

How to Win a Cosmic War – Confronting Radical Islam by Reza Aslan.
William Heinemann 2009.

In his first book, no god but God, Reza Aslan, an Iranian born but US raised academic, introduced readers in an academically sound but immensely approachable way to the religion of Islam, its history and beliefs and possible future directions.

In his second book, How to Win a Cosmic War, he looks at religious extremism and zealotry in general, and Islamic extremism and zealotry in particular. Divided into three sections, The Geography of Identity, God is a Man of War and The End of the War as We know it, How to Win a Cosmic War explains the difference between a war that is fought in conventional ways for the pursuance of diplomatic and strategic aims and a war that is fought for God, which Aslan defines as a Cosmic War.

Because those who define themselves as warriors for God, as opposed to those serving in the national army of their country, do not feel constrained in their actions or attitudes by the norms that govern civilised society, battling against a Cosmic War is much more difficult for those adopting conventional means and subscribing to an earth-bound philosophy, but Aslan believes it is still winnable.

How to Win a Cosmic War is also an excellent introduction for those not previously exposed to it to the nature of Islamic extremism, and the reasons for it, not all of which are related to Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians; it also explains why we should replace the words 'islamist' and 'islamism' to differentiate extremist Muslims from the rest, with the words 'jihadist' and 'jihadism' on the logical grounds that recent history proves that the former can compromise when elected to political office whereas the latter brook no compromise and delegitimize and deracinate all those who disagree with them.

As for the solution to winning a cosmic war: Aslan argues that the best way is by refusing to fight it, but rather to engage Muslims in a fully participatory political process and to challenge the jihadists by allowing Muslims to live in a more open environment than is the case at present.

This is a big ask, but the alternative of doing nothing or fighting an asymmetric war against those liberated from normal human constraints by the misguided belief that they are about God's business does not bear contemplation.

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