No God But God Short Paper

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*No god but God* by Reza Aslan is a wonderful book and gives readers a very insightful look into the history and cultural aspects of Islam as a whole. After thoroughly reading through this book , I believe that there is a crucial aspect of Islam and detail discussed that is important for any reader when reading this, and with a better understanding, can better diminish the negative and ignorant cultural opinions of Islam from the West. This concept is Jihad, defined as being a “struggle”, “striving” or “a great effort” by the oppressed against the oppressor with the goal of reaching God (Aslan, 2006, p.81). Jihad has two forms it can be manifested in, however; the greater and lesser jihads. The lesser being “...any exertion – military or otherwise – against oppression and tyranny” (Aslan, 2006, p.81), and the greater jihad being the general struggle of a lesser power to overcome the sinful obstacles that separate a person from God (Aslan, 2006, p.81). By understanding these concepts, one can formulate for themselves, hopefully, a more positive view of the religion of Islam, help usher Islam and Muslim communities into Western society, and see that Islam is not entirely a religion of war. Though, to an extent, all religions are religions of war.

This first paragraph will focus on the less prevalent jihad in Muslim culture and the world, the greater Jihad. When it comes down to it, the greater jihad and the jihad itself have a very similar definition. It is also a very confusing concept that this version of jihad is referred to as the greater one, but it is not the majority opinion in Muslim communities around the world. There are more accounts from Muslim communities that can point towards this jihad being the preferable one, or the jihad that might have caused the least amount of problems over time, “At the heart of the doctrine of jihad was the heretofore unrecognized distinction between combatant and noncombatant. Thus, the killing of women, children, monks, rabbis, the elderly, or any other noncombatant was absolutely forbidden under any circumstances” (Aslan, 2006, p.84). As I have been reading this book, and when I came across this quote I developed a theory on both of the versions of the jihad. I thought, that the greater jihad is called the greater because it might have been the first jihad to have been put into action. By what other means would it be the greater? Partially because of the Western views on jihad, there was not much content in this book when discussing the jihad on the greater jihad. Because the lesser is what people tend to focus on, because what’s happening it right there in your face, the greater doesn’t get that much attention.

Continuing with this discussion of the lesser jihad, we must go back a little further to Muhammad’s intentions with the jihad. Aslan states, “And while this definition of *jihad* has occasionally been manipulated by militants and extremists to give religious sanction to what are in actuality social and political agendas, that is not at all how Muhammad understood the term” (Aslan, 2006, p.81). While he was both a spiritual leader and a political leader, Muhammad’s intentions with the jihad were never for it to take such a militaristic and political form. Early on in the discussion of jihad, Aslan provides actual definitions and history of the jihad; “’Holy war’ was not a term used by Muslim conquerors, and it is in no way a proper definition of the word *jihad*. There are a host of words in Arabic that can be definitively translated as ‘war’; *jihad* is not one of them” (Aslan, 2006, p.80-81). And of course, as stated before, the literal translation of the word jihad means “struggle”, “striving”, or “a great effort” (Aslan, 2006, p.81), which are collectively focused towards the sinful obstacle, force, or any oppressor that tries to keep the believer from reaching God. In some instances, it almost seems ironic, that Islam and Muslims, a part of this religion of peace, are practically killing anyone that comes and stands the least bit in their way because they feel “oppressed”. This is where I believe Western thought blurs the lines; “But perhaps the most important innovation in the doctrine of jihad was its outright prohibition of all but strictly defensive wars...Elsewhere the Quran is more explicit: ‘permission to fight is given *only to those who have been* oppressed’” (Aslan, 2006, p.84). It is even clearly stated in the Quran that jihad can solely be for defense, and that fighting is a privilege, given only to those who are oppressed. There are also clear and definitive recordings of Muslims using jihad for their own, religious, benefit; “...’I want you to grant me an oath,’ he said, ‘that you will perform jihad against the unbelievers...’” (Aslan, 2006, p.243). This is better taken with a grain of salt, and best to understand the context of this quote, but a definitive trouble can be seen from a Western viewpoint when analyzing this quote. At the end of the day, though, it seems like a majority of contemporary jihadist muslims might need to freshen up on the Quran every once and a while.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the concept of jihad is what blurs the lines of understanding when it comes to Western understanding of Islam. As long as jihad is around, the lesser at least, I believe that it will consistently be very difficult for Western culture to try to accept Muslim communities into their own and understand their way of life. But progress has already been made with this, and it has been successful, and it is in the form of this book itself. Aslan make a brave stand by publishing this book in America, where he and the book itself may get some shady looks. If Aslan was able to publish this book, and get it on bookshelves across America, that means his work has already made an impact on people’s thought. He was successfully able to publish a book on Islam in America. Unfortunately with all of the conflict and doubt shrouding jihad, this concept is a critical piece of the puzzle of understanding the religion of Islam.

Resources

Aslan, R. (2006) *No god but God. The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York, New York: Random House