

Reza Aslan has become an important and critical figure in the mainstream media over the past decade. He is one of the most versatile scholar and commentator today, having written several best-sellers and known for his articulate and savvy ability to debate critically. TIM caught up with Reza to talk about the America of Today, including civil rights issues, the Republican Party, Islamophobia, marriage equality and Iran.



Reza



Aslan on the America of Today

Interviewed by Amina Chaudary

THE ISLAMIC MONTHLY: A lot has happened in the past year, with respect to police brutality and other civil rights issues. If anything, it has stirred up so much discussion about race in America. We are seeing images of the Confederate flag coming down but at the same time black churches being burned. Is this a pivotal moment in American history?

REZA ASLAN: The conflict over race in America has been a feature of this country since long before its founding. The Civil War. Reconstruction. Jim Crow. The Civil Rights Movement. Even after federal laws were put in place to deal with the legal status of African Americans in the United States, these conflicts never abated. I think there were times, as a result of societal stress, that racial conflicts rose to the surface. And I understand why, with the election of President [Barack] Obama, many people simply assumed that those conflicts were put behind us. But let's be honest with ourselves — these conflicts never dissipated. What's happening today is just a part of a very long process of dealing with racial tension in this country. It's a part of our very identity as Americans, the very history of the United States.

TIM: How do you reconcile the tremendous progress, politically speaking and with respect to individual rights, in curtailing discrimination against minorities with the reality that minorities remain targets of bigotry and discrimination on a daily basis?

ASLAN: I would question your premise that there have been all these laws to curtail injustice and inequality. On the contrary, we have seen both the Voting Rights Act and affirmative action laws gutted by the Supreme Court. These are two major pieces of legislation whose entire purpose was to address the yawning gap between African Americans and white people in this country, and they have essentially been

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disintegrated in the last decade. Bill after bill passes through state assemblies with the purpose of disenfranchising poor and primarily African-American voters. When it comes to our federal laws, we're going backward on the issue of African Americans, and, in particular, poor Americans. This is the same racism that we have always had in this country. It ebbs and flows, but it remains ever present.

TIM: But do you think there is something related to the demographic changes going on that is a little bit unique to the time period running? America is going to be a majority-minority country relatively soon. If you look at the arch of the country, that's going to be something totally new. Do you see that as playing a role in how these things are playing out now versus maybe the process with the historical that you spoke about previously?

ASLAN: Yes. But when it comes to federal laws, I think the effect of those demographic changes is at the moment benefiting those who are against racial inclusion and integration. As is often the case, when you have these profound changes in society, what you first get is an overreaction to them. What we are seeing now, particularly under Obama's presidency, is an extreme overreaction on the part of those conservatives who are not happy with the trajectory of the racial, religious and cultural landscape of this country.

But to your larger point, I think that once these demographic changes become a reality, then you are going to see far greater potency from these marginalized communities. We're already seeing some trace of that. The very public condemnation of Donald Trump's egregious statements about Mexican immigrants in this country is a perfect example of what I am talking about. Economically speaking, he paid a huge cost when NBC, Univision, and Macy's [cut ties with him]. And yet, he still skyrocketed to the very top of the GOP field. What we are witnessing here is a very clear tension between a national culture that says we will not tolerate this kind of bigoted behavior, a marginalized community that for the first time has the power to punish that kind of rhetoric, and a conservative base that not only agrees with those kinds of statements, but is willing to reward it with their votes.

TIM: What do you think this means to the Republican Party then?

ASLAN: The Republican Party is on a bus driving off the edge of a cliff. I don't see a way in which a Republican becomes a president in the near future. They'll continue to dominate state houses, but they are not positioned to win a general election. To rally the base, you have to do and say things that are so odious to the general population, and they will not let you forget it. That was Mitt Romney's big mistake. He just simply assumed that he could say whatever he wanted to during the primary, and then he would just talk to the center during the general election. It's what Republicans have always done. Except that we don't live in that world anymore. We live in a world in which everything you say is recorded and played back over and over and over again. You cannot get rid of your previous statements. We have yet to see if Jeb Bush learned that lesson from Mitt Romney.

TIM: In this political space, if the Republicans are incapable of winning an election, do you see a transition where you have a Democratic Party that looks a little bit more Republican, except on some social issues? A new party or maybe the lower side of the Democratic Party turning itself into another party? Do you see the demographics change? Do you see political parties realigning maybe 20, 30 years down the road?

ASLAN: I don't think so. We have been talking about a third party for a very long time. The American political landscape is simply not built for it. We are given two options, and increasingly those two options look more and more alike. But there are significant differences — primarily when it comes to domestic issues, cultural and social issues — that are going to be used to help people make a distinction between Democrats and Republicans. But I don't see a third way opening up any time soon.

TIM: How has Islamophobia changed over the past four years? If you were to chronicle it, how does the narrative change from movements to messages to tactics?

ASLAN: It's become more mainstream. That's probably the most obvious trend that we have seen with Islamophobia in this country. It used to be a matter for the fringes. Even after 9/11, it still maintained its status within the fringes. If you recall

the 2004 presidential elections, Muslims were not an issue. Nobody on either side used anti-Muslim sentiment to gain any kind of traction. It really wasn't until the 2006 congressional elections that you started seeing this used as a wedge issue. 2004 was about homosexuality, and that issue was very deftly used to create wedges and conflicts among the voting classes. But in 2006, certainly by 2008 with the election of Barack Obama, anti-Muslim sentiment rose to the surface, becoming part of the political mainstream. By 2012, it was absolutely off the hook, with a majority of GOP representatives vowing that they would not allow a Muslim to serve in their cabinet. That kind of rhetoric would have been unimaginable in 2006. Yet, it became so much a part of the political mainstream in 2012, the Republican candidates who propagated it were rewarded for their statements and their rank bigotry.

TIM: Can you draw a parallel of Islamophobia following the trajectory of other minorities in American history? Is there a predictable trajectory with relation to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments by which you can foresee what it would be like in the next 10 or 15 years, or do you think this is a unique trajectory?

ASLAN: No, I don't think there's anything unique about Islamophobia. If you look at statements being made about Muslims in this country — that they are un-American, that they do not represent American values, that they are foreign, that they are exotic, that they are the quintessential “other” — those exact statements were made about Jews in this country during the interim War period. They were made about Catholics in this country in the 19th century. We actually passed laws curbing Catholic immigration. We had an entire political party that at one point was the third most powerful political party in the United States, and it was predicated almost singularly on not just curbing Catholic immigration, but also on getting rid of the Catholics who were here in the first place. In the interim War period, the kind of anti-Semitism that one would hear from the political mainstream would have been shocking even to the most grotesque Islamophobe in this country today. Business leaders like Henry Ford published the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in his newspapers as though it was news, forcing his dealerships around the world to sell them. Religious leaders like Father Charles Coughlan, who was unquestionably the most popular tent revival preacher of his time, traversed this country

talking about the Jews as Christ killers. He was ultimately arrested by the FBI for stockpiling weapons in preparation for the final battle against the Jews. National heroes like Charles Lindbergh blamed the Jews for World War Two, calling the war a Jewish conspiracy in order to drag the United States into a conflict in Europe. Today, that kind of rhetoric has no place at all in the political mainstream. Yes, it certainly still exists in the extremes. Anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish sentiment are still very much alive in this country. But it's back in the fringes where it belongs. Catholics and Jews are as much a part of the religious fabric of this country as anyone else.

The same is going to happen with Muslims. Muslims just happen to be the newest sort of outsider in this country. Anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States is very much connected to anti-immigrant sentiment. Even though Muslims came to America as slaves long before the establishment of this country, nearly two-thirds of American Muslims today are first-generation immigrants. That's a huge number. Yet at the same time, nearly 70% of Muslim immigrants — first-generation immigrants in the United States — are American citizens. That's the highest citizenship rate



Soldiers celebrate end of Ramadan

of any immigrant community in America. They also have the highest literacy rates, the highest education rates and the highest income rates.

This has partly to do with the American identity itself, which is a malleable thing. Most other countries were able to form their identity at a very early stage based on some sense of homogeneity. We have never had that in the United States. And so the American national identity has had to form itself in a dramatically different way. It's not based on a common culture, ethnicity, race, language or religion. It's based on

often going to be whoever is the newest face — whether that's Mexicans, Japanese, Catholics, Jews or Muslims. We will always find someone to define ourselves against.

It's not whether there are or should be free speech issues involved in these kinds of bigoted statements. It's about there being a price to pay for them. It's perfectly legal for someone to make some disgustingly anti-Semitic billboard and pay to have it posted on a bus. The problem, however, is that as a result, the bus company is going to suffer financially, and the organization that paid for the poster is going to be censored, even

difficult for immigrant communities to reconcile. On the flip side, what you hear from a lot of immigrant Muslim communities is that the Islamophobia they are dealing with on a daily basis doesn't really apply to African-American Muslims, that somehow they are immune from it because they are not "foreigners." And so they don't understand what it truly means to be a Muslim in America, because frankly, they are Americans.

That, I think, is really a tragedy because there's so much that the indigenous Muslim community and the immigrant Muslim community have in common. There are so many ways in which they could be allied together to promote their common causes. Sadly, I don't really see that happening, except for in a few places like in New York, where you have large African-American Muslim communities. But for the most part, I think it's a real tragedy, the lack of cooperation between these two communities in the United States.

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an agreement over a set of values, a set of principles. But those values and principles, in times of societal stress, are going to be in flux. They are going to be in need of constant redefinition and reinterpretation. And so, we always need some “other” to define ourselves against. It's very difficult to say what it means to be American, but it's very easy to say what is *not* American. Right now, Muslims have become the opposing pole, the most easily recognizable “other,” the thing which people can use to define themselves against at a time in which their identities are in crisis.

TIM: It's hard to imagine that the country would allow for billboards on buses that vilify segments of the African-American or Jewish communities as un-American, but it's commonplace with respect to Muslims. How does free speech find its limits in America?

ASLAN: Within one generation, that kind of speech will be unimaginable. But I also want to emphasize that we will probably find somebody else to demonize and identify ourselves in opposition to. This is the inevitable consequence of how we construct American identity. A country of immigrants cannot rely on any kind of homogeneity to define itself. It's going to constantly look for someone to identify itself against and that someone is very

economically punished. There is a price to be paid for that kind of public anti-Semitism. Currently, there is no price to be paid for public Islamophobia. On the contrary, there is actually a reward for it. You get rewarded by the media, you get rewarded by voters, because you are tapping into what is a widespread dislike and misapprehension toward Muslims in this country.

TIM: You are talking a lot about this being the new face and Muslims. But how do you factor African-American Muslims into that?

ASLAN: I find that there is this strange and unnecessary division and even conflict between indigenous Muslims in the United States and Muslims of immigrant backgrounds. You see this all the time, particularly from African-American Muslims who will say, “I can't go to that mosque because that mosque is full of immigrants. And they don't really consider me to be truly Muslim because they have this Pakistani or this Arab conception of what Islam is.” And the African-American Muslim experience simply does not match the immigrant Muslim experience. Moreover, the African-American Muslim experience is tied to the larger African-American experience, which of course, has created enormous ripples within African-American Islam. And that is something that is very

TIM: What is your sense of the liberal anti-Muslim sentiment developing through voices like Bill Maher and others who perceive the illiberal nature of certain aspects of Islam to be highly problematic?

ASLAN: My problem with that kind of liberal critique of Islam is that it's given in the guise of somehow representing liberalism. But it's not representing liberalism. Bill Maher, of course, is the worst at this. He will say the most bigoted, uninformed statements about Islam. And then when he is criticized, he will simply say in his defense, “I'm a liberal! I can't be a bigot!” That to me is absurd. It's not liberal to call for the racial profiling of an entire people, as Bill Maher has repeatedly called for. It's not liberal to generalize about an entire class of people based on the actions of the few. Unfortunately, the term has just become this kind of catch-all to allow for the spouting of the same grotesque statements that one finds among the far right.

TIM: The Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism program has been met with significant controversy, where some argue that it represents an effort by the government to more overtly monitor Muslim communities. Is there a way for the government to be involved in addressing extremism at the local level without creating this issue?

ASLAN: The problems I have with the CVE program are twofold. One, there is no Islamic extremism problem in the United States. That's a fact that the CIA and the FBI agree with. There is no extremism problem among Muslims in the United States. The vast majority of these terrorism arrests — even those that can be even remotely considered legitimate — have been nothing short of entrapment by the FBI. The cases in which you can absolutely agree that we have an extremist, who was arrested before they could act — those are infinitesimal numbers as opposed to what we see, for instance, in Europe, which has a real problem of Islamic extremism. But it's still small in Europe. There are reams and reams of stories about the enormous number of British Muslims who are joining ISIS. It's a huge number, something like 600. Except that it's 0.02% of the Muslim population. That's not a problem. Something that represents 0.02% of a population is not under any definition a *problem*.

The second reason I reject the whole government program is because it pretends that the extremism problem in the United States is exclusively with Muslims. Even the FBI's own statistics have proven that to be false. A recent article on the front page of *The New York Times* said that the victims of domestic terror attacks in the United States by white supremacists is double that of so-called Islamic terrorists. It's actually six or seven times that because those statistics have a very narrow view of what is and what is not terrorism. Take Michael Wade Page, the white supremacist who went into a Sikh temple and killed six people. That doesn't count in that statistic; for some reason, that's not called terrorism. When Joseph Stack, the anti-government radical, flew his plane into an IRS building, killed a government agent and left behind a manifesto with anti-government right-wing conspiracy theories that ended with the statement that violence against the United States government is the only solution, that wasn't considered terrorism. Even with the most ridiculously limited interpretation of terrorism that you could possibly find, it's still twice as many victims for anti-government and white supremacist groups. Yet, have you seen any federal subsidized government program to address anti-government terrorism or white supremacist terrorism in this country? It's all political, as far

as I am concerned. If this were really an attempt to try to safeguard the homeland against extremist ideologies, then it would actually address what is a very real threat to American citizens, and that is white supremacist and anti-government extremists. But it doesn't.

TIM: There are several schisms developing within the Muslim community as of late, controversies surrounding the Muslim Leadership Initiative, White House iftar, CVE and other issues that pit those who seek to work within existing institutions versus those who feel the only way to change the situation is to critique it from the outside. What do you think these internal discussions represent with respect to Muslim Americans? Is there something happening in America in general that is guiding this set of discussions?

ASLAN: No, I really do see it as a political maturity among American Muslims. As I said, two-thirds of American Muslims are first generation, and two-thirds of that two-thirds are from South Asia. Many American-Muslim immigrants are from countries in which the concept of political participation or civic participation is totally a foreign concept. I mean, yes, you vote, but the notion that you would spend money on campaigns, that you would join political action committees, that you would go door to door trying to convince citizens of your opinion, that you would even bother to join the marketplace of ideas in a public realm — that is completely foreign to most Muslim immigrants in this country. And so it is going to take a generational shift. I do have one criticism of it, however, which is that it tends to be so narrowly focused on “Muslim concerns” or “Muslim issues.” You know what I haven't seen enough of is American Muslims using their clout to advance causes for the general good — be it issues of climate change or poverty alleviation or LGBT rights, issues that have nothing to do directly with the Muslim community, but are about the betterment of American society. That's really lacking in the American-Muslim community. But I do feel as though that is something that's going to rise eventually, that it's a gradual process whereby, as we continue from generation to generation, we will see a greater maturity in tackling the subjects through a Muslim lens, but not exclusively for the betterment of Muslims.

TIM: Is there something happening in America in general that is guiding these sets of discussions or disagreements within the American-Muslim community or that may allow for this ripening of our maturity?

ASLAN: America has always been this way. From the very beginning, we spent so much time praising the Founding Fathers and we forget how much they loathed each other and how often they expressed that loathing for each other. This is part of America — that's part of our vibrant political participatory landscape, and it's just that American Muslims are late to the game. That's all.

TIM: Why did you feel compelled to write about marriage equality in the way that you did?

ASLAN: I am passionately for marriage equality — and for gay rights in all forms. I have many deep loving relationships with gay and lesbian couples and individuals. I know them as human beings. It's impossible for me to “otherize” them or to think of them as a symbol for anything. And so for me, this is a deeply personal issue. But I wrote the letter with Hasan Minhaj primarily because I wanted to create a space for Muslims to have a larger conversation about it. If you read the letter — I think it's been a little mischaracterized as a call for people to change their minds. We actually state very clearly that if you think this is *Haram*, fine — we disagree with you, but you're free to express your opinion. On social media, where this conversation caught fire, we went out of our way to always allow space for comments from those who disagree with us. Everywhere we looked, we saw these robust debates taking place within other religious communities. And we saw nothing happening within Islam. And we thought primarily, that's because Muslims were afraid to say anything. Not that they were afraid from other Muslims. On the contrary, they were afraid to make their voices heard in a country that so deeply marginalized their opinions. And so, we wanted to create that space for dialogue on social media. We were absolutely blown away by the volume of the conversation, and by how positive it was. But even the negative response was surprising to us, because there were so many people who said, “Religiously speaking, I can't agree with

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this interpretation. But I do believe that we should support the decision because of the kind of country we want to live in — that civil rights are for everyone and that democracy isn't a buffet.” The real surprising thing was that it went global. That's what we did not expect, because our letter was very clearly geared toward the American-Muslim community. What was wonderful and shocking was seeing it spread to Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Germany, Britain and France. They are having these conversations, just in a different social context than we have them here in the United States. But it's a conversation that needs to be had.

Most importantly, the letter was a reminder to Muslims that this conversation of LGBT issues within Islam has been going on for 1,400 years. It's not like this popped up all of a sudden. There are dozens and dozens of legal and jurisprudential arguments and debates over the last one-and-a-half millennia about this very same topic. Far more so than in Judaism or Christianity. We wanted to tap into that history and get people access to resources where they could explore these issues more deeply.

TIM: I am curious if people would say whether you could or could not offer this type of open letter five or 10 years ago.

ASLAN: Probably not. I have always been a supporter of LGBT rights, ever since I knew what LGBT even meant — but I think that the response would have been different.

TIM: Recent decisions by the Supreme Court with respect to the right of Muslim women to wear hijab and the right of gay couples to marry seem to indicate that the country is moving increasingly in the direction of ensuring individual liberties. At the same time, the court's Citizens United decision and the resulting floodgates of campaign funds into the political process arguably make the country less equal from an economic perspective. How do you see these trends playing out in the long term?

ASLAN: I would say that these are long-term trends. The move toward individual liberty is a 250-year-old process. The move toward liberalism and social progressivism is a 250-year-old process. We tend to think there are these conflicts that arise between conservatives and liberals over certain issues like same-sex marriage or the role of women in society or the role of African Americans, etc. But the truth is that society is moving toward progress inch by inch, step by step from the very beginning. Those on the right will occasionally win battles, but they will always lose the war. Whether it's about slavery, women's suffrage, health care, or LGBT — the left always, always wins because that is the natural progression of society in this country. So I don't see votes like the Citizens United as going against that notion. From the very moment that we created a federal currency and a federal bank in this country, we created a system whereby those with power — whether from owning land, people or a corporation — have a greater voice in society than those without power. Ultimately, the Citizens United judgment said that money is voice. If money has a role to play in the political sphere, then it cannot be curtailed any more than voice can. That is the equivalent of saying that some people have a greater voice than others. And we have always known that to be the case in this country. Whether it's landowners or slave owners or the titans of industry, it is always the case that the more money you have, the louder your voice is. The Supreme Court decision simply codified that reality. I don't think it created a new one.

Is it going to wreak havoc in our political elections? Of course. Because laws were put in place over the last hundred years to create some sort of parity when it comes to the volume of a person's speech and how much money they can insert into politics. Those laws, which are not in the Constitution, are no longer valid. So now we're going back to the way things were in this country, where the powerful get to openly decide who our political leaders are going to be.

TIM: What is your sense regarding the long-term implications of the Iranian nuclear deal with the Americans? Why do you think that Obama was pushing for this deal now? How does it factor into his legacy? What will it mean for American foreign policy today and tomorrow?

ASLAN: I think that this is the most significant foreign policy achievement of President Obama's tenure. And he needs it because he really hasn't had many other significant foreign policy achievements. There's an enormous distance between his rhetoric and his actions. The New START Treaty has begun to crumble with Russia. How he dealt with the promotion of democracy — as he promised in 2008 — has been an absolute disaster in the Middle East. His handling of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been catastrophic, though now he has a year left, and the perfect political environment to actually do something about it. Support for Israel in the United States has never been lower than it is today, even among Republicans. So all Obama really has left is this nuclear deal with Iran. But it is a big deal because it's not just about curbing Iran's nuclear program. I know that the Obama administration has gone out of its way to limit the scope of this agreement to Iran's nuclear program, both in the negotiating rounds and its rhetoric to the media. They don't want to talk about anything else. But in a very ingenious way, he's also realigning America's priorities in the region by establishing a different set of alliances. People much smarter than me have said this is not about getting into bed with Iran; this is about getting out of bed with Saudi Arabia. President Obama has smartly realized that the Saudi regime is crumbling from the inside. It's a source of radicalism and extremism around the world, and almost every single problem that we have with transnational Jihadism, from al-Qaida to ISIS to Boko Haram, can be traced to Saudi Arabia. We are desperate to get out of that relationship, and the only way to do that is through energy independence. So, he has, unlike any president in history, exploited America's natural energy resources so that we can become energy independent. This deal with Iran is not just about nuclear negotiations; it's the first step toward interdependent trade relationships and perhaps even the normalization of ties between the U.S. and Iran. It's an attempt

to realign the United States to move away from the Gulf monarchies and focus instead on Turkey and Iran as the region's main players in the coming century. And it will profoundly change the nature of the Iranian government by creating an Iran that is much more integrated with the rest of the world and thus, as a result, will have to be far more responsible at home.

TIM: Any last-minute thoughts on the America of today?

ASLAN: We are a work in progress. And that work is going to be defined by each successive generation of immigrants who make this their home. People refer to America as a melting pot, and that is a

terrible metaphor. A melting pot indicates that everyone's uniqueness melts away into a common whole, and that's not what happens here. If anything, America is a sponge, it absorbs each new culture, each new identity that comes to its shores. As it changes them, it too changes — by expanding the very nature and substance of what it means to be American. These are sometimes frightening events. They make people uncomfortable. People look around and don't recognize the economic, social, racial or religious landscape that they are living in. They start to hearken back to some kind of idealized, imaginary past. But there is no past in America; there's only the future. And we are moving toward a future that will be unlike that of any other nation.

We will be the first country in the world to be a majority made up of minorities. That is something to celebrate.

TIM: What's the one thing most people would be surprised to know about you?

ASLAN: I am the biggest Oakland Raiders fan. I bleed Silver and Black.

Dr. Reza Aslan, an internationally acclaimed writer and scholar of religions, is author of the #1 New York Times Bestseller Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, and of No God But God.

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