

The Phony Islam of ISIS

The group's interpretation of the religion is not literal. It is not serious. And saying otherwise puts Muslims in an impossible situation.

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Following the publication of his *Atlantic* cover story, “[What ISIS Really Wants](#),” Graeme Wood has [challenged](#) critics who claim that he misrepresented Islamic belief, noting, “It’s instructive to see how responses to my piece reckon with or ignore this line: ‘Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do.’” But Wood’s entire essay implies that such a rejection of ISIS by other Muslims can only be hypocritical or naive, and that ISIS members and supporters follow the texts of Islam as faithfully and seriously as anyone.

The main expert in Wood’s article is Princeton University professor Bernard Haykel, who “regards the claim that the Islamic State has distorted the texts of Islam as preposterous, sustainable only through willful ignorance. ... In Haykel’s estimation, the fighters of the Islamic State are authentic throwbacks to early Islam and are faithfully reproducing its norms of war.”

Put another way: Not only are Muslims wrong that ISIS is distorting Islamic texts, but the very idea is *preposterous*. ISIS is *faithfully* following Islamic norms of war. All of this might lead a thoughtful reader to wonder what all the other Muslims are doing.

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Wood quotes Haykel’s invocation of an axiom, common in academic discourse, that there is no such thing as ‘Islam,’ rather, “It’s what Muslims do, and how they interpret their texts.”

Presumably Wood does this in order to emphasize that he is not

personally offering a criterion to judge who is a good or bad Muslim. But he introduces just such a criterion: namely, that a Muslim is evaluated according to his or her interpretation of these texts. His article evaluates ISIS against other Muslims on this basis.

“What’s striking about [ISIS] is not just the literalism, but also the seriousness with which they read these texts,” Haykel said. “There is an assiduous, obsessive seriousness that Muslims don’t normally have.”

But who decides who takes the texts seriously? On what grounds do non-Muslim journalists and academics tell Muslims that their judgment that ISIS does not take a full and fair view of the Quran and Sunnah (the example and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) amounts to a “cotton-candy” view of Islam, while these non-Muslims retain the right to judge how “serious” ISIS is in its understanding of core Islamic texts?

If we take the “It’s what Muslims do, and how they interpret their texts” axiom seriously, then there would be no grounds to declare that a Muslim who believes in a pantheon of gods is unfaithful to the teachings of Islam. After all, the Quran, speaking with the Divine Voice, often uses the royal “We” when addressing Muslims. Would this belief in multiple gods also be ‘Islam’? Would these polytheistic Muslims have “just as much legitimacy as anyone else” because they are drawing on the same texts as other Muslims?

Can we extend the axiom of “There is no X, there is only what followers of X do and how they interpret their texts” beyond Islam? If a scientist claims, “Eugenics is not a valid application of the principles of science, and is unscientific,” should he expect to be told that the eugenicists were “just as legitimate as anyone

else” because they are following the same body of texts? Were not the eugenicists “serious” and “assiduous” in their science, at least in their own eyes? Did they not speak the language of science, and base themselves on Darwin?

In fact, no one acknowledges that all interpretations of their own system of ultimate meaning are equally authentic or faithful, whether this system is scientism, communism, post-modernism, or any other metaphysical commitment including religion. It is arbitrary to present the Islamic interpretative tradition as an unrestricted free-for-all where nothing is assessed on objective rational or moral criteria, in which every last impulse or assertion is equal to all other responses and can never be subjected to judgment or ranking.

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What other Muslims have been arguing from the start is that ISIS *does not take the texts seriously.*

The Quran is a single volume, roughly the length of the New Testament. It is a complex and nuanced text that deals with legal, moral, and metaphysical questions in a subtle and multifaceted way. Then there are the *hadīth*, or records of sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad, which run into dozens of volumes spanning literally hundreds of thousands of texts, each on average a few sentences long. Then there is the juridical and theological literature about the Quran and the *hadīth*, which consists of thousands of works written throughout Islamic history.

Does ISIS cite “texts”? Yes, though its main method is to cite individual *hadīth* that support its positions. But remember: The *hadīth* consist of hundreds of thousands of discrete items that range from faithfully transmitted teachings to outright fabrications attributed to the Prophet, and every gradation in between.

Over the centuries, jurists and theologians of every stripe, Sunni and Shiite, have devised rational, systematic methods for sifting through *ḥadīth*, which are often difficult to understand or seem to say contrary things about the same questions. They have ranked and classified these texts according to how reliable they are, and have used them accordingly in law and theology. But ISIS does not do this. Its members search for text snippets that support their argument, claim that these fragments are reliable even if they are not, and disregard all contrary evidence—not to mention Islam’s vast and varied intellectual and legal tradition. Their so-called “prophetic methodology” is nothing more than cherry-picking what they like and ignoring what they do not.

Furthermore, it is past time to dispense with the idea that organizations like ISIS are “literalist” in their reading of texts. Do the members of ISIS believe, literally, “Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God?” Of course not. Nor would they interpret literally, “God is the light of the heavens and the earth,” or any number of other passages from the Quran that the so-called “literalists” are compelled to either ignore or read as some kind of metaphor or allegory. I’d like to see ISIS offer a “literal” interpretation of the *ḥadīth* that says that when God loves a person, He “becomes the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.”

What distinguishes the interpretive approach of groups like ISIS from others is not its literalism (Sufis are indeed the most “literal” of all such interpreters of the Quran) but its narrowness and rigidity; for the adherents of ISIS, the Quran means exactly one thing, and other levels of meaning or alternate interpretations are ruled out *a priori*. This is not literalism. It is exclusivism.

Wood expands on his impression of the religious seriousness of ISIS fighters by pointing out that they speak in coded language, which in reality consists of “specific traditions and texts of early Islam.” Speeches are “laced with theological and legal discussion.” But there is a wide chasm between someone who “laces” his conversations with religious imagery (very easy) and someone who has actually studied and understood the difficulties and nuances of an immense textual tradition (very hard). I personally know enough Shakespeare to “lace” my conversations with quotations from Hamlet and the sonnets. Does that make me a serious Shakespeare scholar? I can “code” my language with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but is that proof of my assiduousness in relation to the Bard?

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The first thing I teach my undergraduates is that the English word “Islam” has two distinct but related meanings: the “Islam” that corresponds to Christendom (the civilization) and the “Islam” that corresponds to Christianity (the religion). The result is that the term “Islamic” has two separate but related uses, as does “un-Islamic.”

In his article and elsewhere, Wood has challenged the claim by Muslims that ISIS is un-Islamic by pointing out that ISIS members are self-identified Muslims. But Muslims who say “ISIS is un-Islamic” are not saying that ISIS fighters are not Muslims at all. They are calling ISIS “un-Islamic” the way a politician might call bigotry “un-American.” In fact, a prominent expert on ISIS has [noted](#), “I would be curious to know how many Muslims are willing to declare the members of [ISIS] non-Muslim,” adding, “I bet you there are very, very few people.” That expert is Bernard Haykel.

In other words, Haykel knows that few Muslims are prepared to describe ISIS as non-Muslim. And yet:

Muslims who call the Islamic State un-Islamic are typically ... “embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion” that neglects “what their religion has historically and legally required.”

Haykel recognizes that Muslims are not accusing ISIS members of being non-Muslims. Instead, he seems to be objecting to the Muslim claim that ISIS’s adherents are *bad* Muslims.

Throughout Wood’s article, this basic nuance between “Islamic” as a normative label and “Islamic” as a factual or historical label is absent, notably from such unqualified declarations as, “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic.” Can such statements be interpreted as anything but a judgment of ISIS’s fidelity to Islamic religion? If Wood was simply identifying the tradition or civilization out of which ISIS has emerged, then what would the word “very” mean? Wood also argues:

[S]imply denouncing the Islamic State as un-Islamic can be counterproductive, especially if those who hear the message have read the holy texts and seen the endorsement of many of the caliphate’s practices written plainly within them.

Un-Islamic in which of the two senses? And again, on what authority does Wood assert that such practices are “plainly” within these texts? Determining what texts “plainly” say is not as easy as spotting some words on a page. Islam’s interpretative tradition exists because the differences between plain and hidden, elliptical and direct, absolute and qualified, are not always obvious. The Quran speaks of itself as a book containing passages that are *muḥkam*, or clear in meaning, and *mutashābih*, or symbolic, allegorical, or ambiguous (even the significance of this word is debated among Muslims). To make such a casual remark

about what is “plainly within” the Quran or other texts is to fail to take them or the Islamic intellectual tradition seriously.

Wood further asserts with confidence, “The religion preached by [ISIS’s] most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.” It's just one more example of how his essay, ostensibly a descriptive account of a group of Muslims and its interpretations of texts, is in reality an account of the fidelity of ISIS to Islamic teaching and a critique of the claim by other Muslims that ISIS is wrong.

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“The only principled ground that the Islamic State’s opponents could take is to say that certain core texts and traditional teachings of Islam are no longer valid,” Bernard Haykel says. That really would be an act of apostasy.

In my experience, many Muslims are upset by articles like this not because their feelings are hurt, but because such arguments fill them with dread. They worry about what might happen to a religious or ethnic group that policymakers or the public believe to be intrinsically and uniquely dangerous.

When extremist groups like ISIS commit an atrocity or make the news, politicians and commentators inevitably lament how Muslims are not doing enough to “speak out” against the crimes carried out in their name. But when Muslims do “speak out” and “condemn,” as they always have, this seems to only reinforce the tendency to blame Muslims collectively. And if one relies on Wood and Haykel, and believes that the horrors perpetrated by ISIS are “plainly” in Islam’s sacred texts and that it is “preposterous” to argue that these texts are being distorted, then the notion that a faithful Muslim could be critiquing ISIS in a moral and rational

fashion is discarded. He can only be a sympathizer, a hypocrite, or a dupe who is ignorant of the requirements of his own faith. Wood's essay leaves readers with a gnawing fear that the majority of Muslims might wake up tomorrow and start taking their texts "seriously."

All of this puts Muslims in a double bind: If they just go about their lives, they stand condemned by those who demand that Muslims "speak out." But if they do speak out, they can expect to be told that short of declaring their sacred texts invalid, they are fooling themselves or deceiving the rest of us. Muslims are presented with a brutal logic in which the only way to *truly* disassociate from ISIS and escape suspicion is to renounce Islam altogether.