How to Win a Cosmic War: An Interview with Reza Aslan

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Personal and Intellectual Influences

Alan Johnson: What have been some of the most important personal, familial, and intellectual influences that have shaped your work?

Reza Aslan: I came to the United States at the age of seven, in 1979. As you can imagine that experience really shaped who I am and the way I think. It was why I decided to study religion and politics, and the interplay between the two. My childhood experiences in revolutionary Iran put a fire in my belly about those topics. As far as people who have influenced me, my mentor at Santa Clara University, Catherine Bell, an expert on Chinese religions, was the first to re-focus my academic studies away from early Christianity and the New Testament (the subject of my BA) and toward Islam. After I graduated, she sat me down and told me that by the time I finished my PhD all anybody would want to know about was Islam. She encouraged me to become more familiar with my own culture, and with Islam as a religion. That obviously was great advice. As a writer, I guess my greatest influence came from a dead Russian. When I was a sophomore in high school, around 16 years old, I read a book by Fyodor Dostoyevsky titled *The Brothers Karamazov*. That really sealed it for me. I'd thought about being a writer before, but reading that book made me realise this was exactly what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

Alan Johnson: Your first book, *No God but God*, was beautifully written and I was not surprised when I read that you consider yourself a novelist. You pay tribute to

the late Frank Conroy as someone who 'taught me that writing is a noble profession; that writers are almost chivalrous in their profession – noble people embarked on a noble task.' Can you tell us a little about Frank Conroy?

Reza Aslan: I think of myself primarily as a fiction writer, even though all I ever seem to get the opportunity to write is non-fiction! My next book is an anthology of contemporary literature from the Middle East called *Word's without Borders*. After that I will be returning to a novel that I was working on while getting my MFA in Fiction at the University of Iowa, where I studied under Frank Conroy. He too was an enormous influence on my life. He personally brought me to Iowa, to the Writers' Workshop, to work with him. He said something very interesting to me when we met in the first week of school. He saw in my writing that I understood what it *meant* to be a writer, that I understood what writing was. The problem was, he said, that I didn't know *how* to write. But then he said, 'fortunately that's something that we can teach you.' In other words, he believed that one can't really be taught what writing is, but that one can be taught the craft of writing. So he went systematically through the process of teaching me. It was an amazing experience.

Alan Johnson: Do you see yourself as someone with a 'noble task?'

Reza Aslan: I decided to study religion in school, even though I planned on being a writer, because of my experience at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit university steeped in the promotion of social justice. The Jesuits taught me that whatever I did for a living, it must benefit society, it must be for the greater good; I must work towards justice and peace. And I think that what Frank really showed me, with his notion of writing being a noble endeavour, is that one can make that kind of impact on the world through writing. That a writer has as much power with words as a soldier has with a gun.

Part 1: The Islamic Reformation

Alan Johnson: Am I right in thinking that you'd like us to think about religion – religion per se – in a new way? Your analysis of Islam seems to me to rest on the understanding of religion as a human response to an existential imperative, and that this response is shaped most not by the texts but by the prevailing socio-cultural contexts in which people grapple with life. Religious stories, in this light, are not so much historical truths as 'prophetic topos' and, you say, 'the historicity of these topoi is irrelevant.' What really matters is what stories are adopted and how

they make sense of the world for people. Achieving religious reform, then, is about achieving reform in the prevailing socio-cultural conditions, not, fundamentally, about disputing the 'correct' interpretation of texts. First, have I got that more or less correct?

Reza Aslan: That's a really nice way to put it. The problem, especially here in the United States, and certainly in Western Europe, is that we tend to think of religion as a *personal* and *confessional* experience between the individual and his or her God. This has a great deal to do, of course, with the Protestant experience, and the rampant individualism that is such an integral part of western identity. But that is not how religion really functions in the rest of the world. Religion is about much more than just a belief system. It's about *identity*. It's about one's culture and politics, even one's economic ideals. All if this is wrapped up in the expression, 'I am a Christian,' 'I am a Muslim,' or 'I am a Jew.' I try in my writings and lectures to help people understand that when we talk about religion or religious faith, we are talking about a form of identity that is as vital as ethnicity, nationality or race.

Alan Johnson: What are the consequences of adopting this anthropological understanding of religion? How does it change the way we think about the relation of religion and politics, for instance?

Reza Aslan: We tend to think of many of the conflicts around the world as being religious conflicts. The sectarian conflicts in Iraq between the Shia and the Sunni, or in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, or the cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians – because these conflicts are often framed in the language of religion, they are misunderstood as religious conflicts. But if you think of religion as involving questions of identity, then you will understand these conflicts are not religious conflicts, they are not about faith or belief. This is important because while political or economic conflicts can be solved, religious conflicts can't be solved. In my new book, *How to Win a Cosmic War*, I argue that we must strip the conflicts we are experiencing in the world of their religious connotations specifically so that we can end them.

Alan Johnson: Can I pursue this? You say 'When we talk about radicalism in the Muslim world we are talking about political radicalism' not religious radicalism. You claim that al-Qaeda's 'secular goals' are 'couched in the language of religion' only because 'religion holds the most currency with the masses and provides a powerful language to create simple collective identities and to urge collective action.' You

think Karl Rove is not really so different to al-Qaeda in this regard. But what does it mean to say Osama Bin Laden has 'social grievances, political grievances, economic grievances, that are framed in the language of religion?' Does it mean Osama Bin Laden is cynically deploying a religious language he doesn't believe in? (Fraud) Or that he does believe in the religious stuff, but that he has misunderstood the real i.e. non-religious roots of the conflicts that move him? (False consciousness) Or something else?

Reza Aslan: Let's understand that when religion is involved it's not just an issue of faith or belief; it's an issue of identity. As a scholar of religions I am wary of making statements like, 'this is a bastardisation of Islam,' or 'Islam is actually a religion of peace, and these militants have adulterated it by turning into a religion of war.' The truth of the matter is that Islam is neither a religion of peace nor a religion of war. It's just a religion. Like any religion it can inspire heights of compassion or depths of depravity. That's what religion does. I don't think we should diminish the fact that those who carry out violence in the name of religion, are doing so, often, as a religious act. Especially when it comes to a group such as al-Qaeda, they truly are motivated by what they view to be their religious impulses. But what's important for us to understand in dealing with such acts is that religious impulses are not just about God, they are not just about Heaven and Hell, they are about ones sense of self, ones identity. These conflicts may be wrapped in the language of religion but that doesn't make the grievances behind them any less politically, socially or economically legitimate.

That is the thing about Globalisation: it breaks down the barrier between 'religion' and 'politics.' And as that line becomes increasingly blurred, one has to recognise that religious grievances are no less valid than political grievances and religious violence no less rational than political violence. I am not saying that we should ignore the role that religion plays in these conflicts, quite the contrary. Having a better understanding of what religion is allows us to respond more effectively to these conflicts.

Alan Johnson: On the one hand, you see an unstoppable 'reformation' taking place within Islam – a shift from doctrinal absolutism to doctrinal relativism, and a 'truly indigenous Islamic enlightenment.' On the other hand, you have spoken of 'the Wahhabisation of the Muslim world that is taking place right now.' You have written of an 'internal conflict – a civil war really – that has been raging within Islam for more than a century.' Can you disentangle these two trends for us, talk about their

respective roots, their relationship to each other, and make an assessment of their relative strengths and future prospects?

Reza Aslan: Those two trends – the enlightenment and the wahhabisation of Islam – are two sides of the same coin. When we hear the term 'reformation,' particularly in the West, in the Protestant world, we immediately assign a positive value to it. We think of "reformation" as a necessarily positive thing. We think of the Christian reformation, which is erroneously referred to, particularly here in the United States, as the 'Protestant Reformation,' as a conflict between Protestant reform and Catholic intransigence that was won by the Protestants. That's *not* what reformation means. Reformation, which is a universal phenomenon that takes place in nearly all religious traditions, particularly in Western religions, refers specifically to the conflict between the institutions of a religion and the individuals of that religion over who has the *authority* to define faith. This is an ever-present conflict that often remains latent, but which can rise to the surface during times of societal stress. We can talk about first century Palestine, and the reformation of Judaism, which led not only to Rabbinic Judaism, but to a whole new religion as well, 'Christianity.' Or we can talk about sixteenth century Europe and the reformation of Christianity. Or we can talk of the nineteenth and twentieth century Middle Eastern reformation of Islam. In each case, ultimately what is at stake is authority: who gets to define the religion, the institution or the individual?

Now that process of reformation can have positive consequences. The individualising of religious interpretation can lead to new, progressive, reform-minded ways of thinking about religious faith, including the reconciling of religious faith with scientific and social progress. But if you remove the authority to define the faith from the hands of institutions and put it into the hands of individuals, you are bound to get both interpretations promoting peace and interpretations promoting violence, both puritanical and progressive interpretations, both ultra-conservative and liberal interpretations. The same force that has led recently to modern and progressive views of Islam has also led to Osama Bin Laden and the more militant versions of Islam. You can't have one without the other.

Alan Johnson: So Sayyid Qutb is a reformist?

Reza Aslan: Sayyid Qutb is one of the most important figures of the Islamic reformation. What connected Qutb, who is often referred to as the father of modern Islamic Fundamentalism, and, say, Hassan Al Bana, who created Islamic Socialism,

which ultimately led to the Muslim Brotherhood, and Jamal Ad-Din Al-Afghani who is referred to as the father of Islamic Modernism, is that they all wrote at a time of profound societal stress as the Muslim world was going through the process of de-colonisation. Although these people had very different interpretations of Islam, each, when confronted with the question 'why is the Muslim world mired in political, economic and religious stagnation?' had the same answer: 'It is because of the institutions of Islam and the religious leaders. The Ulema are the problem.' In fact almost none of the great figures of twentieth century Islamic political and religious thought was a member of the clerical institution.

Now what's extraordinary about this is that, for the last fourteen centuries, only the Ulema, members of the clerical schools of law, have had the right to interpret Islam or issue judgements about Islamic law. They have had a monopoly on the interpretation of Islam and on education and scholarship. Nobody else could read the Quran except these guys! But the nineteenth and twentieth centuries changed all that as increases in education and literacy, widespread access to new ideas and theories, and later the rise of the internet – which quite clearly parallels the role of the printing press in the Christian reformation – broke that monopoly. The consequence was the dissemination of religious authority into almost every corner of the Muslim world. At the same time, you have the rise of new and highly individualised, sometimes deeply anti-institutional – in the case of al-Qaeda militantly anti-institutional – interpretations of Islam fighting among themselves, each of which rejects the authority of the Ulema as the sole interpreters of Islam. That's what reformation is.

Alan Johnson: What is the balance of forces between the reactionary and progressive forms of Islamic reformation?

Reza Aslan: It see-saws depending on what's going on in the world. Most scholars and observers of the Middle East will tell you the transnational ideals of puritanical Islam, which have been so much on the rise over the last couple of decades, are on the wane. We are seeing even fellow Jihadists beginning to reject the interpretation of Islam promoted by Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri.

Here is the problem when talking about Islamic reformation in comparison with the reformation of Judaism in first century Palestine, or the reformation of Christianity in sixteenth century Europe. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam doesn't have a single centralised religious authority. There is no Temple in Islam – no Vatican, no

high priest, no pope. There is no single authority with the power to say what is or what is not 'proper' religious behaviour or interpretation. Authority is scattered to a number of smaller competing organisations and schools of law and institutions – the Ulema – which nevertheless have enormous influence, but which do not have power over each other. Islam has always been democratic in that sense, with no one single Islamic scholar, no member of the ulema being able to override the opinions of another member of the ulema. That's why Fatwas cause so much confusion in the West. We think of them as a form of papal bull, but they are nothing of the sort! A fatwa is nothing more than the individual opinion of a single Muslim cleric. It has no enforcement mechanism. If one cleric issues a fatwa saying coca cola is bad, and another cleric issues a fatwa saying coca cola is good, both of them are right. Neither of them can negate the other, and it is up to the individual believer which fatwa to follow, if any. It's as simple as that.

As that authority begins to disseminate down to individuals what we are left with is a shouting match between individual interpreters. And over the last couple of decades the loudest voice in that shouting match has been the voice of militancy and radicalism. But we have to understand that the loudest voice isn't always the dominant or most widely accepted voice among Muslims. This is hard for the people outside the faith to understand, because one obviously pays more attention to the loudest voice. That's only natural.

So again, reformation is all about authority. Think of it this way: Thirty years ago, if you were some kid living in Malaysia and you wanted a fatwa on a particular issue, you would go down to your neighbourhood mosque and ask the imam. If he was suitably qualified, your imam would issue a judgement. Then it was up to you. If you liked the judgement you followed it. And if you didn't, you didn't. But today that kid can bypass the mosque altogether and go to fatwa-online.com, where he has access to a database of hundreds of thousands of fatwa's on every subject. And if he doesn't like what he finds there, he can turn on the TV and go to Amr Khaled's weekly TV show. Amr Khaled is an Egyptian televangelist who reaches hundreds of millions of Muslims across the world from Jakarta to Detroit with his radio and TV shows and website. But he is not a cleric. In fact he has no instruction in Islamic law whatsoever, and so according to traditional Islam has no right to be doing what he is doing! And yet, by taking upon himself the powers that have for fourteen centuries been the sole purview of this very small male clique, he's completely changed the face of Islam.

Of course for every Amr Khaled there's an Osama Bin Laden. Both have the same lack of formal education in Islamic law. Both appeal to young people by setting themselves up in direct opposition to the imams. It's a very simple choice for kids to make: either the stilted, archaic, out of touch, sermonising of the imam or the politically-aware, socially-conscious version of Islam offered in a peaceful way by Amr Khaled, or a violent way by Osama Bin Laden.

Alan Johnson: Why have you suggested the Islamic reformation will 'come to fruition under the leadership of Muslim Americans?' And are you as optimistic about European Muslims?

Reza Aslan: I think there are three elements pushing the Islamic reformation forward into the 21st century. First, the internet, which has allowed widespread access to all kinds of theories and opinions from all over the world, some informed, some not so well informed. The internet has completely changed the way authority works in Islam. Second, increases in literacy and education, meaning more people can read the Quran in their own languages, instead of relying on their imam to read it to them in Arabic. Remember, there is no Christian reformation without a German New Testament. What is the point of Sola Scriptura, if you can't read scripture? Third, a massive influx of Muslims into the West, where individualism and anti-institutionalism are woven into the fabric of society. I think that the future of Islam does not lie in the desert sands of Saudi Arabia, but rather in the streets of East London or New York.

I am more optimistic about Islam in America than I am about Islam in Europe. It is clear that Muslims in America are more resistant to the pull of Jihadism. Economics has a lot to do with it. The median household income of a Muslim family in the United States is larger than that of non-Muslim families. Also, the United States is perfectly comfortable with public displays of religion. We in the US think religion is a good thing, that it should be part of the market place of ideas. Now, that is obviously not the dominant view in large parts of Europe, where public expressions of religion are frowned upon and religious faith is seen as antithetical to what it means to be European.

Poll after poll of young European Muslims has shown that they feel besieged by European society. They feel as though they can be 'Muslim' or 'British,' but not both. Whether that's true or not is not the issue – that's the overwhelming sentiment. In the United States, a nation of immigrants, we see no connection between one's

nationality and one's ethnicity. But in large parts of Europe, in Germany and Italy for example, nationality and ethnicity are still considered to be one and the same. And if you live in a society without a strong civic identity, a society in which your ethnicity and nationality are considered to be the same thing, then a foreigner remains a foreigner forever. That's exactly what we are seeing in places like Germany. Third generation Turks, whose parents were born in Germany, who were educated in Germany, and who have absolutely nothing Turkish about them, are *still* not considered German. In Italy, Islam is not even officially recognised as a religion because it doesn't adhere to what the Italians believe to be the proper hierarchical institutional structures of a religion, i.e. Catholicism. In the UK discrimination laws are narrowly focused on issues of race, but race is not the only form of identity that matters anymore. You can't get in trouble for religious discrimination in the UK, but you can get in trouble for race discrimination, which explains why groups such as the BNP continue to thrive in the UK.

The notion that the French could outlaw the wearing of religious identification, whether it is a head scarf or a necklace in schools, is so foreign to the American mindset. It blows our minds! This new plan being put in place in the UK to reign in the speech of Muslim imams who are not advocating violence but who may be reaching certain conservative or puritanical interpretations of Islam that may or may not jive with 'British values' – again, that is inconceivable to most Americans. If something like that were proposed in the United States, there'd be a revolution! All this makes me think Muslim Americans are in a better position to make a positive impact on Islam.

I must say, however, the changes that have taken place in the British government and in British society over the last decade – the way in which the old forms of institutional discrimination have been addressed, the attempts to create precisely the strong civic identity that I was referring to through new citizenship tests, the attempt to try and create a British identity that goes beyond any type of ethnic or even cultural identification – I think all this is having an enormously positive impact on Islam in the UK. I just hope that the rest of Europe can catch on to what the UK is doing.

Islam and the Medinan moment

Alan Johnson: In *No God but God* you re-create the Medinan moment – when the Prophet, having left Mecca, founded the first Muslim society with his companions

in the town of Medina – as a founding moment that should have stamped Islam forever as a religion of radical equality and social justice. It was, I thought, a tour de force of writing. But you also noted two things about it. First, 'Muhammad's revolutionary message of moral accountability and social egalitarianism was gradually reinterpreted by his successors into competing ideologies of rigid legalism and uncompromising orthodoxy.' Why did that happen? Second, the example of Medina has been interpreted in radically different ways by Muslims – it has been 'simultaneously the archetype of Islamic democracy and the impetus for Islamic militancy' (52). Why has that been the case? Does the struggle to define the meaning of the Medinan founding remain at the heart of the battle for Islam's soul today?

Reza Aslan: Just as many discussions about Christian ethics refer to the three years of Jesus' ministry, so, for Muslims, the period in Medina, before Islam became a religion, when it was just a community, is for most Muslims the starting point of what Islam actually means. It is not so much Mohammed's birth, or the onset of revelation, but the first moment in which the community came into being that is the reference point for true Islam.

Medina represents what Islam was supposed to be. Of course, everybody has their own interpretation of what that statement means. One tends to read into the history of Medina one's own ideas, prejudices, biases, desires and whims, until Medina becomes whatever you want it to be. However, what I think Medina offers for those of us who envision a much more pluralistic and progressive idea of Islam is a set of revolutionary ideas about how a society should structure itself. We find notions of spiritual as well social equality in Medina. The position of minorities, the weak, orphans, widows and women in Medina was absolutely revolutionary for seventh century Arabia. These things had never even been envisaged before, let alone actually put into practice. Now, that was fourteen centuries ago and while one can boast about how ahead of its time the community of Medina was, unfortunately it kind of stagnated after that. Islam became an institutionalised religion and once the institutions took over, the conservative element came into play. Indeed, part of the dream of an Islamic reformation is precisely the hope that we can take the interpretation of Medina out of the hands of the clerics and allow individuals themselves to formulate their own ideas. I do that myself in *No God but God*.

Islam and Democracy

Alan Johnson: You decry as 'outrageous' a tendency in the West to depict Islamic values, traditions and history as opposed to democracy. You claim that 'Islam has from the very beginning, from the moment of the first revelation that came out of the Prophet Muhammad's mouth, indeed even before that, had in place the ideologies of egalitarianism and human rights and popular sanction of governing bodies.' You rest your case on the long-standing Islamic notions of shura (consultative assembly), Isjma (consensus) and Bay'ah (oath-giving within the Shura as basis for leadership). Moreover, you think that, today, 'the only way [democracy] is going to take hold in the region, is that it is [if it is] based on an Islamic moral framework.'

I have a deliberately provocative question. If Islam is so well-suited to democracy why has it had such a problem with democracy?

Reza Aslan: That's simply not true. The world's largest Muslim country, Indonesia, is a democracy. The world's second largest Muslim country, Pakistan, is a democracy. And the world's third largest Muslim country, Turkey, is a democracy. Malaysia is a Democracy, as is Senegal. Bangladesh is quite an impressive democracy, considering the social and economic problems it has to deal with. I think what people mean when they talk about the incompatibility of democracy and Islam is the incompatibility of democracy and the *Arab* world. We tend to think of Islam and the Middle East as synonymous, but the overwhelming majority of the Muslim world lives on the margins of the Middle East. I believe that of the one and a half billion Muslims in the world only about eight to ten percent are Arabs. There are more Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa than there are Arabs of any religion!

So, can democracy and Arab culture be reconciled? I think the answer is yes, but we can debate that. Can Islam and democracy be reconciled? To me, that is an absurd question, because they have been reconciled in many parts of the world.

It is the core ideas of Islam that make it so compatible to democracy. One can say the very notion that human society should be organized not according to kinship or ethnicity, but according to acceptance of certain set of principles and values – what nowadays we would call secular nationalism – was invented by the Prophet Mohammed. He formed his community from scratch based on the acceptance of principles, ideals and values about how society should be run – a social contract if you will. In fact, the world's first constitution laying out these kinds of things was

written out by the Prophet Mohammed, so it's not just that there's compatibility, it's that many of these ideas were actually created within the Muslim world.

It's a fallacy that religion per se and democracy are irreconcilable. In other words this debate is not just about Islam, it's about whether you can have such a thing as religious nationalism, and whether religious nationalism can, in and of itself, be a movement of pluralism and democracy. I think a lot of people would say 'no' – that, almost by definition a modern constitutional democratic state must be secular. Certainly that's the view throughout much of Europe. I would disagree. When we talk about democracy, we're not actually talking about a monolithic thing. Rather, we're talking about a set of principles (popular sovereignty, government accountability, rule of law, ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism) that, when put together, create a democratic state and society. Now, as long as those principles remain sacrosanct, as long as they are not violated, then whatever moral framework society is based upon is irrelevant.

As much as we like to think of the United States as founded upon a strict separation of church and state, that's simply not true. We are one of the most religious countries in the developed world, if not the entire world, and as an Iranian American I can tell you that religion plays a more profound and influential role in the United States than it does in Iran. When I said this in the Bush years it was an easier argument to make because it was just so obvious. But look at Obama, and see the way he has very comfortably co-opted the language and metaphors of religion. It's what we do here in the United States.

Alan Johnson: Some argue that there is a specific difficulty in Islam. The Prophet, so to speak, was his own Constantine, and so religious and political authority were fused in Islam. Christianity, by contrast, with its notion that one should 'give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God' has been able to hold the two forms of authority at more of a distance. And it's in that gap that democracy emerged. It was as believing Christians that the American Founders wrote the separation of Church and State into the Constitution. How do you respond?

Reza Aslan: Certainly there are those within the Islamic world that make the argument that sovereignty belongs not in the hands of human beings but in the hands of God, and so it's God's laws that matter not man-made laws. There are a host of problems with that idea. God doesn't actually talk, so when the government

of Iran says 'Gods sovereignty reigns supreme,' what they mean is that the government's interpretation of God's sovereignty reigns supreme, which of course means the government reigns supreme. The supreme leader in Iran is supposed to ensure God's sovereignty, but he does this by exercising unimpeded political power! In other words it is his human sovereignty that reigns.

But I have to say, those same arguments are made quite loudly, not just in Christianity but also in Judaism. In the United States there is a powerful movement which scholars refer to as Diminionism – I prefer the term Christianism because I want to emphasize its startling resemblance to another form of religious nationalism, Islamism. According to some polls almost half of Americans believe that the bible should be *the* source of legislation, that man's law should be based on biblical law. There is also a large and rapidly growing movement of religious or messianic Zionists in Israel who believe the same thing. If you look at the BJP in India, the Hindu nationalists are also trying to construct a society based on the sovereignty of God instead of the sovereignty of man. It's not exclusive to Islam.

I think religious nationalism is unavoidable. You can't forcefully suppress religious impulses, particularly in a democratic society where people make decisions, formulate laws and build a consensus based on their own ideals and values and their sense of what is right and wrong. People of religious persuasions are going to try to impress their ideals, their morals and values upon society. It might be by peaceful means, if that's an option, like here in the United States, or in Turkey where the Islamist party, the AKP, peacefully came to power and has presided over seven years of unprecedented political and economic growth. But if there is no peaceful avenue for the implementation of one's religious values and ideals, then the voice of violence and revolution comes to the fore, as we are seeing in Palestine, Egypt and in parts of Europe.

The impulse itself is unavoidable. Each society has to decide whether to allow those impulses to be a part of the market place of ideas, or to violently suppress those impulses. That decision dictates how society itself is going to function and how these religious groups themselves will act.

Part 2: How to Win a Cosmic War (don't fight it)

Alan Johnson: Your new book *How to Win a Cosmic War* argues that after 9/11 we stupidly and tragically read a religious significance into a series of very earthly

conflicts. By doing so we became caught in the trap the extremists had set – we allowed ourselves to be drawn into an (unwinnable) 'cosmic war.' Our task, you argue, is to extricate ourselves, quickly, from this cosmic war and address the earthly conflicts. What do you mean by the concept 'cosmic war?'

Reza Aslan: A cosmic war is a religious war. It is a war in which participants feel as though they are acting out on earth a battle that is actually taking place in heaven. Unlike a holy war, which necessarily implies fighting a battle between rival religions, a cosmic war has both a physical encounter – there is an actual battle taking place – and an imaginary moral encounter. Cosmic wars involve a conflict over identity, and in this conflict one feels God is directly involved on one side against the other. My book argues that the Jihadists who attacked the United States on 9/11, and the Jihadists who attacked London on 7/7, are fighting a cosmic war. They're fighting a battle that they know cannot be won in any real or measurable terms. Their notion of 'victory' is so beyond the realm of reality that they don't really talk about it. For them, the battle is being waged not just between al-Qaeda militants and American soldiers, or even Islam and Christianity. The war is between the angels of light and the demons of darkness. It's a war that has been going on for eternity, and it will end only when good triumphs over evil.

Alan Johnson: So you win a cosmic war by not fighting one?

Reza Aslan: When we joined in their cosmic war we gave the Jihadists exactly the reaction they were seeking. (The trap worked very well after the attacks on the United States; it did not work nearly as well with the attacks on the UK.) The war on terror as consciously defined and implemented by the Bush administration is a cosmic war. It is a battle between good and evil in which our very existential selves are at stake. This kind of conflict is in the minds of many Americans, and certainly it is in the minds of the military and political leaders who have implemented and carried out the war on terror thus far.

The problem is you can't win a cosmic war. When what is at stake is one's existential self, there isn't any room for negotiation, compromise or surrender. Moreover, when the ultimate goal of the conflict is proclaimed as ridding the world of evil, as Bush repeatedly promised to do, that's not something that's going to happen anytime soon. It's a recipe for never-ending conflict. The concept of a clash of civilisations, as Samuel Huntington himself very clearly laid out, is not really about civilisation; it's about religion. There is no such thing as 'Islamic civilisation.' As

Huntington himself said 'the problem for the West is not Islamic civilisation, it is Islam.' They are one and the same as far as the West is concerned. My new book makes an argument about how the war on terror became a cosmic war, why that is so disastrous, and what to do about it.

Jihadism as a social movement

The book talks about the process of stripping the conflict of its religious connotations and instead focusing very narrowly on Jihadism as a social movement. This is something Europe, and especially the UK, can really understand, because you are faced with this social movement on a daily basis. There is no Jihadist sub-culture in America. We don't have kids listening to Jihadi rap songs, wearing Bin Laden t-shirts and getting together and downloading Jihadi videos. Those kids have incorporated their identity into this larger collective identity, but they are not themselves militants. They are not going to be picking up guns and joining the fight. Very few of them are actually going to get to that point. Dealing with Jihadism as a social movement means making sure that stays the case.

The military conflict against al-Qaeda is something completely different. There is nothing to talk about when it comes to al-Qaeda, because there's nothing that they want. They have no goals, no policies, no social agenda – nothing save for the conception of the utopian society they want to create. They are unreachable, so they can only be hunted, captured or killed. But the vast majority of those who identify with the Jihadist movement are not sitting in a cave with a gun. They're kids with internet connections in Rotterdam or Leeds. Those kids are attracted to Jihadism as a form of identity because they feel, for varying reasons, marginalised or alienated, and unsatisfied by the identities that are being offered to them. Whether it's the national identity of their country, the ethnic identity of their parents, or the religious identity offered by the mosques, nothing seems adequate to confront their social problems. So they look for an alternative form of identity, and they find it in this militantly anti-institutional, radically individualistic, de-territorialised, idea of Islam. That is what Jihadism as a social movement is.

We should deal with Jihadism in the way that we deal with any social movement. The way that we dealt with, for instance, the anti-Globalisation movement, or the radical environmental movement, the black power movement, the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, etc; that is, by addressing their grievances.

By co-opting the grievances of these movements, making them a part of society, we took away the raison d'être of their social movements.

Alan Johnson: You claim that 'what we see as religious terrorism is born not out of religion itself but is born out of political, social, and economic grievances, many of which are legitimate.' What are these grievances? Why have similar grievances in other regions of the world not produced similar outcomes?

Reza Aslan: The grievances of al-Qaeda are not real grievances, they are symbolic grievances and their sole purpose is to create a narrative of injustice and suffering, by connecting local and global issues. Yes, the issues they talk about are real: the suffering of the Palestinians, US support for dictatorial regimes, etc. These things are legitimate grievances. But al-Qaeda couldn't care less about the Palestinians, certainly not their hope for a Palestinian national home. Al-Qaeda is an anti-nationalist movement that believes the nation state is anathema to Islam. The creation of a Palestinian state is the last thing on their minds. If you really pay attention to the list of al-Qaeda's grievances, some of them are so absurd, so mind bogglingly random, that you can only understand them as nothing more than symbols to rally around. If you listen to the complaints that Zawahiri makes about the British government, it's laughable. He talks about the violation of historic British values, as though the Magna Carta is on the top of his mind! Bin Laden has even issued a complaint about America's campaign finance laws. Al-Qaeda has even condemned the West's role in global warming, as though the green revolution is something al-Qaeda is fighting for.

But what al-Qaeda has done brilliantly is weave together global grievances, such as the suffering of the Palestinians, to local issues, such as why a Pakistani-Brit can't get a job, to create a single collective identity. There is an argument heard in the United States, particularly in Republican circles, that 'if we brought peace to Palestine, Bin Laden would not pack up his bags and go home.' No, of course he wouldn't. He couldn't care less about peace in Palestine. Addressing any grievance is not going to make Bin Laden go away. However, addressing grievances will blunt the appeal of his movement.

Alan Johnson: What have been the most important consequences for the west of being sucked into the 'cosmic war?'

Reza Aslan: It turned the US into the new bogey man, the new crusading imperialistic force around which a cohesive identity, a collective oppositional identity, was formed. That identity could not be based on nationality, ethnicity, or language, because al-Qaeda is a transnational movement. Al-Qaeda thrives on its ability to create a transnational identity and that's exactly what our response to 9/11 provided.

Alan Johnson: Some might respond to your argument by arguing that the strategy adopted by Bush-Petreaus in 2007 is the very opposite of a cosmic war. In fact, apart from some really terrible rhetoric early on ('for us or against us,' 'wanted dead or alive,' 'crusade,' 'bring it on,' and so on) what is the evidence that we ever did get sucked into a cosmic war? In what sense does our support for democracy, elections, an Iraqi constitution, and our commitment to train the Iraqi forces before getting out of Iraq, amount to being 'sucked into a cosmic war?' And in Afghanistan hasn't the focus been on security and development (however badly executed) rather than anything associated with a cosmic war?

Can you distinguish the bits of the west's response to 9/11 that, in your view, played into the hands of the terrorists desire to suck us into a cosmic war, and those bits that did not?

Reza Aslan: Look, it's not so much the actions that are the problem, not even the actions in Iraq – though that intervention was obviously disastrous, unnecessary, and has made things worse than they needed to be. It's the rhetoric behind those actions that is the problem. It's the way the actions have been understood and defined, and, frankly, promoted by the US and the West that is the problem. It's one thing to decide that Saddam Hussein is a threat and needs to be removed from power; it's another thing to say, as George Bush said in 2003, that God told him to do it. It's one thing to say the events of September 11th have reformulated the way the United States thinks about foreign policy, and that it now has a different definition of its enemies; it's another thing to call for a crusade against evil, which is precisely what the Bush administration did. On a local level, it's one thing for Tony Blair to talk about the need for immigrant communities in the UK to assimilate more fully into society, it's another thing to talk about the veil as a mark of separation. That kind of rhetoric, the construction of 'us' versus 'them,' causes religious polarisation because it comes across as 'us=good' and 'them=evil.' That's a problem because in those polarising rhetorical frames identities are formed.

There's always going to be protests and unhappiness about certain American actions and Western actions. Any actions that a nation takes in the name of its own security are going to cause anger and annoyance around the world, especially when that nation is the United States. What's important here are not the actions, but the rhetoric and symbolism that are wrapped around the actions, because it is through those that the actions are interpreted.

Islamism and Jihadism

Alan Johnson: Connected to this question of a cosmic war is the question of how we should think of those political forces that are called, variously, 'Islamist' and 'Jihadist.' Speaking at Bloggingheads TV you set out the difference, as you saw it, between 'Islamism' and 'Jihadism.'

> 'Islamism' is a political philosophy of Islam. It is the notion that Islam is a complete way of life, and that it is not just a religion but it is also an ideology of statecraft, of politics, of international relations, and the ultimate goal of Islamism is to create an Islamic state. Islamists are vastly different around the world. In some sense the Taliban were Islamists, but so is the AKP party in Turkey. And yet these two groups could not be any more different in their ideologies, their agendas, their goals, even in their version of Islam. So 'Islamism' is a very wide-ranging term that ultimately gets narrowed down to the idea that Islam should also play a role in the political sphere.
>
> 'Jihadism' is a completely different ideology. Jihadism is not interested in the Islamic state. In fact, Jihadists believe that the state, and nationality or nationalism is totally anathema to Islam. Their goal, ultimately, is to get rid of all national-states. They are a transnationalist organisation that wants to create a world-wide unified Umma, headed by a caliphate. Islamists and Jihadists are often at war with each other.

Some would challenge this analysis. They might say that the Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir are Islamist organisations but both believe, ultimately, in a global stateless Umma-identity and the desirability of a global caliphate. Al-Qaeda, while without doubt a jihadist organisation, derives its world-view from standard Islamist ideology. Sayyid Qutb remains the ideological pillar not just of the Brotherhood and the Hizb but also of al-Qaeda. These continuities and overlaps and commonalities are missed by this rigid separation of nationalist Islamists and globalist jihadists.

And is it really the case that 'Islamists' concern themselves with the near enemy while 'Jihadists' attack the far enemy? In fact, Islamists, especially in Europe, are obsessed with the far enemy, while al-Qaeda sometimes attacks the near enemy. Are we describing two wholly separable forces, or are we looking at the two stages of one programme, and a division of labour? Perhaps the real difference lies in tactics and methods, i.e. the utility and legitimacy of violence and terror (no small thing, of course)? Perhaps the ideological and theological differences are relatively insignificant?

How do you respond to that kind of argument?

Reza Aslan: The goal of Islamists is to create a nation state founded upon an Islamic moral framework. When that aspiration is thwarted, and Islamists recognise that the goal of an Islamic state is impossible, their ideology can become globalised. In fact, Jihadism was itself originally an Islamist movement; even Zawahiri himself was a quintessential Islamist with no global agenda whatsoever. His sights were set solely upon Egypt and its transformation into an Islamic state. It was only after spending nearly a decade in Afghanistan that Jihadism turned from a movement focused on the near enemy to a movement focused on the far enemy.

So, yes, from Islamism to Jihadism is quite a natural progression. The question then becomes 'how does one stop that progression?' The answer to that goes back to when we were talking about religious nationalism as an unavoidable impulse. Turkey has no problem with Jihadism at all. There are a few violent ultra conservative radical Islamist movements in Turkey, but they have almost no following today, whereas in the 80s and 90s they were quite a problem. There is a simple reason for that shift: the success of an Islamist party that had the opportunity to put its ideas into society, and allowed people to judge them in a democratic way based on their record. That has essentially sapped any support for the more radical movements in Turkey. The flip side of the Turkish development is what happened in Algeria, where the FIS decided to put down its weapons and engage society democratically, and put their Islamism to the test so to speak, only to be violently thwarted. The result of that wasn't just a decade long war that killed 200,000 people, but the rise of the most powerful Algerian militant group today, the GIA, which does not have a nationalist agenda, but is rather a Jihadist organisation with a violent global agenda.

Alan Johnson: Where does Hamas fit into that picture?

Reza Aslan: Hamas is an Islamist organisation not a Jihadist organisation. Jihadism and Islamism are opposite movements. The goal of Islamism is to build an 'Islamic state,' whatever that means. The goal of Jihadism is to great rid of all states, and to reformulate human society as a global utopia, what they would refer to as a 'caliphate.' They have vastly different goals and aspirations. The only thing they have in common is that they both use terror as a tactic, and they both identify themselves religiously. They have nothing more in common with each other. They can't be thrown into the same category. Not once has any member of al-Qaeda shown up in Palestine, or in the Palestinian territories. There is a very simple reason for that – they would not be dealt with very well if they did. But we can't wrap our heads around that for some reason. They're all Muslim, they're all terrorists, they all hate Jews, they all hate America, therefore they must be the same thing? Well, nothing could be further from the truth.

Alan Johnson: Recently, you said 'I think the time for a two-state solution has come and gone. I don't think there will ever be a Palestinian state' http://www.hotpotatomash.com/2008/04/video-exclusive.html What is there beyond the two-state solution other than endless conflict?

Reza Aslan: Even if a viable Palestinian state was on the horizon, there's almost nothing left of Palestine. Everyday, more and more of a future Palestinian state is being gobbled up by Israel. In two or three years there won't be anything worth calling Palestine, and I just don't see the Israeli's making the short term sacrifices necessary to ensure their long term security. Almost every decision that the Israelis make – whether it's Labour, Likud or Kadima, it doesn't seem to matter – is based upon short-term security considerations. 'We want bombs to stop dropping on Sederot so we're going to raise Gaza to the ground.' Well, that may solve the short term problem, but it makes the issue of long term security for Israel that much harder to achieve. I don't feel very optimistic about the reality of a two state solution anymore.

Alan Johnson: So, what then?

Reza Aslan: Then we are talking about the end of Israel as a Jewish majority state. The notion that the existential threat to Israel comes from Iran is a joke. Iran is a third world country and cannot really threaten Israel. The notion that Israel's existential threat comes from Hamas is equally absurd. There is only one existential threat to Israel: demography. In twenty years, maybe less, there will be more Arabs

than Jews between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. If the status quo continues as it is now, Israel will no longer be a majority Jewish state; the very purpose of the state will cease to exist. It is confounding to me that this is not being treated as a much more urgent issue. If there is not a Palestinian state in the next two to three years then there may not be an Israeli state in twenty years.

Part 4: Responding to Critics

Criticism 1: Denial and apologia?

Alan Johnson: Ok, the first criticism comes from both Sam Harris and Irshad Manji. They both charge you with being in denial about the true state of Islam today, with the consequence that you end up – inadvertently, perhaps, driven by your optimism, perhaps – an apologist. In debate with you, Harris said:

> What is interesting to me is the way in which your sophistication, your willingness to have a conception of religion and a conception of faith that is almost infinitely elastic, that is compatible with any mode of discourse, a conception which never allows us to call a spade a spade, is giving shelter to this kind of religious literalism.
>
> What's troubling me is, I don't know where the line is between encouraging moderation, representing what Islam could be – Islam could be a religion of peace, perhaps, Jihad could be just an inner spiritual struggle and have nothing to do with holy war, and we have to raise a generation of Muslims who believe those things – and pretending that is already. [That's] problematic, because it isn't for so many millions of Muslims. It may be that if you pretend hard enough then you become what you pretend to be, and maybe that is part of the process, but we have to admit to ourselves that we are confronting the behaviour of a death cult among millions and millions of Muslims ... and a reflexive political solidarity in which Muslims side with other Muslims no matter how socio-pathic their behaviour simply because they are Muslim. We can't deny the problem while trying to encourage a more benign face of the religion.

The feminist writer and activist, and Muslim, Irshad Manji, has made a similar criticism. In response to your optimistic opinion that Islam is 'the most diverse religion in the history of the world,' she argues that today that diversity is 'in the shadows.' She observed that:

> The reality is in the last 50 years alone more Muslims have been maimed and raped and imprisoned and murdered and tortured at the hands of other Muslims than at the hands of any foreign imperial power, and I believe mainstream Muslims have contributed to that reality through their complacency, passivity and denial. They are so quick to point the finger at outside entities – America, Israel, MTV, you name it, fill in the blank – that the mainstream Muslims (and not just the 'Puritans' which are a minority within Islam) have broken faith with that beautiful passage within the Koran, that states that God changes not what is within a people, or what is the condition of a people, until they change what is in themselves.

How do you respond to Harris and Manji's charge that, as another reviewer put it, 'his prognostication and current realities are utterly discordant.'

Reza Aslan: Sam Harris says that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim, that all Muslims believe what Osama Bin Laden believes. And if a Muslim disagrees with bin Laden, then he or she is not really a Muslim (which is pretty much what bin Laden says). Harris thinks those Muslims that claim the mantle of moderate Islam are basically providing cover for Bin Laden. Not only do I find that to be offensive and illogical, I find it to be the most profoundly unsophisticated view. I have no respect for Sam Harris as a thinker or scholar. I find him to be absolutely unintelligible when it comes to religion and culture. It's fascinating that somebody who is studying to be a neuroscientist has set himself up as an expert on religion. I don't go around performing brain surgery on people because I haven't been trained to do so.

It's not my idea of religion as malleable and elastic that's the problem; it's his idea of religion as monolithic and fixed that's the problem. From its first moment religion has been infinitely malleable to whatever situation and landscape it finds itself in. There is a reason why we refer to Hinduism, Islamism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity as the five great religions – because they have lasted. And they have lasted because they can be shaped into whatever form you want. When a religion ceases to change and evolve it disappears. To say that those who advocate a non-extremist version of Islam are doing nothing but promoting and giving cover to extremism is not only offensive, it's frankly stupid.

Irshad finds Islam's diversity to be under attack by radicalised versions of Islam, which she sees as dominant. The problem with that view is that it's based on

media depictions which, of necessity, focus on what is extraordinary. If it's not extraordinary, then it is not news! There are one and a half billion Muslims in the world, and we must put the movements of militancy, radicalism and even conservatism in that context. Anyway, those movements, which were on the rise, may have begun to decline. In 2006 and 2007 a lot of people that had identified with the Jihadist movement began looking at Iraq and thought 'this has gone too far.' Even Dr Fadl, one of the founders of the Jihadist movement, has issued a rant condemning Jihadism altogether. I think we are seeing something akin to what has happened to the American neo-conservative movement – Jihadism has also begun to swallow itself.

All we ever hear is about is radicalism, because radicalism is newsworthy. But anyone who has done the kind of field research that I have done, or other scholars of Islam have done, can see there's a difference between that and the dominance of radicalism. Irshad hasn't done the research because she is an activist not a scholar.

Criticism 2: Evading Islam?

Alan Johnson: Andrew Bostom has argued that Islam, in both the sacred texts and the history, has been guilty of anti-Semitism. He argues that 'alongside the general attitude to non-Muslims there was a specific anti-Jewish animus, which comes from the foundational texts.' Christianity was anti-Semitic too, he points out, but while Christianity has done much to face up to this problem, Islam has not. Why, in your view, is he wrong?

Also, Bostom and others claim that those founding texts, provide much more of a basis for violence than we have been prepared to admit. He said in interview with Democratiya:

> The final abrogating revelation, Sura 9, is a chapter of open-ended war proclamations, and it's not confined to specific historical instances. Some of the initial Koranic revelation is related to specific events, yes. But Sura 9 is about a timeless Jihad. We are not talking about circumscribed events and accounts when the Israelites conquered Canaan. What you have in the most warlike and bloody sections of the Old Testament, such as Joshua, are really history-bound descriptions. They are not timeless injunctions. This difference really matters. Take the question of Paganism, and compare the Koran to the Old Testament. The Old Testament condemns Paganism but

> it does not invoke an eternal war against all the world's Pagan peoples, like Koran 9:5. The bloody Old Testament campaigns relate to a very specific piece of real estate. They are not open-ended and they don't look to the entire world.

Actually, this is argument can be found on the left, too. Perry Anderson, writing in the flag-ship journal of the Marxism, *New Left Review*, pointed out that:

> Since Muhammad clearly enjoins jihad against infidels in Holy Places, latter-day Salafism – notwithstanding every effort of Western, or pro-Western, commentators to euphemize the Prophet's words – is on sound scriptural grounds, embarrassing though this undoubtedly is to the moderate majority of Muslims.

How do you respond to these arguments?

Reza Aslan: First, I would like to emphasise that there is no text in the history of religions that is more positive to other religions than the Quran. The idea that there is some anti-Semitism – which of itself is a silly thing to say as Arabs are Semites – is a complete misreading of the Quran. Yes, the Quran is quite ruthless to disobedient Jews and disobedient Christians, but that's the whole point of scripture, is it not? Look, nothing that Mohammed says about the Jews in the Quran matches what any of the great Hebrew prophets say about the Jews. At no point does the Quran refer to the Jews as a brood of vipers. There is no more horrific, bloody, despicable piece of scripture than the Old Testament when it comes to violence, racism and xenophobia. Now, many followers of Christianity and Judaism take those texts quite seriously. This is certainly true of the radical settler movements that we are seeing in the occupied territory, who take the notion of ethnic cleansing, the foundation of the Torah 'to put to death all that do not worship our way.' But the vast majority of Jews, of course, read that in context, and interpret it however they see fit.

I think the problem here is that there is a general misunderstanding of what scripture is. Scripture is a neutral thing with absolutely no meaning beyond the individual's encounter with it. Scripture says what the reader thinks it says. In the United States, a couple of hundred years ago, both slave owners and abolitionists used the exact same verses to justify their arguments. To reject a reformist or a progressive Muslim's interpretation of scripture as invalid because it interprets away certain violent sections, but then to accept a radical or puritanical interpretation of

the same scripture because it accepts those violent elements – whilst it interprets away the pluralistic and progressive elements of scripture – is ridiculous. Bostom's approach is actually the same as Bin Laden's.

Bostom's discussion of 'abrogation' illustrates why a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. The idea of abrogation – that later verses of the Quran abrogated earlier verses – is often used by people like Bostom when discussing what Islam actually means, but they don't understand that abrogation is itself merely an exegetical tool that was *invented* by second and third generation Islamic scholars. First of all, we don't know what verses came first and what came second. We are just guessing! Second, we have multiple examples of peaceful verses that abrogate violent ones, for instance the verse that says 'there shall be no compulsion in religion' is one of the absolute last verses of the Quran to be revealed. The truth is that the Quran, like all scriptures, is full of contradiction and paradox. Hundreds of years after the death of the prophet Mohammed, scriptural scholars trying to reconcile these apparent contradictions came up with the idea of 'abrogation.' It was their way of explaining away why one verse says 'a' and one verse says 'b,' why one verse promotes peace and another verse promotes war.

The early Christian scholars looked at the New Testament, then looked at the Old Testament, and recognised the irreconcilable contradictions between the two texts. The answer they came up with was 'fulfilment,' that Jesus fulfilled the laws of the Old Testament. These are all *human* constructions, born from a necessity to strip away the paradoxes of scripture. And by the way, the people who actually put the text together couldn't care less about the paradoxes! There are four gospels in the New Testament, which vastly contradict themselves concerning the chronology of Jesus life, the events of his birth, the date of his death, and all kinds of other things. It wasn't that the early church fathers didn't realise these contradictions were there. It was that they didn't care. The same is true of the Quran. The compilers of the Quran deliberately went out of their way to make sure that there was no attempt to make sense of the text. It was almost randomly compiled from longest to shortest chapters without any attempt at chronology, or theme, or commentary. All of that came when later generations tried to make sense of this opaque text. So, someone like Bin Laden – or Bostom, who comes from the exact same viewpoint when it comes to his understanding of Islam – will pick the verses that they feel are representative of the entire text and ignore everything else. And the flip side of this is also true. The modernists and progressives will pick the verses that they feel are

most representative of what the Quran is and ignore the rest. That's human nature, and goes back to the fundamental issue – religion is what you say religion is.

Criticism 3: Mis-identifying the 'moderates?'

Alan Johnson: Irshad Manji has argued that you tend to present organisations that are part of the problem as part of the solution. The consequence, she thinks, is that you mask the true state of affairs. She thinks we must start by distinguishing 'moderate Muslims' from 'reform-minded Muslims,' a distinction you elide, in her view.

> The moderates are actually the establishment in America and they are part of the problem. What really ought to be asked is where are the reform-minded Muslims. Moderates denounce terror that is committed in the name of Islam but they deny that Islam has anything to do with this violence. Reform-minded Muslims condemn Islamist violence and acknowledge that our religion is being used to help incite the violence that is committed in its name. When the moderates say 'this has nothing to do with Islam,' in effect they abandon the ground of theological interpretation to those of malignant intentions. They wave a white flag to those who are abusing Islam. They are saying to terrorists of the Islamic variety, that we as mainstream Muslims will not challenge you with bold competing interpretations of the Koran. So you guys can walk away with the show. Reform-minded Muslims on the other hand step up to the plate and say we have got to reinterpret the violent passages of the Koran in much the same way that liberal Christians have done with the violent passages in the Bible, and reform-minded Jews have done with the violent passages of the Old Testament. And reinterpreting does not mean rewriting. It means rethinking the words that already exist. Islam not only permits such rethinking, it encourages it. (...) Most of the organisations Reza reels off, through their denial, are giving the extremists a blank cheque. Reform-minded Muslims challenge the extremists, and often pay for it.'

How do you respond to her criticism?

Reza Aslan: What Irshad means is that a reform-minded Muslim is someone that agrees with her, and a moderate Muslim is someone who doesn't. What she is really referring to here is the difference between progressive and conservative interpretations of religion. Religion, by definition, gravitates towards conservatism,

especially religious institutions. Progressive ideas tend to be the purview of individuals that have divorced themselves from the institutional structures of their faith, and so naturally they're going to be in a far better position to be experimental with regard to religious interpretation. For instance, for a lesbian like Irshad, the institutions that apply a very conservative idea of sexuality that's found in the Quran and in Islamic thought and tradition are problematic precisely because they have a traditional conception of religion and sexuality. Progressive groups, by contrast, are not bound by any forms of tradition.

Alan Johnson: What are you working on now?

Reza Aslan: My next project is one I am very excited about. It's a book published by Norton here in the United States called '*Words Without Borders*.' It's an anthology of contemporary literature from the Middle East: works of poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction translated from Arabic, Turkish, Dari, Urdu, and Persian. The idea is going to be to put it together in a very accessible way, to tell the story of this region over the last century through its literature. A lot of this literature has never been anthologized, let alone translated, before. We have a cadre of translators working night and day making English translations of this work. It will hopefully appear in the fall of 2010. I am also working on a historical novel. It is set at the turn of the first millennium and follows a caravan from the Arabian Peninsula to India, and it has to do with the Arab discovery of the number zero.

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