The Jihad Is a Civil War, the West Only a Bystander - New York Times

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 battle 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 Islamists), 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. But 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.

This has a heroic ring to it, but Mr. Aslan acknowledges that the outcome is in doubt. He 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 The rationalists saw the Koran as both the word of God and a historical document whose meanings change through time.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 discussion. 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."

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As Mr. Aslan acknowledges, Islam's haunting 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, 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.

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