No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam
By Reza Aslan
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A Book Review by

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Europe in the fifteenth century of the Christian calendar was wracked by religious wars. The Protestant Reformation unleashed views that prompted priests, peasants and princes to take up arms against each other. It is noteworthy that this is the fifteenth century of the Islamic calendar, and Muslims are also divided in the name of religion. In his 2011 book *No god But God*, Reza Aslan sees substantial similarities between Martin Luther's application of the then newly available printing press and Osama bin Laden's use of the Internet. Both men and the communication technologies they used are credited for decentralizing the interpretations of their respective religion's teachings.

Aslan asserts that "bin Laden may have had more in common with mainstream Christian reformers like Martin Luther than many would like to admit" (2011: 290). He points to Luther's insistence that readings of scripture other than those which he had prescribed were to be prohibited. He also draws attention to the Protestant preacher's public call for mass murder during the Peasants' Revolt in 1525: "Let everyone who can, smite, slay and stab [them], secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be so poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel" (Ibid: 291). Over a hundred thousand peasants were massacred.

Whereas Europe at that time was facing the impact of the printing press, changing religious ideas, and rising nationalism, its conflicts occurred with the cultural context of the continent. However, the current struggles within Muslim societies have to contend with the legacy of colonialism, the continuing influence of the West, globalization, and an increasingly mobile population—to say nothing of the potent nature of digital technologies. It is not surprising then that this religious conflict has spilled out into the West.

The author's updated edition of his 2005 international best seller adds a new last chapter, "Welcome to the Islamic Reformation: The Future of Islam", that examines the impact of the Internet on the ways that Muslims engage with their beliefs. This review focuses on that chapter rather than on the rest of the book which deals with the origins and evolution of Islam.

Aslan points to the attraction of the Internet to Muslims, who seek advice through it on how to practice their religion. The picture he draws is that of a marketplace of *fatwas* where an individual believer keeps shopping for a ruling on a matter of religious concern until he finds one that deems acceptable to him.

> If the desired fatwa is not found in the database, the employees at IslamOnline will happily connect the user to a live "cyber-mufti", who will chat with the supplicant in real time and issue a satisfactory fatwa in less than twenty-four hours. If the cyber-mufti's fatwa proves unsatisfactory, the user can simply switch his browser to one of IslamOnline's many competitors, such as FatwaOnline.com, IslamismScope.net, Almultaka.net, Islam-QA.com (whose fatwas come in twelve languages), or AskImam.org—all of which provide their own unique (and also often contradictory) fatwa databases.
>
> <div align="right">(Aslan, 2011: 287)</div>

The author suggests that the Internet is enabling Islamic religious authority to become "democratized" (2011: 288). However, the consumer-like search for the fatwa that fits one's particular view does not appear to make for a healthy democratic society in which certain levels of societal consensus are necessary. The author does admit that the marketplace approach to religious guidance is a cause for concern, but states that "a new generation of politically active, socially conscious, and globalized Muslim youth" (Ibid) are drawn to the Internet for spiritual advice because they distrust institutional authority. A large proportion of Muslim Internet users live in the West and the content that they produce has "enormous influence over their co-religionists in Muslim-majority states" (Ibid: 289). However, recent developments in Arab countries appear to show young Muslims and Christians as well as others are quite adept in producing their own materials for the World Wide Web and social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Even those who do not own computers are able to access a substantial proportion of online content through mobile devices, although they are limited in their ability to contribute significant amounts of content. (This easy acceptance of the new media is quite contrary to the view espoused by Benjamin Barber in his popular 1995 book *Jihad vs. McWorld*, which, drawing on the stereotype of the barbaric Muslim, stated that the adherents of Islam were averse to using contemporary communication technologies).

Aslan notes that various sources of authority in Muslim-majority countries are also adopting new communication technologies. A new class of dissident Islamic preachers have created authority structures parallel to the official ones, which themselves are using contemporary forms of media to fight in the war of ideas among Muslims. Given that some three-quarters of the populations of Muslim societies are under the age of thirty-five, the pressure for traditional Islamic institutions to appear relevant to the increasingly media savvy youth draws them into employing new modes of communication. Continuing to draw what he sees as precedents in European Christian history, Aslan terms such use by Muslim religious authorities as manifesting Islamic "counter-reformation" (2011: 291).

The author holds that current developments in Muslim societies, spurred by the use of new media, are taking them beyond the Jihadists' unscrupulous exploitation of Islam. He appears convinced that the militant phase of Muslim engagement with modernity is coming to an end. Given the continuing turbulence in Muslim societies, this seems to appear overly optimistic. It is not clear from Reza Aslan's descriptions of the electronically connected virtual *Ummah* (Muslim community) how the situation in which a multitude of voices that are competing for attention will advance towards a resolution to the current strife. He also does not explain the existence of anti-establishment and militant views among some Muslims several decades before the emergence of contemporary media technologies.

About the Reviewer

Karim H. Karim is Professor at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication, where he previously was the Director. He recently stepped down as Co-Director of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, UK. Dr. Karim has been a distinguished lecturer at venues in North America, Europe, and Asia and his publications have been translated into several languages. He received the Robinson Prize for the critically acclaimed book, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence*. Professor Karim has been also honoured by the Government of Canada for promoting inter-faith collaboration.

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