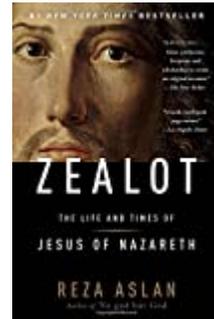
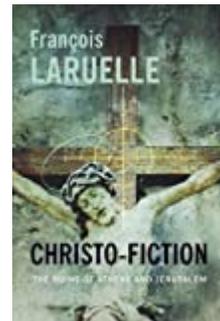




Reza Aslan. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth.* New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014. 336 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8129-8148-3.



François Laruelle. *Christo-Fiction: The Ruins of Athens and Jerusalem.* Translated by Robin Mackay. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xvi + 273 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16724-6.



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These books have little in common but their failure to offer a satisfactory antidote to honest bibliolatry. The first sentence in Reza Aslan's *The Zealot* declares it a miracle that we know anything of the life of Jesus. In fact we would know nothing if it were true, as he asseverates, that none of our Gospels was written by the man whose name it bears (p. xxvi). Even if this were demonstrable, the inference that they are forgeries would be unwarranted unless we knew that the authors themselves had attached false names to them. Aslan repeats the old but unverifiable claim that forgery was not considered dishonest in antiquity; he goes further still in arguing that the evangelists had no intention of imposing upon

their readers. Who, he asks, would believe in the flight to Egypt or in a census that required everyone to return to the ancient home of his ancestors (pp. 26-31)? The answer, since by hypothesis we know nothing of the authors and therefore nothing of the audience, is that Gentiles outside Palestine might believe anything fifty years after the event. And perhaps they would be justified: it is certainly no argument against the veracity of the evangelists that they describe a trial which contravenes every precept in the Mishnah (pp. 156-158), for the Mishnah is a utopian compilation, and the Gospels are describing not a regular tribunal but a lynching by proxy, on which a perfunctory semblance of legality was conferred by a

meeting at dawn (Mark 15.1). Aslan seems to relax his critical standards when handling written materials outside the New Testament: one cannot prove, by mingling uncorroborated anecdotes from the Talmud with a handful of texts written later than the Gospels and almost certainly with knowledge of them, that exorcism was a ubiquitous practice (pp. 103-104); the assertion that itinerant preachers followed by a ragged band of satellites were a common sight in antiquity (p. xxxiii; this is refuted, not confirmed, by the examples of Theudas, Judas the Galilean, and Athronges, who led not bands but temporary legions and have left not one recorded saying between them). Again, while the *son of man* on the lips of Jesus is surely the figure of Daniel 7.13, many scholars hold him to be a corporate representation of Israel, not an individual redeemer as Aslan opines without canvassing any other theory (pp. 136-145). And if we grant all that he claims, we must remember that fiction is fiction, so that we can no more discover from the Gospels whether Jesus was a zealot (pp. 73-79) than we can ascertain the true causes of the French Revolution from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Still less can we hope to derive a veridical account of infant years of Christianity from Eusebius or the Acts of the Apostles (pp. 183-212): skepticism must be held to the standard of consistency that it rightly demands of faith.

The title of François Laruelle's *Christo-Fiction* seems to promise a sharp distinction between reality and fancy, but in fact such crude antitheses have no place in a book which urges, in the manner of Alain Badiou, that only mathematics can preserve us from metaphysics. A rigorous application of the algebra that governs quantum theory is inculcated, though Laruelle spares himself the definitions that any textbook of physics would offer, and leaves the readers of his opening chapters to work out for themselves what he means by terms such as *matrix*, *superposition*, *idempotent*, and *taste vector*. A little light is thrown on the application of this new vocabulary when he propounds, as the first of two universal axioms of christo-fiction, the *superposition of Christ* (of

his sayings) and of Greco-Judaic theology (p. 112). Superposition in physics is the occupation by a particle of all the states that it is possible for it to occupy before it is observed. The superposition of Christ, says Laruelle, is an operation of idempotence, defined most lucidly on p. 173 as *the capacity of an operation to produce the same effect*. The meaning of his first axiom therefore appears to be that Christ is best conceived not as a person in a particular place and time but as that algebraic sign which represents every possible value on a wave. Each of us as an individual, if we have faith, occupies one of these values, but we are constantly tempted to exchange this faith for the mere belief which assumes an ossified form in the Torah and the Greek theory of the Logos. Laruelle's second axiom, that of noncommutativity (p. 113; pl. 172), entails that, while it is *christic science* that effects the superposition of Law and Logos, we cannot affirm, as the converse of this truth, that Law and Logos impart significance to Christ. Nor is Christ the Messiah, let alone the fulfilment of a predetermined Messianic hope: he is a *vector of Messianity* (p. 172), while the Cross on which he expired is the fourfold matrix of messianism, faith, fidelity, and belief (pp. 192-197; cf. 43-46). The crucifixion is not so much the sacrifice of the Son to a transcendent God as the death of divine transcendence (pp. 215-217); it has no meaning without the Resurrection, which is not so much Christ's rising once for us as the rising of each of us in Christ (p. 207). Here we catch an echo of Protestant existentialism, though its language is, by comparison, transparent; of Laruelle one can only say what I have said of Aslan, that if his argument is to prevail it must be carried to its logical conclusion, which in this case would be the reduction of theology to mathematical symbols. Instead of the promised algebra he gives us only page of page of verbal perambulation, professing to revive the ancient gnosis without one reference to a gnostic source (chapter 1 and *passim*), and laying down rules for the interpretation of Christ's *logia* (pp. 155-159, etc.) without adducing a single word that is said to have fallen from his lips.

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