



# Teaching Notes

by

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## **Introduction**

### *Study Questions*

1. Consider the quote by musician Ani DiFranco at the start of the book.  
What are your thoughts about the questions she raises?
2. What are some of the dietary differences between Muslims and non-Muslims?
3. What is *Eid*? How is it different to Christmas?
4. Why has Alom called this book the *Young Atheist's Handbook* rather than the *Young Agnostic's Handbook* – is there a difference?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

*Living a Good Life* — what do you think a good life involves? Can it be lived without believing in God — why or why not?

### *Vocabulary*

|                |                 |         |
|----------------|-----------------|---------|
| Spontaneous    | Liberating      | Porcine |
| Intrinsic      | Anathema        | Kafir   |
| Indoctrination | Anthropomorphic | Nuanced |

### *Find Out More About*

Judy Blume

Jamie Oliver

Ayatollah Khomeini

## Chapter One: The Day God Died

### *Study Questions*

1. “In that instant, my reality was irrevocably changed.” What influence did the death of Alom’s mother have on his worldview?
2. What are some reasons people have for believing in an afterlife?
3. What is the *mind–brain duality* theory?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

“A scientific understanding of the world makes it hard to believe in an eternal soul.” To what extent do you agree?

### *Vocabulary*

|             |              |                |
|-------------|--------------|----------------|
| Oblivious   | Comatose     | Feral          |
| Irrevocably | Inconsolable | Predisposed    |
| Mitigated   | Insidious    | Verisimilitude |

### *Find Out More About*

C.S. Lewis

Richard Feynman

Kenan Malik

## Chapter Two: Being Good

### *Study Questions*

1. How influential was Kalidas on the young Alom?
2. What is the *Euthyphro dilemma*?
3. What does an *omnipotent* God mean? What does it imply about God's powers?
4. What are *Sharia laws*? How do they differ from UK laws?
5. What do you think is important to living "a moral life"?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

Outline the problem of evil and what questions it poses about the existence of God. Does it alone seem a good reason for being an atheist?

"The belief that your own religion is the absolute moral truth is a dangerous one."  
How true do you believe this statement is? What implications does it have?

### *Vocabulary*

|          |                  |               |
|----------|------------------|---------------|
| Imam     | Eliciting        | Pernicious    |
| Adhered  | Incontrovertible | Anachronistic |
| Polygamy | Intuitive        | Schadenfreude |

### *Find Out More About*

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Christopher Hitchens

Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Chapter Three: Escape to Narnia

### *Study Questions*

1. Compare your earliest experiences with books and reading to Alom's. What similarities / differences are there?
2. Alom comes to view C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* books differently as an adult — what changes, and why does he continue to enjoy the books regardless?
3. In what ways does Alom suggest are the differences between mainstream Christian readings of the Bible and the Muslim reading of the Qur'an?
4. "... it is probably foolish not to read the Bible if you are interested in developing a deep understanding of English Literature." What other reasons are given for reading the holy books of the world's major religions? Are there counter-arguments you can think of?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

"It is ironic that religious people think of God as 'eternal', when the evidence from history is clear that our very human ideas about God are anything but immutable." What are arguments that Alom gives for this statement? Can you think of any counter-arguments?

### *Vocabulary*

Malnourished

Eloquent

Sacrilegious

Abrahamic

Anthropologists

Sexism

*Mein Kampf*

Susceptible

Flabbergasted

### *Find Out More About*

Cynthia Voight

Cory Doctrow

Thomas Paine

## Chapter Four: Coconut

### *Study Questions*

1. "I've since heard people argue that words such as 'Paki' and 'nigger' are 'just words', but they are missing the point." What are some of the arguments that Alom makes about the power of insulting words?
2. Alom says he cares deeply about prejudice against Muslims, despite not identifying as one. What are the reasons he gives?
3. "We teach children, from their earliest days, the words that define them: their names, genders, position in the family, and religious affiliations." What labels have been used to define you and how accurate are they?
4. "I took the 176 bus instead of stepping through the wardrobe, but the results were the same: I entered a world where things were quite unlike the one I'd left behind." Summarise the differences between Alom's home life and school life.
5. Alom proposes that developing a sense of identity is an important part of growing up — how can religion play a part in this?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

*We all want to be the person we know ourselves to be, and for others to recognize this and treat us with respect. We want to live without being dominated by fear, to enjoy good relationships, and to have a secure place in society – Dr Dorothy Rowe.*

How realistic do you think this goal is?

### *Vocabulary*

Islamophobia

Intimidation

Abhorrent

Socio-economic

Hijab

Palatable

Narcissistic

Misnomer

Self-aggrandising

### *Find Out More About*

Edward Alleyn

Robert Smith

## Chapter Five: God is Love

### *Study Questions*

1. What comparisons does Alom make between falling in love and being religious? Do they seem convincing to you? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the modern-day concerns involving sex that come into conflict with religious belief? How do they differ from earlier times?
3. "Love conquers all unless your religious beliefs make you feel unable to follow your heart." How can religious beliefs potentially help or hinder seeking love?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

Are there more difficulties for women, in comparison to men, when it comes to being religious? Are some religions inherently sexist? Why or why not?

### *Vocabulary*

|             |            |                |
|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Egalitarian | Acrimony   | Deconversion   |
| Propagated  | Heinous    | Misogynistic   |
| Homophobes  | Abstinence | Unreciprocated |

### *Find Out More About*

Daniel Dennett

Sam Harris

Friedrich Nietzsche

## Chapter Six: My Father's Son

### *Study Questions*

1. "It seems my father's failure to set a good example in a religious sense was instrumental in my own 'failure' to become a Good Muslim." List the positive and negative influences that Alom's father had on his upbringing.
2. Look at the survey questions by Dr Shermer and Dr Sulloway. How would you have responded to them?
3. "They are subjected to elaborate rituals, such as christenings and religious festivals, that reinforce the significance of this thing called God and the importance of belief." What kinds of rituals and traditions have you been exposed to as a young person that you still take part in today?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

"However, I'm not convinced that very many of the 'religious' people I know believe in a god in the explicit sense of the word." What do you consider would be convincing evidence of a genuinely religiously observant person?

### *Vocabulary*

|          |              |             |
|----------|--------------|-------------|
| Copious  | Ramadan      | Robust      |
| Pretence | Suras        | Circumcised |
| Kosher   | Disaffiliate |             |

### *Find Out More About*

Dr Michael Shermer

## Chapter Seven: Let There Be Light

### *Study Questions*

1. What is “New Atheism”?
2. What are some of the positive influences that teachers had on Alom’s schooling? How does he view his own career as a teacher?
3. “Well, I won’t be coming to those lessons. It’s against my religion to believe we’re descended from monkeys.” What are some of the arguments for religious believers to attend all science classes, even if the content challenges their beliefs?
4. What does “non-overlapping magisterial” (NOMA) involve? Do you think it is a good approach to have to questions of science and religion? Why or why not?
5. Summarise the difference between the common usage of the word “theory” and the scientific meaning of the word. What is Alom’s interpretation of the phrase “faith in science”?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

“While I don’t condone the behaviour of ‘dick atheists’, I can empathise with their frustrations.” At what point does frustration by atheists cross the line to becoming potentially damaging to their arguments?

“It would be disingenuous for anyone to claim that religion genuinely encourages critical thought in children...”. Is there a place for learning about religions (and to what extent) in children’s education?

### *Vocabulary*

Blasphemy

Repercussions

Inclination

Pedagogical

Authoritative

Magisteria

### *Find Out More About*

Richard Dawkins

Galileo Galilei



## Chapter Eight: Kafir

### *Study Questions*

1. What are some of the difficulties that Alom faces in writing this book as a former Muslim — and could face in the future?
2. Could Alom's argument with "Susan" be better handled? Are there strategies that you would suggest for potential conflicts of this kind?
3. What criticisms does Alom have of Karen Armstrong's interpretation of the word "truth"?
4. "A 2010 study carried out by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life found that people who described themselves as atheists or agnostics were better informed about religion than those who believed in God." Why do you think this is so?
5. "When I think of this, I cannot help but believe that, just as many individuals outgrow religion, the human race as a whole needs to outgrow religion." What might be some factors that prevent this from happening?

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

"These religions have an inbuilt resistance to change ... but I have every hope that, with better education, greater freedoms, and the same rights for everybody, humanity may eventually adopt a different take on religion." Do you agree with Alom's conclusions? Why or why not?

### *Vocabulary*

|           |               |             |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Solipsist | Shackles      | Provocative |
| Devout    | Anachronistic | Paradox     |
| Formative | Mundane       | Erudite     |

### *Find Out More About*

Ricky Gervais

Ophelia Benson

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Ibn Warraq

## **Epilogue**

### *Extension Questions / Reading Group Discussion*

Alom apologises for not writing a “handbook” in the strict sense. What reasons does he give, and what would you usually expect from a “handbook”? If you were to write your own handbook about your faith or lack of faith, what would you include?