

Review: JAI160

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

NO GOD BUT GOD: The Reinterpretation of Islam

a book review of
No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam
by Reza Aslan
(Random House, 2006)

This review first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 30, number 3 (2007). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

The events of 9/11 guaranteed one thing—that the Western world must come to understand Islam. Public awareness of Islam, the world's fastest-growing religion, has gone from the basement of our consciousness through the roof, and is now somewhere in the stratosphere, but six years hence, this still has not translated into useful knowledge for very many people. How can this be?

First, a majority of Westerners think, "Muslims are here...probably to stay—but as long as they mind their own business and don't disrupt *my* way of life, I've got no problem with that." After all, Muslims constitute about half of 1 percent of the total U.S. population (somewhere between 5 and 6 million), there hasn't been a serious terrorist incident in the United States since 9/11, and most of our Muslim neighbors seem to have assimilated into the mainstream. Why, then, should we be alarmed?

Second, paradoxically, authors of books and magazine articles, bloggers, and interviewees on radio and television bombard us with "perspective." This cornucopia of informants is a mixed blessing, however. On one hand, the magnifying glass of expertise is angled to offer a sharper image of the Muslim community, its history, its customs, and its ambitions, to show a bewildering array of specimens. On the other hand, the barrage of information is withering. Alarmists warn of the imminent dissolution of civilization, longsuffering multiculturalists call for sharp discrimination between the militant minority and the peace-loving majority within the Muslim community, and others greet Muslim immigration with the expectation that little will change in American culture as a result of the assimilation of Muslims.

Thoughtful Christians need historical perspective to develop a strategy for educating themselves about the opportunities and challenges that have emerged in Islam in recent years. In *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, Reza Aslan chronicles the development of Islam from its unpromising beginnings into a force to be reckoned with worldwide.

A two-page chronology marks key events from the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in 570 up to Al-Qaeda's attack on New York and Washington in 2001 (pp. xxxi-xxxii). This timetable reflects Aslan's desire to educate non-Muslim Westerners about Islam in the wake of 9/11. His strategy is to document the history of Islam, describe inner tensions within that historical context, and relate the resulting picture to current conditions, in a manner that is neither reckless nor misleading.

Pre-Islamic Background. The story he tells begins in the Arabian desert during the pre-Islamic era of the sixth century AD. Chapter 1 provides the back story for the emergence of Islam. It is a story with two dominant themes, one geopolitical, the other religious. The Arabian desert was the habitation,

geopolitically, of warring tribes, and religiously, of waning pluralism. Tenets of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity mingled with native paganism, and this amorphous mix congealed into a kind of henotheism, where tribes acknowledged a panoply of gods but reserved their highest respect for one or another particular god. This set the stage for the emergence of a bona fide monotheism.

Aslan argues that Muhammad, born in the last half of the sixth century, “would have been influenced as a young man by the religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia” (17). He was not the lifelong monotheist portrayed in traditional Muslim accounts. Aslan briefly recounts the high points of his childhood, as preserved in traditional Islamic legend (see 19–21). He doubts the authenticity of the traditional narrative and says only that

we can reasonably conclude that Muhammed was a Meccan and an orphan; that he worked for his uncle’s caravan from a young age; that this caravan made frequent trips throughout the region and would have encountered Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish tribes, all of whom were deeply involved in Arab society; and finally, that he must have been familiar with the religion and ideology of Hanifism, which pervaded Mecca and which very likely set the stage for Muhammed’s own movement. (21–22)

The Hanifists were pre-Islamic monotheists who were in some significant sense indigenous to the Arabian peninsula.

Chapter 2 explains the emergence of Islam in its initial socioeconomic context. As a young man, Muhammad lived in Mecca, a city severely stratified along economic lines, where a group called the Quraysh held the reins of political power and religious influence. Aslan explains the development of Muhammad’s “prophetic consciousness” as “a series of smaller, indescribable supernatural experiences that climaxed in a final violent encounter with the divine” (36). (Here, as elsewhere, Aslan strays from traditional accounts in the interests of historical accuracy. This is a welcome tendency in his book.) The sporadic revelations that came to Muhammad were recounted orally, addressing injustices in Arabian society, such as the distribution of wealth among the Quraysh. This led to a series of increasingly violent clashes between Muhammad and his entourage and the Quraysh. During a period of exile, Muhammad gathered supporters and received additional revelations, summed up in the *shahadah*: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger.”

Muhammad’s exile effectively ended in 622 AD. He came upon “a small federation of villages” and an oasis where he wished to settle, a region called Yathrib. This became the site of Medina, “the City of the Prophet.” Aslan details the significance of Medina in Chapter 3, where he makes the arresting statement, “Today, Medina is simultaneously the archetype of Islamic democracy and the impetus for Islamic militancy” (52). Aslan speculates that Muhammad conceived of his community as a tribe, with himself as its leader. This tribe, in due course, evolved its own laws of social governance and developed into a religious cult.

Intra-Islamic Sectarianism. Muhammad, unfortunately, made no clear arrangements for a successor, and “the era immediately following [his] death was...a tumultuous time for the Muslim community” (66). Muhammad’s “Companions” (those who had lived and worked closely with him) assumed rule, and their oral pronouncements were loosely codified in a series of *haditha*, a grab bag of rules and regulations that by the ninth century were subject to radically differing interpretations exploited by competing claimants to Islamic purity.

The Qur’an suffered a similar fate, as different schools of interpretation emerged. At the center of these developments were political machinations as well as simple practical exigencies. Aslan, in Chapter 6, describes a welter of variants of Islam, and intramural disputes that were dramatically polarizing. The chief victors in the intero-Islamic skirmishes took shape in sharp contrast to what Muhammad had envisioned. Chapter 7, “In the Footsteps of Martyrs: From Shi’ism to Khomeinism,” brings this sectarianism up-to-date. Other chapters explore the concept of jihad, Sufi mysticism, and the Islamic response to colonialism up through the early twentieth century.

Aslan’s Particular Brand of Islam. Readers will have recognized that Aslan’s understanding of Islam differs from that of the “Traditionalists”; yet, he is a committed Muslim. The front pages of *No god But*

God include the familiar Muslim acclamation, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” Aslan, however, is a reformist. His concluding chapter expresses the hope that a democratic reform movement within Islam eventually will displace the radical Islamist movement, which he believes is defined by terror and at odds with the true spirit of Islam. He segues to this chapter with this brief paragraph: “Fourteen hundred years of rabid debate over what it means to be a Muslim; of passionate arguments over the interpretation of the Quran and the application of Islamic law; of trying to reconcile a fractured community through appeals to Divine Unity; of tribal feuds, crusades, and world wars—and Islam has finally begun its fifteenth century” (248).

In the final paragraph of the book, he writes:

It may be too early to know who will write the next chapter of Islam’s story, but it is not too early to recognize who will ultimately win the war between reform and counter-reform. When fourteen centuries ago Muhammed launched a revolution in Mecca to replace the archaic, rigid, and inequitable strictures of tribal society with a radically new vision of divine morality and social egalitarianism, he tore apart the fabric of traditional Arab society. It took many years of violence and devastation to cleanse the Hijaz of its “false idols.” It will take many more to cleanse Islam of its new false idols—bigotry and fanaticism—worshipped by those who have replaced Muhammed’s original vision of tolerance and unity with their own ideals of hatred and discord. But the cleansing is inevitable, and the tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here. We are all living in it. (266)

Christian Concerns. Those are heartening words. What are we, especially those of us who are traditional Christian believers, to make of this, or of the rest of Aslan’s book?

First, the historical narrative Aslan presents is engaging, informative, eminently readable, and, under close scrutiny, fairly reliable. It will not be considered reliable by Islamic Traditionalists, but Aslan makes a plausible case that their narrative is largely mythological. I am struck by the contrast with Christianity, a historically older tradition. Its history is better known and better founded. This is a major attraction that Christianity has for me. Its most important historical claim, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, is so well-attested that, in comparison with what is actually known about the life of Muhammad, it is refreshingly factual and free of mythology.

Second, the book is devoted mostly to historical documentation. It concludes with enthusiastic expression of hope for reform in the direction of a democratic Islamic culture, but Aslan offers little reason to believe that this is the likely outcome, to say nothing of its “inevitability.” His prognostication and current realities are utterly discordant. As a Muslim, he is right to do all he can to hold fast his faith in a more peaceful outcome, but non-Muslims who would welcome the reforms he envisions would like to see evidence that they are prevailing against Islamic radicalism.

Third, Aslan’s account of the origin and development of Islam follows a dubious principle of secular historical practice. He believes that all religion is conceived, incubated, weaned, and matured almost entirely in response to sociocultural conditions. He relies on this in his defense of the early history of Islam and of the peculiarities of Islamic tradition and the challenges of Qur’anic interpretation. Islam is no different than Judaism or Christianity in being human responses to the religious imperative. Aslan distinguishes between “factual history” and “sacred history” (3). Here’s an illustration of his outlook:

If the childhood stories about Muhammed seem familiar, it is because they function as a prophetic topos: a conventional literary theme that can be found in most mythologies. Like the infancy narratives in the Gospels, these stories are not intended to relate historical events, but to elucidate the mystery of the prophetic experience.... Again, the historicity of these topoi is irrelevant. It is not important whether the stories describing the childhood of Muhammed, Jesus, or David are true. What is important is what these stories say about our prophets, our messiahs, our kings: that theirs is a holy and eternal vocation, established by God from the moment of creation. (21)

Fourth, this methodology raises questions: Aslan is Muslim, but in what sense? Is he a supernaturalist? Does he believe that all religions are equally valid? My impression is that he is a sincere monotheist who believes that Islam is greatly in need of reform, that this reform requires reinterpretation of Islam’s

history and sources of authority (the Qur'an and *sharia* law), that reinterpretation along these lines is nevertheless faithful to Muhammad's original vision, which included, most fundamentally, a commitment to social egalitarianism, and that being a Muslim is more a matter of ethnic orientation and cultural conditioning than it is of maintaining allegiance to a particular creed, beyond the *shahadah*.

Fifth, there is an eerily sanctimonious thread in the final chapter that may be grounds for concern. Aslan does reassure with the emphatic declaration that "an Islamic democracy cannot be a religious state." A religious state would not be a democracy but an oligarchy (most would say, with dread, that it would be a theocracy). A religious state of Islamic orientation also most likely would be rife with internal struggles, since "there has never been a successful attempt to establish a monolithic interpretation of the meaning and significance of Islamic beliefs and practices" (265). Aslan goes on to say that "this does not mean that the religious authorities would have no influence on the state." He says that "such influence can only be moral, not political. The function of the clergy in an Islamic democracy is not to rule, but to preserve and, more important, to reflect the morality of the state" (265). He suggests that "if ever there is a conflict between the two, it must be the interpretation of Islam that yields to the reality of democracy, not the other way around" (266). Aslan, however, does seem to think of an Islamic democracy as in some sense an Islamic state.

This should concern us. It would seem that for a state to be Islamic in any meaningful sense, it would have to be informed by Islamic religious ideals. It is hard to imagine that these ideals would not privilege Muslim believers over other members of society. Aslan's own account of Muhammad's community indicates that non-Muslim citizens had more limited rights than the Muslims who shaped the ideals and social arrangements of their society. Islamic clergy may be able to exert considerable influence within a democratic state, by seeking to establish an Islam-friendly consensus among the people of that state.

Aslan says nothing about the boundaries of a legitimate, democratic Islamic state. It seems, based on what he does say, that the United States of America could become an Islamic state. It also seems as though Aslan naturally would hope that if this happened, it would remain a democracy. It would be interesting to know whether Aslan would rather live in an Islamic democracy than in a democracy such as we have in the United States today. It also would be interesting to know how such a transformation might take place, and what the concrete result would be.

Despite these concerns, I recommend Reza Aslan's book. It offers a sympathetic but critical look at the origin and development of Islam. I hope Islamic reformists are successful in curbing the excesses of fanatics. I would like to know what specific strategies have been developed for this purpose. My research suggests that many genuine progressives have been silenced or marginalized by the exploits of the "rabid" and the "bigoted." Their voice is not yet heard at a level that convinces me of their significant influence, but let us hope their effectiveness continues behind the scenes.

I want to conclude by recommending another book. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has recently published a memoir titled *My Year Inside Radical Islam* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2007). Gartenstein-Ross grew up in southern Oregon as a secular Jew. At university he was converted to Islam because of its visible action on behalf of a class of oppressed people. Having converted, he was gradually radicalized. This book explains how this can happen to a sensible young man, and gives cause to worry about America's universities, many of which have been endowed funds by radical Islamic sects to provide programs in Islamic studies. Gartenstein-Ross is no longer a Muslim, but he believes that moderate Muslims will play a role in dealing effectively with radicals. His memoir gets most exciting toward the end where he describes his escape from radical Islam, facilitated in a crucial way by the appeal of Christianity. I don't want to spoil the ending by saying any more than that. Do read the book.

— reviewed by R. Douglas Geivett