

Why IR Religionists Should Watch Reza Aslan's Believer

Written by John A. Rees

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JOHN A. REES, APR 24 2017

A fellow academic once asked me as a scholar working in a Catholic university whether I found it strange to teach in an institution where crucifixes hung in every room. With a wink I answered, "Only when they move". For a split second, before coming to his secular senses and joining me in the joke, my learned friend responded with a look of amazement that seemed to ask, "Really? They move?!"

I have often reflected on this passing moment of shared irony that also, unexpectedly, created a fleeting moment of shared wondering. It is also partly what drew my interest to *Believer*, the recent CNN series hosted by religious studies scholar Reza Aslan. Described, and not without a little irony of its own as a "spiritual adventure series", Aslan steps into the sacred spaces of different religious groups and practices in an attempt to understand the essence of religion and religious belief.

Believer has evoked a variety of reviews that range from incisive and critically balanced, to those that are more dismissive, to others that even warn of the dangers inherent in the production's methodology and outlook. Of equal interest are responses from religious actors, including the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) who released a statement protesting that Episode 1 would encourage hate crimes, and the Church of Scientology which dismissed a so-called reformed group examined in Episode 4 as 'heretical' and insignificant to the church's present growth and success.

Having watched the series with these conversations in mind, I was surprised by the extent to which *Believer* pulled me in as a scholar/student of religion in IR. Maybe it was because the outlook of the series is innately cosmopolitan (as much a staple to IR as kale and quinoa salad) or because I chose to watch *Believer* within the rules of the genre (that is, as a popularisation of more complex themes), or because I looked beyond the stifling effect Aslan's personality had at times on the content (which is standard fare in contemporary journalism).

Whatever the reasons, the result was that each episode of *Believer* held value for me as an IR religionist. Here are some brief examples:

Ep 1: Recognition of the Aghori sect of Hinduism illustrates how the margins of a religion are as important to study as the mainstream. [The response of the HAF to this episode highlights the complex politics of simultaneously promoting and suppressing religious minority identities.]

Ep 2: Seeking out an apocalyptic cult in Hawaii connects the formation of new spiritual groups to the threat of climate change. Such a focus helps to open new policy discussions about how climate instability may produce new forms of religious rejectionism and even insurgency.

Ep 3: Investigating the competition between Vodou traditions and Evangelical Christianity in Haiti highlights the importance of history and geopolitics in the study of religious conflict. This comparative approach re-establishes the importance of religious difference for actors on the ground, even if religious scholars (including Aslan) can dismiss the importance of such difference.

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Ep 4: The study of independent groups practising forms of Scientology remind us that religious traditions – even those linked to new religious movements – always evolve and change. [The response by church hierarchy prompts an awareness that religious institutions can possess a high degree of transnational autonomy and ideological confidence.]

Ep 5: The cult of Sante Muerte in Mexico illustrates the central intersections between human (in)security and spiritual traditions that are employed to deal with it, notably among the marginalised. This highlights the complex role that spiritual practices can play in maintaining social cohesion and providing informal governance structures in sprawling urban environments.

Ep 6: The study of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel points to the multiple practices that emerge from within a religious tradition – even those crudely labelled as 'fundamentalist' – and how this divergence directly impacts on the position of the religious citizen in relation to the state.

There are, no doubt, other benefits and an equal number of criticisms related to Believer that could be considered. Perhaps the lasting stimulus is in the attempt by Aslan himself to enter momentarily into the practice of the spirituality he is wanting to explore. Yes, this is surely intended for dramatic effect, but it also connects to religious studies methodology such as 'temporary conversion' proposed over three decades ago by the Buddhist scholar Noble Ross Reat. To imagine oneself as a believer in 'this' religious group or within 'that' spiritual tradition may benefit IR contextual approaches toward religion significantly, notably in the attempt to understand the political imagination borne from religious practice and belief. Perhaps on this Aslan and IR religionists can agree: the issue is not whether the symbol on the wall moved, but rather, what the personal, social and political implications are in believing that it did.

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.