/.premium-1.723616) and think about this question. How does the idea of identifying with a religion but not with its deity connect to Aslan’s argument about the difficulty that humans have in connecting to a depersonalized god?
5. Christianity introduced two fundamental concepts: first, that God could become embodied in human form and, second, that one God could also be three. Read about trinitarianism on the BBC’s religion guide: www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/trinity_1.shtml. How does the idea of a triune God reaffirm God’s difference from humans, despite the figure of a human Jesus? How does it place faith beyond the scope of human reason? Does it seem to cause tensions for Christian believers today?

6. One of the most quoted Qur'anic verses is 2:255, the Throne Verse. It contains the famous point that "what people know about God is only what God has disclosed," suggesting the fundamental un-knownness and un-comprehendedness of God. Yet it also describes God as having a *kursi*, which in Arabic serves as the word for seat, stool, chair, or—as is often translated into English in this case—throne. This word has been the source of much debate over the centuries: is it literal, in which case does God have the capacity to sit, in embodied form, on a seat? Or is it metaphorical? Watch tiny.cc/throneverse and listen to ten different styles of Qur'anic recitation for this verse. Read a translation of the verse at: sufism.org/origins/quran-islam/quranic-chapters/ayat-al-kursi-the-throne-verse-from-the-quran-2. What do you see in this verse? How might the two passages be interpreted?
7. Read "The Cognitive Science of Religion," a short online article published on The British Psychological Society's website in April 2011: thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-4/cognitive-science-religion. What can we learn about the cognitive origins of religion by studying infants and children? What connections might there be between religious worldviews and prosocial behavior? What kinds of research still needs to be done?

— online resources

rezaaslan.com—Featuring information about Reza Aslan, other published writing, press coverage, and upcoming author events

"Seeing the Concept of God as an Expression of the Self," critical review of *God*, www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/reza-aslan/god-aslan

"Religion and Faith Aren't the Same," excerpt from interview with Oprah Winfrey, *Super Soul Sunday* tiny.cc/supersoulsunday, April 17, 2016

"Belief in God," Pew Research Center survey of American adults, broken down by age, gender, race/ethnicity, religious group, immigration status, economic status, and educational level: www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god

www.ibnarabisociety.org—The official website of the scholarly society devoted to studying the ideas of Muhiyyidin Ibn Arabi, the Sufi Muslim thinker who developed the "Unity of Being" theory of God's connection to the universe

www.pantheism.net—Website devoted to the scientific embrace of pantheism and the concept that all elements of the universe are inseparable from one another

www.religiousstudiesproject.com—Website run by two scholars who produce weekly podcasts with researchers working on the social-scientific study of religion

www.patheos.com—Website for scholarly, faith community, and general public dialogues about religion and spirituality, with news articles and explanatory articles sorted by religious tradition and by theme

— other titles of interest

On the impact of evolution and biology on human conceptions of religion:
Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age, by Robert Bellah

On humans' fundamental tendency toward anthropomorphizing the world and the divine:
Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion, by Stewart Guthrie

On the relevance of Paleolithic burial practices for our understanding of modern human religious and social practices:
The Paleolithic Origins of Human Burial, by Paul Pettit

On the connections between Neolithic humans' art, religious conceptions, and brain patterns:
Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos, and the Realm of the Gods, by David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce

- On the cognitive underpinnings of human religion:
In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion, by Scott Atran
- On Theory of Mind and humans' social nature:
In and Out of Each Others' Bodies: Theory of Mind, Evolution, Truth, and the Nature of the Social, by Maurice Bloch
- On the process and impact of the agricultural revolution:
The Neolithic Revolution in the Near East: Transforming the Human Landscape, by Allan Simmons
- On ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions:
The Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia, by A. H. Sayce
- On the ancient Greek gods:
The Gods of Olympus: A History, by Barbara Graziosi
- On Akhenaten and the effort at Egyptian monotheism:
Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism, by James Hoffmeier
- On Zoroastrianism:
Zoroastrianism: An Introduction, by Jenny Rose
- On the religious world-view of the ancient Near East:
Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible, by John Walton
- On the emergence of ancient Israelite monotheism:
The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel, by Mark S. Smith
- On the figure of Jesus:
Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, by Reza Aslan
- On the history of Christianity:
Christian History: An Introduction to the Western Tradition, by Diarmaid MacCulloch
- On the emergence and history of Islam:
No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam, by Reza Aslan
- On an introduction to Sufism:
Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam, by Carl Ernst
- On Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi's views of God and the unity of creation:
The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination, by William Chittick
- On the concept of pantheism:
Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Conception of Deity, by Michael Levine
- On the historical evolution of human conceptions of God:
A History of God, by Karen Armstrong
- On the value of belief:
The Case for God, by Karen Armstrong

● about this guide's writer

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• notes



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