Even if you have never visited YouTube, you have probably at least heard about YouTube videos going viral. It usually happens to short films of pop culture that pique the interest of young people, usually for a laugh, and then lots and lots (and lots) of people watch them.

I never expected the academic study of religion to go viral, but it did. Fox TV’s Lauren Green’s interview with Religious Studies scholar Reza Aslan about his new book, “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth,” received hundreds of thousands of views. It is cringe-worthy stuff. From the interview’s start, it was clear that Ms. Green had not read the book, but she had to continue on for nearly 10 minutes.

But that is not the oddest thing about the interview. Dr. Aslan is an American Muslim, and Ms. Green’s primary contribution to the interview (desperately rephrased over and over) is the accusation that any Muslim who writes about Jesus must be pushing an Islamic agenda to denigrate Jesus.

Well, it turns out that Dr. Aslan holds four degrees, two in the study of religion. He earned a Master’s of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School (the nation’s oldest Christian divinity school), and he received a Ph.D. from the University of California-Santa Barbara in the sociology of religion.

So, far from writing a book about the Muslim view of Jesus (or even one Muslim’s view of Jesus), Aslan has produced a work of academic research and rigor. He knows the scholarship on Jesus and cites it, in good academic form, whether it agrees or disagrees with his argument. By his own admission, he has spent two decades researching this topic.

Indeed, in the field of religious studies, it is common for scholars to become experts in religions in which they do not believe. Among the seven full-time professors in the University of Wyoming’s Department of Religious Studies, four teach religions to which they do not belong. My own background is Christian, but I am an expert on Judaism; we have a Jew who teaches Islam; a secular scholar who handles our Hinduism and Buddhism courses; and another Christian who teaches African and African-based Caribbean religions.

So, it is not the scholars’ religious background, but their training, mastery and continuing research that make them an expert in a particular religion. A professor of political science need not be a Republican or a Democrat to be an effective instructor, and the same kind of difference holds true for those engaged in the academic study of the world’s religion.

Reza Aslan’s religious background would go without mention among academic experts on religion. Among those who work in the field, no one would have given it a second thought before the Fox interview.

And the book itself? Well, Dr. Aslan used his creative writing talents to produce a work that aims to bring scholarly debates and analyses of the historical person Jesus to a more popular audience. If you are interested in the subject, it is a good read, with many footnotes directing the reader to further material.

Is it cutting-edge scholarship? No, not really. The case he makes for Jesus being a rebel against Rome (a “zealot”) is immersed in the history of scholarly analysis, starting more than 300 years ago with Reimarus. He takes his own positions on the many points of debate and presents a plausible case for his characterization of Jesus. He may put together the puzzle that was Jesus in a new way, but nearly all the pieces have been seen before. [Most major English-language newspapers around the world have reviewed the work.]

Will you (or I) agree with his conclusions? Some of them probably, but not all of them. If you are an evangelical Christian, you will find much to dislike in the volume. But you will dislike it because it is a work of secular, academic scholarship, not because it has a Muslim viewpoint.

The book comprises a good example of how religious studies scholars have been trained to set aside their personal views and beliefs about religion to write works of analysis accessible to, and important for, everyone interested in the subject.