



Is the Islamic State Islamic?

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Nothing could be more curious to Muslims than Western non-Muslims telling them what their religion is about. Would not Christians find it odd to hear from Muslims what the true meaning of their religion is? Nevertheless, after almost every terrorist act against a Westerner, particularly the more gruesome ones like beheadings, Western heads of state reflexively react with protestations that such acts are absolutely un-Islamic, despite the explicit claims of their perpetrators that they are done precisely as religious acts, as they exultantly declare, “Allahu Akbar.”

For example, President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron, noted Muslim scholars both, were the first to assure us that the Islamic State or ISIS, after it had decapitated an American and a British citizen, has nothing to do with Islam. (Of course, we can trace the genealogy of this thinking at least back to former President George W. Bush who said, after 9/11, “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. . . Islam is peace.”) Their subalterns also chimed in. Secretary of State John Kerry announced that Islam is a “peaceful religion based on the dignity of all human beings.” He denounced the Islamic State as “this enemy of Islam.” U.K. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond asserted that the Islamic State “goes against the most basic beliefs of Islam.”

Clerics were not far behind. The Archbishop of Brisbane, Australia, Mark Coleridge said, “It has nothing to do with real Islam.” At a September press conference, retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick claimed that “Catholic social teaching is based on the dignity of the human person . . . [and] as you study the holy Koran, as you study Islam, basically, this is what Muhammad the prophet, peace be upon him, has been teaching.” Therefore, these killings were not canonically correct. So they must not be due to Islam, but to a lack of opportunity—something we can fix.

This sort of exculpation happens so frequently that I can only understand it as a kind of preemptive Stockholm Syndrome. Because we don’t want to face the consequences if such acts are Islamic, we will simply insist that they are not: they can’t be because we find that unacceptable. The preemptive Stockholm Syndrome not only provides huge psychological relief to us, but it also lets Islam off the hook.

Why don’t we wait to hear from Muslims on this? Wouldn’t they be in a better position to say? In Jordan, politician Muhammad Bayoudh Al-Tamimi, a Palestinian, adamantly defended ISIS during a television appearance posted online in late August. Islamic State ideology “stems from the Quran and the Sunna,” he said, according to the translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). “The Quran and the Sunna constitute their ideology, doctrine, and conduct. . . . There is no such thing as ‘ISIS ideology’—it’s Islam.”

That of course supports the position of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who has declared himself caliph and claims descent from Mohammed. Unlike Obama and Cameron, he has a PhD in Islamic studies. As any good caliph would, he has commanded the allegiance of all Muslims in order that they might reclaim their “dignity, might, rights and leadership,” and announced that ISIS would march on Rome. If he is a real caliph, there is nothing particularly unorthodox about this, and it would resonate with a desire in the hearts of many Muslims.

“We look forward to the coming, as soon as possible, of the caliphate,” said Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the most popular preacher and scholar in the Sunni Muslim world. However, he cautioned, the “declaration issued by the Islamic State is void under sharia and has dangerous consequences for the Sunnis in Iraq and for the revolt in Syria,” adding that the title of caliph can “only be given by the entire Muslim nation,” not by a single group.

So the problem is not with the idea of the caliphate, but with this particular pretender to the title. However, as the long history of Islam has shown, power is self-legitimizing in the Muslim world. Power comes from Allah; otherwise, how could one have it? Therefore, further success in battle and more oaths of allegiance from other Muslim groups may vindicate Al-Baghdadi’s claim. That is why Muslim rulers, particularly in the Middle East, are particularly anxious that he be defeated. Otherwise, their goose is cooked.

This is essentially a Muslim quarrel. In fact, the Muslim opponents of ISIS refer to its members as Kharijites, referring to a 7th century intramural conflict over the caliphate that was likewise settled with a great deal of blood.

However, we in the West are unlikely to hear of the struggle in these terms. More likely, we are assuaged by statements like that made in August by former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who said: “There is no place for violence in Islam. Islam is a religion of peace and some people have wrongly interpreted the religion.” No doubt, and there have been many such protestations from Muslim leaders and religious figures.

But how is peace defined in Islam? The key is to understand the Islamic jurisprudential context in which these things are said. I have no doubt of the sincerity of most Muslim leaders in saying the things they do, but we in the West are largely unaware of what they mean by what they say. This is due to our ignorance of Islam.

The goal of Islam is salam, which means peace in Arabic. However, ultimate peace is achieved only by bringing all things into submission to Allah. That submission is often signified by the rule of Sharia. How is that to be done, especially if, as Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, an Indian American Muslim, has said, “aggression is never allowed in matters of faith”? Westerners could only wish this were so. But it decidedly is not—except in the most literal way in which Sharia defines as aggressors those who refuse to accept Islam.

In classical Islamic jurisprudence, after Islam has been offered to non-Muslim states or entities three times, their refusal to accept it makes them the aggressor (taghout). Anything that inhibits the spread of Islam is considered a hostile act insofar as it contradicts the will of Allah that “the word of Allah be supreme in the world,” and hence a *casus belli*. (I have little doubt that James Foley, David Haines, and the other executed Westerners were first offered Islam by their captors, then killed only after their refusal. If they had accepted Islam, they could not have been beheaded according to the Islamic rules of the game.)

Waging this kind of offensive jihad (jihad al-talab waal-ibtida) was an obligation of the caliph or “commander of the faithful” at least once a year, conditions permitting. There is definitely a jurisprudence of jihad—a kind of Islamic just war teaching—that requires prudential considerations of likely success and proper authority before jihad can be declared. Hence some of the objections to Al-Baghdadi. However, the obligation to jihad is incontestable, which is why it is called the sixth pillar of Islam.

Also, Muslims did not use the word *harb* (war) to describe their consequent armed assaults, but *jihad* and considered them “openings” (*futuh*) of the world to Islam. It is those who resist Islam who are waging *harb*. Therefore, Dr. Siddiqi, who earned a graduate degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, is literally correct in saying that “aggression is never allowed,” but only through the *legedmain* of Sharia which defines defense against Islam as aggression.

How many, however, who hear and are comforted by these kinds of declarations of the nonviolent nature of Islam understand the Islamic jurisprudence of peace—which defines defense as offense?

These kinds of contextual misunderstandings can, in my view, be extended to the horrific matter of beheadings. Secretary of State Kerry proclaimed, “There’s nothing in Islam that condones or suggests people should . . . cut people’s heads off.” Actually, the argument within Islam is not over the justice or injustice of this act but over who should be subjected to it, for what reasons, and when. Beheading itself is sanctioned in Muslim revelation. So there is nothing wrong with it in principle, which is why there are so many beheadings in Saudi Arabia each year.

The Quran says: “When you encounter the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike off their heads until you have crushed them completely; then bind the prisoners tightly.” (47:4) And also: “I will cast dread into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike off their heads, then, and strike off all of their fingertips.” (8:12). It is only a matter of prudence as to when and on whom to apply this punishment.

Here is the basic problem—the hard truth regarding these issues that we are too afraid to recognize. The well-known Egyptian scholar, the late Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, noted:

If we follow the rules of interpretation developed from the classical “science of Koranic interpretation,” it is not possible to condemn terrorism in religious terms. It remains completely true to the classical rules in its evolution of sanctity for its own justification. This is where the secret of its theological strength lies.

This is why the denunciations of terrorism by Muslims are frequently hedged. You will be able to recognize the hedges only if you know Islamic jurisprudence.

Yes, the possibility may exist of historicizing these texts—that is, confining them to their time and place in the 7th century – and some honorable and courageous Muslims I know have been working on this. (In fact, Nasr Abu Zayd was declared an apostate and driven out of Egypt for doing this kind of work.) But many others insist on their literal interpretation and application.

I think that so long as the main theology of Islam, which is Ash’arism, posits a God of pure will and power, it will not be able to get out of the grip of violence and the religious justification for it. So long as it can’t, one has to say that Islamism is a true interpretation of Islam insofar as Islam is not able to resist it. And I don’t mean resist by force of arms, but theologically. Islam currently does not have sufficient antibodies, and Western medicine has nothing to offer—because the problem is fundamentally religious.

The State Department’s new Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, Rick Stengel, said in a recent speech that

there is no battle of ideas with ISIL. ISIL is bereft of ideas, they’re bankrupt of ideas. It’s not an organization that is animated by ideas. It’s a criminal, savage, barbaric organization.

This is hugely mistaken. It’s giving up while sounding tough. Once again, Islam gets a free pass. It is not enough for the West to call these people barbarians. Recall that Adolph Hitler exclaimed, “We are barbarians. We want to be barbarians. It is an honorable title.” Calling him a barbarian was useless. In the Nazi case, it was the ideology that made barbarism honorable that had to be attacked in a war of ideas. With ISIS, we must object not only to their barbaric acts but to the Quranic principles that inspire and justify them.

It is time to stop the whitewashing and call them out on it. Doing so would be the single most effective thing we could do to help reformers in the Muslim world—and to help ourselves, as well. Otherwise, our exculpatory reflex will keep us in denial and enable the very forces in Islam that are against reform.