

Transcript 124

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast and today's episode I've got a special guest with me today, Abdu Murray. He's the author of *More Than a White Man's Religion*. This is a topic that's fascinating to me because over the last few years as race issues have become very prominent in the United States and also around the world of course, but specially here, we've been a lot of questions where people went against Christianity just a religion for white people? Or people who have seen the church do very poorly when it comes to race relations and have as a result of that turned away from the faith, or at least begin questioning it whether it is Christianity really a religion for people of color? So we're going to be discussing that today.

Shea Houdmann

It's an excellent book, highly recommended and we'll discuss later. So Abdu welcome to the show, and maybe let's start out, tell our listeners a little about yourself and your background and what led you to write this book.

Abdu Murray

Well, thanks Shea for having me on. I've always been a fan of the site and its popularity is well deserved and it's influenced as just God honoring. So I'm, I'm thrilled to be on with you and thanks so much for having me.

Abdu Murray

So I was raised in a Muslim home. I was very proud of being a Muslim. I was a Shia Muslim. And there are many, many different sects within Islam. The two biggest ones are the Shia and the Sunni. And that's made a lot of news because of the strife between them that's made quite a bit of public clamor of late, and Shia are minority. But the differences are largely political and have to deal with the origins, not origins of Islam, but the origins of the leadership of Islam after Muhammad. But other than that, they're basically the same.

Abdu Murray

And I thought it was true, and I grew up in America. I was raised, I born and raised in America, and we were exotic. I was the olive skin. We were sort of the dollop, dollop of olive oil in the pot of rice in the area I grew up in. So we were exotic and that led me up to opportunities to be able to share why I thought Islam was true. Because people wanted to know if what do you guys believe exactly? And after 911 everyone wants to know that now, but I I became a believer in Christ before 911. But leading up to that, people were still curious.

Abdu Murray

Well, I was challenging Christians. And Christians were sort of low hanging fruit. Shea I was more of a equal opportunity faith knocker out or other. It didn't matter if you were a must, a Christian or Hindu or Buddhist, or Jew, or an atheist. I would eventually tell you why you were wrong when I was right when I was a Muslim but Christians were low hanging fruit. You know, there was, there was it was in the 80s

and 90s when it was fashionable to say you were a Christian, even if you didn't really mean it. So I would engage Christians in conversations and very few actually knew what they were talking about in terms of why they believed what they believed. But a few did. And along the way, they challenged some of my assumptions not only about Christianity but also about Islam.

Abdu Murray

And I began to go through a process where I was seeing if what I believed is based on tradition or it's based on truth, because it can be both. But I wanted to see if what was the primary motivation for this? And over the course of nine years, I began to study Islam, Christianity, and every other ISM and schism there is trying to find out the truth. And after the close of that nine year journey I saw that the answers that were my, my, my mind longed for and my heart also longed for we're both satisfied in the Christian faith, historically, scientifically, philosophically, theologically. And then ultimately they existentially really coalesced together, and I found that the Christian faith in the Christian faith alone actually answers all of those questions from all of those various vantage points. I think in cohesive ways and coherent ways and comprehensive ways.

Abdu Murray

Does that mean I found the answer to every single question ever going to have? Well, the answer is no, of course not, but I found enough answers to justify that having faith in Christ was not only true, but also worth it. And that the fundamental distinction people often make is that people don't come to faith just because it's true. They come to faith because it's true and it speaks to their lives and it speaks to their hearts as well.

Abdu Murray

So that took 9 years. I was in the midst of that studying in law school to become a lawyer. I passed the bar, became a lawyer, practiced law, did complex commercial, commercial litigation, and then also jumped into into into ministry. And I do this now, writing books, speaking in various venues including and especially college campuses and those venues as well. And that led me to write More Than a White Man's Religion partially because of my background, you know.

Abdu Murray

As someone from the Middle Eastern descent and I have the sort of the non white perspective, but also someone raised in the west, the West in the predominantly white area. I also know the the insider perspective from the white community as well, and from people of color. And having come from an ethnic minority but also a religious minority, I know what it's like to actually assess Christianity as sort of wanting, in one sense, from, from a skeptics point of view, but then seeing how it's not really wanting. And I wanted to express that in More Than a White Man's Religion, because Shea, I'll wrap it up by saying. I think this, I think that the world is still asking questions. The culture is still asking questions like, is the Bible true?

Abdu Murray

You know, was lysanias really Tetra Kabbalah as Luke says, or did he get it wrong? You know they have those minutiae questions and those fact based questions as well. But the primary question I think the culture is beginning to ask isn't is the Bible true? They're asking is Christianity moral? And race and

gender issues therefore come to the fore. And that's why I think it spoke was such a timely book for me to write, and it's been something I've been addressing at college campuses and from the platform for quite some time now.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely, and like I said earlier, we we've received a lot of questions about this over the years and more it's becoming more and more a question. So in your experience, both in your research on preparing to write the book and speaking on college campuses, what is the main driver of why some people are asking this specific question that is Christianity only a religion for white people or even only religion for white males? What's what's driving that inquiry?

Abdu Murray

Yeah, I think that there's several things that are several factors. They're all sort of the confluence of things happening all at the same time. You know, you have the death of George Floyd, for example, that catalyzed the world really. It wasn't just Western culture that's asking this question now, everyone is asking this question. And I think the political the politicization of Christianity, specifically evangelicalism, being associated with one particular either political party or one sort of side of the spectrum, as it were. And so it's become viewed as white favored and male centered in that way. And some of that is earned in terms of the reputation of Christendom versus the actual teachings and foundation of Christianity. So I think that's part of what's driving this.

Abdu Murray

And obviously there's a history here, Christians have not always acted that well when it comes to issues of race or gender. We have a history we have to be honest about and have to deal with. Christians, people who were Bible believing Christians back in the antebellum south owned slaves and were part of the slave trade. Whether it's in America, in the Americas, or it's in Europe or in other parts of the world, we have to own that. And I think that has catalyzed a view that Christianity is a white male religion 'cause in the past, white males have used it. I would even say this so far as they misused it to justify actions to other words to baptize otherwise evil practices that the Bible actually prohibits. And so that's the that's the shame of it all is that it's been come to be seen as a white male religion because it's dominant in sort of white Western European circles, but the reality is it's an olive skinned religion that spread across Africa and was actually promoted strongly in the earlier centuries by Africans and Middle Easterners to influence the West for the good. And so many of the abominable practices that were happening in the 1st century were put to death, in a sense, because of the message of the Bible.

Shea Houdmann

I think one of the most interesting quotes in your book was to quote by Frederick Douglass, and I'm probably going to butcher it but I think I'll get the spirit of it right, when you essentially said it wouldn't matter if every white person on the planet was a terrible racist that does not change the truth of the resurrection. Has not changed the truth claims of Jesus Christ and how he is the Savior and he is the only answer to the problems we face in the world.

Abdu Murray

Yeah, but it Douglas. In fact, I I remember a lot of the quote, it was that between the Christianity of this land, and he's speaking of antebellum South, between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference. So wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy is, of necessity to be the enemy of the other. And he basically is saying that the Christianity that was the perversion of the original message used by slaveholders and slave traders to justify their positions is as far a chasm as, or possibly could be from the Christianity of Christ. From the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Absolutely.

Shea Houdmann

So let's jump to the solution, because I I like a lot of what you talk about, both the the biblical solution, the gospel solution, and then you go even a little bit into the more practical solutions. But when someone asked that question is Christianity a white man religion? What have you found in your experience is the best response or responses to people who have that struggle?

Abdu Murray

Yeah, and there there's very many, and I go through it in the book, but a couple of things I think are worth pointing out. The first thing is that we have to understand what we mean when we say it's a white man's religion. Certainly religions don't have ethnicities, and certainly they don't have gender. So what do we mean when we say this? And I think if you point out the fact that Christianity is growing in the global south and in Asia. Whether it's in Africa, it's sub-Saharan Africa, South America or Asia, it's growing primarily among non white people in a postcolonial world. So it's not because colonialism is to blame, as it were, or that these poor non white people don't realize that their beliefs are based on a colonialism they can't seem to shake. Because that's actually insulting in itself, isn't it? It's saying that these these people of color can't figure things out for themselves. That's not true. So it's growing not because of politics. It's not growing because of white influence. In fact, white influence in those areas is waning yet Christianity is growing. So I think that just the fact that see today is that it's not a white religion. It's actually religion for all people, including white people and including people of color. That's it's a fact. You can't get around that fact.

Abdu Murray

But I think fundamentally one of the most important fundamental things is the Bible, whether older New Testaments doesn't actually focus on race, it does have a lot of distinctions on ethnicity. But this is an important characteristic. When the Bible judges certain people for the and brings God condemnation upon them, and either uses the nation of Israel others to judge those people. It's not because of their ethnicity in terms of the way they look, or their genetics. Because genetically speaking, in the ancient nearest east, everyone was essentially identical. No God is judging them based on the cultural expressions that lead to wickedness like child sacrifice and temple prostitution and rape and murder being just rampant behaviors.

Abdu Murray

So God in essence is not judging cultures based on their appearances or estimations of their lower intelligence, or whatever these racist ideas might be. No, the God of the Old Testament and the New Testament is judging people based on their ideas and their expressions. In other words, it's very similar to what MLK said is that we don't judge someone by the color of their skin, but by the content of their

character, and that's what the Bible actually does. In fact, it could be decided to be racist in one sense, because Israel, the favored nation, as it were or as it would be said, isn't immune from the same judgments that its neighbors are. So it's a universal religion in that it tests as justice comes to all, but all are often offered equal mercy. In fact, that's what the Bible message is all about, from Genesis to Revelation.

Abdu Murray

In fact, it's interesting William Lane Craig has pointed this out that in other ancient Near Eastern creation myths, what you have is a sort of a generalized discussion about the creation of humanity, usually as slave labor for the gods. And there's no real specificity as to women's creation, but there is in the Bible. And that's a statement of equality all by itself. The Bible does not begin with the call of Abraham as the father of the Hebrews. No. The Bible begins with the creation of the entire world and goes in specific because the Bible is about the redemption of the entire world, regardless of ethnicity and regardless of gender.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, it's one of the things I really liked in your book is how you in a sense separate OK, let's talk about is Christianity a white religion? Is Christianity a white man's religion? You discuss both race and ethnic identity and also gender in there. And I think those are helpful to separate, because both of those are big issues in the culture, and both are especially common questions we receive. I mean, if you look on our top 20 questions of all time, the question of can women serve as pastors over men is still the number one question of all time that we've received in any sort of restrictions to make well why is the Bible just favoring men over women, or why is Christianity seem to be predominantly a religion for Europeans over the past 1500 years or so? Why is it been dominating in one particular ethnic group? And so both questions are really important. You separate them, but then also bring them together to discuss the Christianity is a faith for all people of all color of on both genders, etc. And it's a powerful reminder of how everything is is tied together.

Abdu Murray

Yeah, and I think, you know, and one thing I I make sure I wanted to do was to address some of the tougher passages of the Bible. I remember when I was first started out in speaking and speaking at universities, I was invited to speak at the university. And I was taken by the group who was who who had invited me to on a tour of one of the buildings and they said, we want to show you this display and the secular student alliance had put up a display. This is back when Dawkins and Dennett and Hitchens and Harris, the four horsemen of the New Atheism as it were, were just absolutely just new on the scene. And the display showed, it had two had a division and it had the Bible on one of the displays, and it had various passages plucked out of out of context, frankly, and it said the word false over them. Like, you know, women were forced to marry their rapists, and women were considered property for men, and slavery and all these things all throughout there. And then the other side were the, you know, Dawkins, Hitchens, Denton you know, then the books and the words true were labeled all over them, and I think that is carried over since and so, yes, these are the pressing issues of our day.

Abdu Murray

But when you look at those passages because we have to look at them, we have to look at them. I think, honestly. Hopefully what I've done in the book is provided enough cultural context, enough historical context, to point out that passages in the new time, sorry in the Old Testament, that seem to condone slavery are actually passages that regulate indentured servitude.

Abdu Murray

And in fact, when you look at the way that is, is it in itself regulated. 1st, it's not. None of the servitude is involuntary, it's voluntary. Second, even where it is regulated, it's regulated in a way that actually regulates itself out of existence. There are things in the Old Testament that were intended to remove the kind of debt incursion that someone would have to the point where they'd have to become an indentured servant because their lives are so destitute. And those passages actually require certain things of the so-called masters to rectified the situation and to free people from their burdens, even if they haven't paid them all off yet so. In those proper contexts you can start to see they're not race based, they're not really chattel slavery. They're nothing like the slavery we think of in the antebellum South or the north Atlantic slave trade.

Abdu Murray

And when it comes to women, I mean, there's a couple of just beautiful nuggets, honestly, with the more and more I read the Scriptures and as I was researching this book and reading some things, just some things that jumped out at me that were just beautiful. Take for example the book of Esther. So Esther is a hero of that book. In a so-called sexist book why would you make Esther a hero? You'd make it only Mordecai. And Esther would be sort of a sort of a side character, but she's not a side character. In fact, it's her bravery that allows her to defy the king and walk into his presence, realizing that that might get her killed, because that was against the rules and ancient Persia, in order to save her people. So you can see almost like a reference to Christ. And here a hidden reference to Christ is that she goes in risking her life for the sake of her people. And that harkens us right to the idea of the cross, which is that Jesus doesn't even risk his life. He sacrifices his life willingly for the sake of all people. Interesting that a woman could be a figure of that ahead of time.

Abdu Murray

But it's also interesting. And one of these beautiful nuggets that the Bible gives to us is the story of Vashti. You know, the book of Esther opens up with the king of Persia, and he's got a banquet, and he's got his wife, and she's got her banquet going on. So the men, the women are separate, and Vashti is beautiful. She is incomparably beautiful. And the king summons her to come into her chambers, to be a trophy wife, to show off to all the guests. Look how beautiful my wife is. It's interesting. Vashti says no, she refuses the king, and that's of course a crime and she's banished for it. But that very act is the story of character. Vashti is not the prime of character in the story. Yet she bravely holds up her own dignity, says I will not be an object of men's desire, and so she refuses to go into the Chamber of the king when he summons her. Esther, in contrast, goes into the presence of the king even when he didn't summon. Or in other words, women are showed in this one book alone, and there's so many others to be extraordinarily brave and have tremendous character. And they figure prominently all throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Shea Houdmann

And so many other beautiful stories in the Bible. There's a book called Vindicating the Vixens that I read recently where it goes into different women in the Bible who are unbiblically maligned. Like trying to attach on something immoral or sketchy about women whom the Bible is absolutely nothing negative and it is refreshing to be reminded how the Bible uplifts women in a way that's amazing for especially the literature at the time that it was written.

Shea Houdmann

Some powerful nuggets like you said that in a sense, one thing I really like about the book is how honest you are with the difficult passages in the Bible and the difficult aspects of Christian history where we've royally messed up. I mean, to say the least. But the way that the Bible is doesn't like explicitly outlaw slavery, but lays the foundation for how how it should be done away with. The way it does not forbid treating women poorly and or like property so to speak, but uplifts them to the point where if you're really looking at what Scripture says about women, you would not be treating them poorly. So it addresses a culture that existed at the time and it since regulates it, but also points to a better way, especially when we get to the New Testament. See how Christ dealt with people, uplifted women, and the apostles speaking so positively of women throughout.

Shea Houdmann

You see how the foundations being laid for what Christianity is still striving to become, the faith of following Christ and following his example, and how he treats people. A lot of people look at the scriptures and say, why didn't God just outlaw this out, outlaw this, outlaw this? And it's like, I I get that, I understand that. I really wish there was a command completely against human slavery. You are not allowed slavery and endangered servitude, whatever, but God chose to not do it that way, but instead chose to teach people love and respect and recognize that all human beings are created in the image of God. And how could you possibly enslave another human beings creating the image of God? So laying the foundation and I really like how you express that in your book as well.

Abdu Murray

Yeah, you know, it's interesting because when you do look at some of the passages of the Bible that are partially the the most troubling, for example, when the Bible references how you can acquire certain people. Robertson Mcquilkin and Paul Copan actually point out that this word actually doesn't connote the idea of actual chattel ownership of a property so much as it's akin to how, you know, the Chicago Bulls acquired Dennis Rodman from a different team. You know, you don't really acquire someone at it in that way. But you have to wrestle with the fact that the Bible actually is regulating something in a very harsh environment, in a very harsh surrounding environment when you look at the biblical regulations on indentured servitude, compared to the the laws of comparable and contemporary ancient near Eastern cultures which didn't regulate indentured servitude but actually regulated actual chattel slavery, what a difference it makes. And those things are actually meant. Those biblical regulations are actually meant to gradually do away with the practice altogether, if you completely follow them.

Abdu Murray

A good example is the fact that when a servant is pays off their debt finally to their master, if they haven't already been freed, because of the seven-year rule, because servants were required to be freed after every seven years, whether they pay the debt off or not, or every time in Jubilee. In other words, if

you were an indentured servant for six months and then the year of Jubilee came, you went Scott free. And what happens with that is the Addon or the master, as it were, of that debt have to give liberally from his own livestock, his land, and his property to the freed servant so that the freed servant would never go back into indentured servitude again.

Abdu Murray

Here is something that is so important for us to understand. When America, when the American Civil War was over and emancipation had happened, slaves were freed. And that fact W EB Dubois pointed out that slaves were freed, but freed to what? To wander a wilderness with nothing but the shirts on their backs. Had there been a provision, some kind of measure during reconstruction, what we had actually said, maybe from the plantations they've been freed from, they're allowed some land or they're allowed some kind of monetary gain to make up for what's happened to them. So they don't actually end up back in this situation economically, maybe not, you know, forcefully, but economically in slavery. We wouldn't be having this situation, we'd be having today. We wouldn't have talked about it equities. This is not an argument in favor of or against reparations, but my point is, is that the biblical regulations had they actually been followed, I think would have cured us of the very ills the Bible sometimes is often blamed for. So I think that's a really important distinction.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent point Abdu, and again, I could not recommend some More Than a White Man's Religion any stronger, but it's a much needed message maybe let us conclude with this, if someone comes up to you and says why shouldn't I view Christianity as a white man's religion and you, you don't have the opportunity to hand them your book and you've got like the the two-minute opportunity to speak this person. How do you answer that question?

Abdu Murray

That's a great question. Wow, I think I would say it this way. So at first I would prefer to asking questions. So I would think I would say, I think I would ask you to really ponder what you mean when you say white man's religion. But let me answer it this way. Christianity is a religion that was founded in olive skinned region. Dominated by a white Western European power. And it wasn't the European power that influenced Christianity, it was Christianity that changed the very heart of that Western part of that western imperial power to end slavery eventually, and to vaunt women. There is a reason why the initial progenitors of Christianity were people of color.

Abdu Murray

There's a reason why the predominant population of the world right now of Christians is people of color. It's not because they don't know any better, is because they know who Christ actually is. And there's a reason why in the 1st century, in the 2nd century Christianity was made fun of by the Romans as a as a religion of women and children, because it was women who flocked to Christianity not because of sexist ideologies, but because of the Savior who vaunted women to being the equals that they really are.

Abdu Murray

So I challenge you read the book with that in mind, read the Bible with that in mind. And see men like Frederick Douglass, people like Amy Carmichael. These people saw the difference between the

character of Christianity you see today and the carrot in the Christianity of Christ that we see that. You know, there is this poem by John Greenleaf Whittier that I love. It's called him. And there's a couple of stanzas that are so beautiful. He says that when from each temple of the free a nation song ascend to heaven, most Holy Father unto thee, may not our humble prayer be given. That children, all so human form, are varied in thine own goodwill? With my own holy breathings warm and fashioned in thine image still. Our hughes and our forms, male and female, dark and light, were all fashioned in God's image. And Revelation tells us that all of us will keep our ethnicities. We'll keep our gender when we lay our crowns before the Lord of Glory and have a wonderfully beautiful unity in our diversity as we worship a God who is Trinity, unity, in diversity.

Shea Houdmann

Amen, Amen. Well said, love the book, highly recommended. Will definitely be including it as a recommended resource on numerous Got Questions, articles when it when it comes out, which will be soon. So I'm excited for that. So Abdu, thank you for joining me on the Got Questions Podcast today.

Abdu Murray

What an honor it was, Shea, and thanks for the time. I really appreciate it and great work you guys were doing.

Shea Houdmann

Well, thank you. Thank you for that encouragement. We'll include links to where you can learn more about Abdu and his ministry and also More Than a White Man's Religion where it can be purchased both in the the show notes for this episode, on podcast.gotquestions.org one step so goes live and also on the description on YouTube. So if you you missed it, we're able to catch it will include some links so you can for sure learn more. Or purchase the book 'cause it is a tremendous resource. So I love how theological it is. But that's that's my wavelength, so thank you for that as well. So again, Abdu thank you for your time today. Really enjoyed our conversation. This has been the Got Questions podcast. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.