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The Jihad Is a Civil War, the West Only a Bystander

By WILLIAM GRIMES

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The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam

By Reza Aslan

310 pages. Random House. \$25.95.

For many in the West, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center turned a page in world history. They signaled the onset of a monumental struggle between fundamentalist Islam and modern, secular democracy, what the Harvard scholar Samuel P. Huntington has called a "clash of civilizations."

Not so, Reza Aslan argues in "No god but God." "What is taking place now in the Muslim world is an internal conflict between Muslims, not an external battle between Islam and the West," he writes. "The West is merely a bystander - an unwary yet complicit casualty of a rivalry that is raging in Islam over who will write the next chapter in its story."

That history, grippingly narrated and thoughtfully examined, takes up nearly all of "No god but God." Mr. Aslan, an Iranian by birth and a doctoral student in history and religion at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has written a literate, accessible introduction to Islam (or, more accurately Islams), carefully placing its message and rituals in historical context. Complete with a glossary and an annotated bibliography, it could easily serve as a college textbook.

Mr. Aslan is, in a certain sense, a fundamentalist. The Christian sense of the word is meaningless in Islam, of course, because Muslims believe that the Koran was dictated by God and, therefore, that its words are literally true. But like the puritanical Wahhabists of Saudi Arabia, whom he reviles, Mr. Aslan looks to the first Muslim community in Medina, established by Muhammad 1,400 years ago, as a model for reform today. His Medina, though, is a communal, egalitarian society dedicated to pluralism and tolerance. The problem with Islam, Mr. Aslan argues, is the clerical establishment that gained control over the interpretation of the Koran and the hadith: the anecdotes describing the words and deeds of Muhammad, passed on by his followers and their descendants. Less than two centuries after Muhammad's death in 632, there were some 700,000 hadith circulating throughout the Muslim world, "the great majority of which were unquestionably fabricated by individuals who sought to legitimize their own particular beliefs and practices by connecting them with the Prophet." The stoning of adulterous women, to take a notorious example, originated not in the Koran, but in the virulent misogyny of Umar, one of Muhammad's first converts and later the ruler of the caliphate, who simply claimed that this form of punishment had accidentally been left out of the Koran. Although women in the Medina community were given the right to inherit the property of their husbands and to keep their dowries as their own personal property, later scholars decided that the Koran, when instructing believers "not to pass on your wealth and property to the feeble-minded," had women and children in mind.

One of Mr. Aslan's most important chapters deals with the centuries-long struggle between traditionalists and rationalists over the proper interpretation of the Koran. The outcome weighs heavy on the world today. The rationalists saw the Koran as both the word of God and a historical document whose meanings change through time. For the traditionalists, the Koran is fixed and eternal. Therefore, "what was appropriate for Muhammad's community in the seventh century C.E. must be appropriate for all Muslim communities to come, regardless of the circumstances."

The traditionalists won. The power to interpret the Koran came under the control of religious scholars, collectively known as the ulama, who ended the era of consensus and free reasoning that, up to the 10th century, had defined Koranic inquiry.

If this sounds like a remote quarrel, it is not. Mr. Aslan says it is now being played out again throughout the Muslim world. This, he argues, is the real jihad, not holy war against the West, but the internal struggle for Islam's soul, with reformers pitted against reactionaries in Tehran, Cairo, Damascus and Jakarta, as well as in Muslim communities in the West. "Like the reformations of the past, this will be a terrifying event," he writes. "However, out of the ashes of cataclysm, a new chapter in the story of Islam will emerge."

This has a heroic ring to it, but Mr. Aslan acknowledges that the outcome is in doubt. He places his hopes in the like-minded liberals who, he suggests, constitute Islam's silent majority. "The fact is that the vast majority of the more than one billion Muslims in the world readily accept the fundamental principals of democracy," he writes. Like the reformers in Iran, they are committed to "genuine Islamic values like pluralism, freedom, justice, human rights, and above all, democracy."

This may be, but Mr. Aslan, in his polemical conclusion, tends to assert rather than present evidence. His impassioned plea for an Islamic form of democracy, although moving, sounds sophistical. Religion and the state, in his view, cannot be separate. The very concept is alien to Islam. "At its most basic level, the Islamic state is a state run by Muslims for Muslims, in which the determination of values, the norms of behavior, and the formation of laws are influenced by Islamic morality," he writes. Yet somehow pluralism, human rights, equality of the sexes and religious tolerance would prevail, because, ultimately, these values already exist in Islam.

As Mr. Aslan acknowledges, Iran's halting steps toward a synthesis of Islam and democracy have been discouraging. The example of the Taliban casts a very dark shadow over the idea of an Islamic state. But the tide of history, Mr. Aslan insists, is moving in the right direction, sweeping Islam back, after 1,400 years, toward Medina.

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