Looking for Its Luther
Korb, Scott
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ry. Nevertheless, he argues that Religiousness A has lost any power it may once have had to make Christianity compelling. What people have always responded to in Christianity is not its consonance with some universal ideal, but the challenging, maddening, and intriguing person of Jesus Christ and, to a lesser extent, the persons throughout history—from St. Francis to Dorothy Day—who have tried to conform their lives to his.

In keeping with his preference for Religiousness B, Barron calls for the recovery of an "embodied Christianity," with an emphasis on practices: diverse forms of liturgy and prayer, pilgrimages, corporal works of mercy, and church architecture that consciously uses beauty to draw us into the mystery of God. Like baseball or painting, Christianity is less a set of rules than a comprehensive way of life. "And like those other worlds," he writes, "it is first approached because it is perceived as beautiful."

Although a few years separate us, Barron and I are generational contemporaries. I, too, grew up in the era of "God doesn't make junk" catechesis. I live in a suburban landscape dotted by Catholic churches that are almost mind-numbing in their banality. I readily concede Barron's point that a certain form of "Religiousness A" has been ascendant for some time now in parishes, schools, and chancery offices, often imposing its own form of orthodoxy and showing an almost paranoid aversion to anything that can be safely labeled "pre–Vatican II."

For this reason, I am personally inclined to be sympathetic to Barron's suggestion that Catholics should rebalance their theological portfolios, drawing more deeply from the wellsprings of Scripture and tradition and relying less on appeals to human experience as articulated by modern philosophy, anthropology, or psychology. But it is hard to see how, as Barron argues, such a move would do much to "bridge the great divide" in the contemporary church. Even if the great shift in religious consciousness that Barron advocates could be achieved, it would certainly not put an end to our intraecclesial arguments. Even among those who are inclined to be skeptical about the anthropocentrism of modern theology, there can often be passionate disagreements about how to interpret the received tradition or how to apply it in new situations. Sometimes it is even the defenders of the tradition who end up resorting to arguments from anthropology.

The chapter in which Barron discusses the priesthood is a case in point. Barron's desire to highlight what is distinctive and irreplaceable about the Catholic priesthood is certainly defensible. But holding that "transhistorically and transculturally" communities have always designated certain people as "mediators of the Mystery" seems to draw on a generic anthropology of religion that is much closer to Religiousness A than B. By contrast, most of those who question whether all elements of the priesthood are necessarily *iure divino* ground their arguments in New Testament and early Christian writings rather than making appeals to modern philosophy or anthropology.

Barron might counter that this urge to deconstruct the priesthood reflects a modernist ethos that views all institutions through a hermeneutic of suspicion. But such a hermeneutic is also deeply encoded into the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Jewish priests were continually being subjected to the withering critique of the prophets. Jesus himself tells the Samaritan women that a time is coming "when you shall worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," a position arguably more radical than anything offered by the liturgical reformers of the twentieth century.

After so many years of debate about what following Christ in the modern world demands of us, it is tempting to believe that some new way of thinking—postliberalism, postconservatism, postmodernism—can bring peace to Christianity's culture wars. But the church has always been a community "locked together in argument." The question is whether we can find ways of arguing together that do not throw up stumbling blocks to those to whom we preach the gospel. Barron's vision of Christianity *is* an inspiring and challenging one. Hopefully it will not be strangled by the tares that increasingly wind their way around us all. ■

J. Peter Nixon *is a graduate student in theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.*

Scott Korb

Looking for Its Luther

No god but God
The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam
Reza Aslan
Random House, $25.95, 336 pp.

Although it may not have felt like it, September 11 was just fallout. According to Reza Aslan, the West, with its great commercial center in downtown New York City, was "merely a bystander" in an ongoing conflict raging within Islam. This struggle has left a crater at the center of his religion that is so huge its creation generated a cloud of dust that we mistook for—and misnamed—the epicenter. In short, we've all been wrong about the location of ground zero.

Referring to 9/11 as fallout, or implying that Islam itself was in some ways more damaged by the attacks than the United States, does not minimize the tragedy of the day. Aslan, a doctoral candidate in religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, knows well that thousands of dead cannot be considered collateral damage. And for this very reason, neither can the attacks be understood as jihad: Islam's own highly regulated guidelines for "just war." It is precisely because the attacks were so indiscriminate, says Aslan, that they were "roundly condemned" and

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unsanctioned within a Muslim world that takes seriously the requirements laid out in the Qur'an for jihad. Aslan belongs to this Muslim world, and *No god but God* is his explanation to the West, an apology and defense of his faith, and a "critical reexamination" of Islam that is as soulful as it is smart.

More than any other idea, event, era, or person discussed in his thorough and engaging history of Islam, jihad is Aslan's focus—no doubt because the concept entered the Western consciousness mostly by way of 9/11. The terrorists were widely called jihadists in the Western media, and with this book, the author has attempted a kind of reclamation project. To this end, Aslan develops a verbal tic, a sort of religious stammer over his favorite word: *strive*. Through the power of sheer repetition, Aslan hammers home the primary religious meaning of jihad—an internal *striving* or struggle, as the Qur'an puts it, "in the way of God."

By Aslan's account, good Muslims have always been strivers, beginning, of course, with the prophet Muhammad. And while any history of Islam will be bloody, like histories of Christianity or Judaism, Buddhism or Taoism—"*every* religion," Aslan avers—he is clear that there is nothing holy about the kind of violence that has been identified by some Muslims as jihad. Aslan writes, "There are a host of words in Arabic that can be definitively translated as 'war'; jihad is not one of them."

The West is wrong to see Muslims as murderers and not strivers, Aslan contends. Those who murder are misguided sinners. The prophet Muhammad never would have approved. In Aslan's history, Islam takes the shape of a single embattled soul engaged in the internal religious struggle that characterizes "the greater jihad."

If Islam itself is currently engaged in this greater jihad, then who are the combatants? On the one hand, there are Al Qaeda and other radical, revolutionary Wahhabist organizations (sects founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab). They divide the world into "the People of Heaven" and "the People of Hell" and interpret the first pillar of Islam, "There is no god but God," in a puritanical sense, that God alone should be the object of religious devotion. Muslims who do not share these beliefs are to be killed as infidels. For these religious reactionaries, the rule of God is the only rule; to separate religion and politics makes no sense. These Muslim have made themselves well known throughout the West by very clearly identifying their enemies, often with bombs.

Modernist reform-minded Muslims, on the other hand, would have power broadly shared within an Islamic democracy grounded in the ideals of pluralism. They understand the first pillar of Islam to include devotion to both God and the community at large. The model for Aslan and other Muslim modernists is the first settlement of emigrants in Medina, where the revelation received by the prophet Muhammad was "dictated by the needs of the Ummah," the community of believers. According to Aslan, representative democracy, "the greatest social and political experiment in the history of the world," has taken hold among Muslims as the modern-day fulfillment of the Medinan ideal. It is thus in keeping with the way of God that "all legal and moral considerations be determined by the citizens of the Islamic state."

Muslim democrats, though, are by nature both less exclusive and harder to classify than their reactionary opponents. In fact, Aslan shares at least one quality with the religious fundamentalists and political Islamists: He has a much harder time pointing out his friends than his enemies. If *No god but God* might be seen as a blueprint for democratic reform in the Muslim world, it remains unclear, by Aslan's account, who today's Muslim democrats are. In this sense, the book's subtitle correctly identifies its scope and aspirations—the origins, evolution, and future of Islam—while the present moment remains conspicuously absent.

Surprisingly, and much to the author's credit, the story of the battle over the soul of Islam will seem familiar to a Western reader. Consider, for example, Aslan's description of the faithful strivers Muhammad led away from Mecca and who eventually established Medina as the "City of the Prophet." Through his recitations, Muhammad's early followers were taught an ethics of radical social egalitarianism, and an ideal of economic redistribution, realities for which the prophet struggled (or, *strove*) in life. Among Christians, there may be no more accepted characterization of Jesus and his community of disciples than as this sort of radical. And of course, God is always *God* in Aslan's version, never Allah.

Today, Islam is about fourteen hundred years old, and if the history of Christianity is any example, the time and conditions are right for an Islamic Reformation to match Luther's. Most important, this Reformation could serve to reconcile Islam with democracy. And just as John F. Kennedy had to calm Americans' fears of "papalism" by pledging he would resign if there should be a conflict between his faith and his duty to uphold the Constitution, Aslan assures the reader that the same principle applies to Islamic democracy: "If there is ever a conflict between the two, it must be the interpretation of Islam that yields [in the secular sphere] to the reality of democracy, not the other way around."

The history of Islam has never been one of successful consolidation. After the death of the Prophet and the split between what would become the orthodox Sunni and the sect of Shiism, not to mention the Sufi mystics, there have always been at least two stories, two claims on Islam—at least two writers of each successive chapter. One, though, has tended to hold sway. And while the same old factionalism still exists, the current chapter is up for grabs between reactionary and violent fundamentalists and striving and democratic modernists. Aslan is positive that the modernists will prevail. "Reformation is already here," he declares. And *No god but God* is a beautiful early draft of the modernists' chapter. ■

Scott Korb *is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn. His book* The Faith Between Us, *personal essays on religion coauthored with Peter Bebergal, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury.*

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