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"What ISIS Really Wants" Revisited:

Religion matters in jihadist violence, but how?

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Abstract

In his influential and provocative article on "What ISIS Really Wants", published in *The Atlantic* in March 2015, Graeme Wood argued that "the Islamic state is Islamic. *Very* Islamic." He also sought to challenge what he diagnosed as a "western bias" among academics and policy makers toward religious ideology, whereby religious doctrines or beliefs are relegated to the status of epiphenomena rather than taken seriously as causal properties in their own right. Wood's article sparked a wider - and still ongoing - debate over the relationship between Islam and jihadist violence. For one side in this debate, ISIS is inexplicable without reference to Islamic scripture; indeed, some commentators and politicians have even argued that it represents the "true" face of Islam; for the other side, ISIS is a hideous distortion of Islam's "true" teachings, and is inexplicable without reference to the wider political circumstances in which it emerged and to which it

is a response. This article attempts to forge a middle way between these two polarized viewpoints by arguing that any comprehensive account of ISIS must recognize both its secular and theological bases. More specifically, and drawing on the work of the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, it argues that Wood's critics, in their understandable but misplaced eagerness to detach Islam from jihadist violence, fail to accord proper causal weight to the legitimizing role of revolutionary Islamic ideas - and the innovating ideologists who develop these – in the commission of this violence.

INTRODUCTION

It is just over a year-and-a half since the publication of Graeme Wood's controversial *Atlantic* cover article "What ISIS Really Wants".[1] A lot has happened in the interim in Syria and Iraq. Palmyra,[2] Tikrit[3] and Ramadi[4] are no longer under ISIS control. After a year of sustained aerial bombardment[5] by U.S.,[6] French[7] and Russian[8] warplanes, Raqqa, the so-called "stronghold" of the Islamic State, isn't looking so strong, still less anything remotely like the beatific utopia[9] depicted in ISIS propaganda. In recent months, the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition has reportedly killed more than 10,000 ISIS fighters,[10] including key figures among ISIS's leadership, most notably Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, according to the Pentagon.[11] In addition to this, the group's Twitter footprint[12] has decreased markedly,[13] and all those earnest think-pieces about how to "counter-message" ISIS[14] no longer seem so urgent now that group doesn't look so prepotent in the offline, real world.[15]

Yet ISIS, though no longer expanding in Syria and Iraq, is still emphatically here, and in the aftermath of the Paris and Brussels attacks, in November 2015 and March 2016 respectively, the question of how Islam is related to what the group does and thinks has returned with a vengeance, invariably generating more heat than light. There also seems to be a consensus emerging, following reports on the secular habits of the Paris and Brussels attackers[16] and the acquisition of leaked ISIS documents showing the lack of religious knowledge of its foreign recruits,[17] that ISIS isn't really about religion. But if this is right, then what was all that talk

about apocalyptic prophesy, the caliphate, hijrah and the sharia? Is ISIS, and the wave of global jihadist violence it currently spearheads, really *not* about religion?

This article directly takes up this debate, but charts a different course by focusing on the legitimizing role of ideas in social and political life. If, as Quentin Skinner has convincingly argued,[18] any course of action will be promoted to the degree that it can be legitimized, it follows that ideological principles and their rhetorical recrafting by "innovating ideologists" (this is Skinner's expression) must feature in the architecture of any comprehensive explanation of the course of action in question. This sheds a new light on the debate over the relationship between jihadist violence and Islam. Instead of arguing that the former is driven by the latter or insisting that the latter has nothing to do with the former, the argument in what follows is that revolutionary Islamic doctrines provide legitimizing scripts for jihadist violence. Even if this violence, as seems obvious, has deeper social, psychological and political roots, and even if the scripts are not sincerely held by those who claim adherence to them, the ideological legitimation of jihadist violence is a crucial causal condition of its occurrence.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first part summarizes Wood's argument and the criticisms mounted against it. The second part argues that Skinner's core insight that ideals or principles are both "constraining and enabling" helps clarify existing misconceptions over ISIS and its causal connection to Islam. The third part explores the highly charged question of whether Islamic scripture is especially susceptible to demagogic manipulation by innovating jihadist ideologists.

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WHAT ISIS REALLY WANTS: RIPOSTE AND COUNTER-RIPOSTE

ISIS is Islamic – Like, A Lot

In March 2015 *The Atlantic* published an article by Graeme Wood, a contributing editor at the magazine and Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. The subject of the article could not have been more topical: "What ISIS Really Wants". In June the previous year, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), also known as Islamic State, ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or "Daesh",[19] had seized Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and in the following months captured large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, including, notably, Fallujah, Ramadi and Palmyra.[20] It had also, by that point, recruited more foreign fighters to its ranks than any other jihadist mobilization in recent history [21], eclipsing its chief competitor Al Qaeda as the world's preeminent jihadist group.[22]

Wood's article was 10,500 words long, and its tone was sober and scholarly. Despite this, it went viral. According to the web analytics company Chartbeat,[23] it was the best read digital article of 2015, receiving a total of 100 million minutes of engaged reading time. In the months following its online publication it attracted approximately 10,000 views a day. On the night of the November 2015 Paris attacks it received an extraordinary 1.9 million views.

The article, in part, served a polemical purpose and was an attempt to refute the view, prevalent in Washington political circles in mid-2014, that ISIS was just a bunch of thugs and psychopaths who posed no serious strategic threat to the Middle East or the wider world.[24] But it was also a serious attempt to explain the nature of the group, its origins, aims and broader ideological vision. "There is a temptation," Wood argued, citing Peter Bergen's classic study of Al Qaeda *Holy War, Inc.,*[25] to think "that jihadists are modern secular people, with modern political concerns, wearing medieval religious disguise - and make it fit the Islamic State."[26] This would be a mistake, he insisted, for "much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse".[27] "The reality," he continued, "is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic."[28] Of course, he clarified, "Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do."[29] But it is absurd to deny its essential character as "a religious, millenarian group."[30]

Wood also took aim at what he described as "a well-intentioned but dishonest campaign to deny the Islamic State's medieval religious [and specifically Islamic] nature".[31] "Many mainstream Muslim organizations", he wrote, "have gone so far as to say the Islamic State is, in fact, *un-Islamic*"[32] - a view shared by President Obama, who has denounced ISIS as "not Islamic",[33] and French President François Hollande, who contemptuously refers to the group as 'Daesh'.[34] According to Wood, this is flatly "preposterous", given how closely and assiduously the leaders of the Islamic State follow, however selectively, "the Prophetic methodology" of early Islam. It is also indicative, he suggested, of a deeper "Western bias": namely, that "if religious ideology

doesn't matter much in Washington or Berlin, surely it must be equally irrelevant in Raqqa or Mosul".[35]

Wood's article provoked fierce controversy, almost immediately. It is not difficult to see why. ISIS has become notorious for its terrible brutality and violence. Since its dramatic rise to prominence in the summer of 2014, the group has slaughtered thousands of defenseless Iraqi soldiers and Shiite civilians, gunning them into trenches.[36] It has raped and enslaved hundreds of women.[37] It has brutalized children by forcing them to watch scenes of horrific cruelty.[38] It has presided over public crucifixions in Raqqa.[39] It has coerced boys as young as 14 to carry out suicide missions.[40] It has launched a campaign of murderous aggression against gay men.[41] It has stolen and destroyed ancient and irreplaceable artifacts.[42] And it has created a vast library of atrocity porn that degrades not only the helpless victims who appear in it but also those who watch it.[43] To say that all this inhumanity and carnage is strongly rooted in, or somehow connected to, Islam runs counter to the one of the prevailing mantras of polite modern political discourse: that Islam is "a religion of peace". (It should be recalled that even President George W. Bush – widely excoriated across the Muslim world and beyond for launching wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – was adamant, as he put it in a speech just after the 9/11 attacks, that "Islam is peace". "These acts of violence against innocents", he said of the attacks, "violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it's important for my fellow Americans to understand that."[44])

ISIS is for Dummies, Not for the Devout

The contention, at the heart of Wood's article, that ISIS is fundamentally Islamic was strongly challenged by Juan Cole, who accused Wood of engaging in Orientalist "essentialism" for failing to recognize that ISIS, far from having an "Islamic essence", is in fact a "destructive Muslim cult", radically at odds with the ideals of Islam as understood and practiced by most Muslims. [45] Cole argued that there is "a center of gravity to any religion such that observers can tell when something is deviant", concluding, "Why pretend that we can't judge when modern Muslim movements depart so far from the modern mainstream as to be a cult?"[46]

Mehdi Hasan was similarly emphatic, discounting religion "as a useful analytical prism through which to view the rise of ISIS".[47] "It isn't the most pious or devout of Muslims who embrace terrorism, or join groups such as ISIS," he observed.[48] Referring to two British men who purchased copies of *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* prior to joining a jihadist group in Syria, Hasan asserted: "Religion plays little, if any, role in the radicalisation process."[49] Indeed: "To claim that ISIS is Islamic is egregiously inaccurate and empirically unsustainable, not to mention insulting to the 1.6 billion non-violent adherents of Islam across the planet."[50]

The controversy surrounding Wood's article reflected a larger controversy, first sparked by the 9/11 attacks, over the nature or "faces" of Islam and, more broadly, the relationship between religion and violence. Is there something inherently violent about extreme or fundamentalist versions of religion (let alone Islam), or is the violence carried out in the name of religion at root politically motivated and thus primarily secular in character? What causal role, if any, do reli-

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gious doctrines and beliefs play in terrorism? Is religion a force for good in the world or a source of evil? ISIS, because of the vigor and fastidiousness with which it has sought to justify its actions as divinely mandated, has brought these wider questions to the fore.

Hasan's view that religion – religion here being a euphemism for Islam – "plays little, if any, role in the radicalisation process" has gathered considerable traction since Wood's article was published last year. Writing after the Brussels attacks in March, *The Washington Post*'s Ishaan Tharoor argued that "radicalization is driven less by religious fervor than by more local factors, and it is shaped also by ties to gangs and other criminal activity".[51] For this view, Tharoor leaned on Rik Coolsaet's recent study of the jihadist scene in Belgium, according to which "the root causes of radicalization" are "high unemployment, marginalization, discrimination and a sense of alienation from the wider society".[52] Although Tharoor referred to the "complexity" of the causes of jihadist radicalization, he declined to identify religion as a salient variable in the causal mix. Far more important, he suggested, quoting Cas Mudde, an associate professor at the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia, is the story of how Europe "has created the conditions for the resentment that drives the terrorists."[53] Tharoor also approvingly cited "a top Belgian police official", according to whom the most recent generation of western jihadists are "Islamized radicals", whose radicalization is rooted not in Islam but in an essentially secular youth revolt against the status quo.[54]

The "top Belgian police official" referred to by Tharoor is Alain Grignard, a senior member of the counterterror unit in the Brussels Federal Police and a lecturer on political Islam at the Uni-

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versity of Liege. In an August 2015 interview with Paul Cruickshank for the *CTC Sentinel* Grignard said, responding to Cruickshank's probe about the possible "emergence of a new breed of jihadi in the West": "Previously we were mostly dealing with 'radical Islamists' - individuals radicalized toward violence by an extremist interpretation of Islam - but now we're increasingly dealing with what are best described as 'Islamized radicals'."[55] The idea that western recruits to ISIS were, as Grignard puts it, "radical before they were religious"[56] also finds support in the thinking of Olivier Roy. European jihadists, he observes, have Muslim backgrounds, but they are not religious, and none has a past of piety. Rather, their route into jihadism is via a broader disaffection from the societies into which they were integrated. Jihadism gives them "a cause, a label, a grand narrative to which they can add the bloody signature of their personal revolt", in the way extremist leftwing ideologies did for some in the 1960s and 1970s.[57]

LEGITIMATION AND CAUSALITY

In *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, published in 1930, the British historian Sir Lewis Namier warned about public figures who summon high moral principles to explain their own actions, and insisted that such professed ideals will be *ex post facto* rationalizations that have little or nothing to do with their actual motives for acting.[58] Indeed, for Namier, like the Marxist historians he claimed to despise, the ideals invoked by politicians were mere epiphenomena, deployed to conceal intentions of a very different and often inadmissible kind. Namier and his followers were castigated by less hard-headed historians for their cynicism. Hebert But-

terfield, for example, argued that many public figures are "sincerely attached to the ideals" in whose name they proclaim to act.[59]

A similar division, between materialists and idealists, can be seen today in arguments over ISIS, where one set of protagonists insists that ideology in the form of radical Islam is the key to understanding the group's violence, whether directed, inspired or branded, and the other argues that materialist factors, like political grievance or political self-interest or social net-works, override any ideological-religious dimension.

According to the Namierite or materialist reading of ISIS, the group's rise to power is a story of political state failure in Iraq, where jihadists, in collaboration with ex-Baathists from the previous Saddam Hussein regime, were able to exploit Sunni disaffection and seize territory and resources. Ideology, according to this story, did not drive this historic advance, but rather was, like the territory itself, annexed and refashioned for ISIS's own political purposes. Dalia Mogahed, for example, argued, contra Graeme Wood, that "a violent reading of the Quran is not leading to political violence. Political violence is leading to a violent reading of the Quran."[60] Or as *The Atlantic's* Kathy Gilsinan paraphrased Mogahed: "It's not ISIS's interpre-tation of Islamic texts that drives its brutality—it's the group's desired brutality driving its interpretation of the texts."[61] In this view, the will to power, not ideology, is the cause of ISIS's violence.

On the other side of this argument are those who insist that there is direct relationship be-tween belief and action, and that the former inexorably drives the latter. "Believe," the atheist philoso-

pher Sam Harris has written, "that you are a member of a chosen people, awash in the salacious exports of an evil culture that is turning your children away from God, believe that you will be rewarded with an eternity of unimaginable delights by dealing death to these infi-dels—and flying a plane into a building is only a matter of being asked to do it."[62] Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim who is now among Islam's more prominent critics, similarly contended that the "cause of [jihadist] terrorism" lies in "the ideology of radical Islam."[63] She also wrote contemptuously of the view that religion "is a mere smokescreen for underlying 'real' motivations, such as socio-economic grievances."[64]

Both sides in this debate make some valid points. But they are also deficient in numerous respects. It is of course entirely plausible that some jihadists are motivated by a sincere religious commitment, as they subjectively see it, and that their actions are directly premised on this commitment. In fact, there is some empirical evidence to show this.[65] But, equally, it is also entirely plausible that others became jihadists not out of a religious commitment and were not remotely religious at the time at which they became involved in jihadist activism. There is some evidence, also, for this alternative scenario. Coolsaet, for example, in the study cited by Tharoor, found that many Belgium jihadists in were not particularly religious or engaged politically. "Religion is not of the essence," he concluded.[66] The release, earlier this year, of leaked ISIS recruitment forms would appear to support this view. In a preliminary assessment of the forms, West Point's Combating Terrorism Center found that 70% of 4,173 foreign recruits considered themselves novices about Shariah law,[67] although, as Andrew Lebovich has commented, this doesn't conclusively show that they were not religious at the time at which they joined ISIS.

"The relative weakness of someone's knowledge of the Shariah," he remarks, "does not necessarily say much about how religious they are or want to be."[68] And of course even disbelieving Muslims may possess a deep knowledge of Islam.[69] In addition to this, the insistence that belief drives action is often based on a naïve reading of what agents publicly say about their actions. As Stephen Holmes has observed, "private motivations cannot always be gleaned from public justifications".[70] Or to put it more strongly: people are prone to lie about their motives, either to others or to themselves, in an effort to elevate or preserve their moral self-image.

Yet neither does the alternative claim that religion is causally marginal in jihadist violence fully stand up to scrutiny. Reza Aslan argues that there is no direct causal relationship between religion and violence. "It is ridiculous," he writes, "to claim that the actions of Islamic extremists are either necessarily or exclusively the result of their belief in Islam."[71] Aslan is right about this.[72] But is doesn't not follow from this that religion doesn't feature as *a* motive, among others, in jihadist violence.[73] As Peter Bergen recently observed, summarizing his research on jihadist activism in the United States since September 11, 2001: "I found that the perpetrators were generally motivated by a mix of factors, including militant Islamist ideology; dislike of American foreign policy in the Muslim world; a need to attach themselves to an ideology or organization that gave them a sense of purpose; and a "cognitive opening" to militant Islam that often was precipitated by personal disappointment, like the death of a parent."[74]

More crucially, it also does not follow that even when religious beliefs are *not* a decisive motive for jihadist violence that those beliefs are causally marginal in its commission.

In a series of classic methodological articles on social action,[75] Quentin Skinner argued that moral principles are not merely *ex post facto* rationalizations for actions, serving to give them a veneer of rectitude; they are also in themselves "enabling", making possible a range of actions by giving them legitimacy. Skinner's position was explicitly conceived as a riposte to the materialist tradition in modern thought,[76] strongly associated with Marxism, which minimizes or discounts the role of ideas in historical change. It also stands in self-conscious opposition to what he described as "the most hard-headed of our historians", like Namier, who themselves were opposed to Marxism. Although Skinner acknowledged Namier's point that moral principles are rarely in themselves the determinants of human action, he rejected the inference that people's professed principles do not thereby figure causally in their behavior. As he put it in another context, "even if your professed principles never operate as your motives, but only as rationalizations of your behavior, they will nevertheless help to shape and limit what lines of action you can successfully pursue".[77] Skinner's explanation for this is that people have a strong motive for trying to legitimize any conduct liable to appear suspect, and to the degree that cannot find a legitimatory warrant for their behavior they will be inhibited from pursuing it.[78] Furthermore, in claiming that their conduct was in fact motivated by some accepted principle they must behave, in Skinner words, "in such a way that their actions *remain compatible* with the claim that their professed principles genuinely motivated them."[79] This shows, he argued, that principles causally matter, regardless of whether they are sincerely held.

Hence, returning to the question of the relationship between jihadist violence and Islam, even if it were true that ISIS is animated by exclusively secular political purposes and that its theological principles are a mere mask cynically deployed by its leaders to conceal their worldly ambitions, this would not show that religious scripture does not shape the group's behavior, since what the group is able to do is limited not only by what it can legitimize within the bounds of Islamic scripture, but also by what courses of action it can plausibly range within this.

In his seminal 2001 study of religious violence, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer argued that religion is "crucial" for acts of religious violence, "since it gives moral justifications for killing and provides images of cosmic war that allow activists to believe that they are waging spiritual scenarios".[80] This, as Juergensmeyer carefully added, doesn't mean that religious violence is rooted in religious belief, nor does it discount the profound shaping impact of secular political imperatives on how and where this violence occurs. But religious ideas are an enabling condition of its occurrence - and hence a key part of the causal story of religious violence.

This point is brought into sharp focus in Rukmini Callimachi's haunting reportage in the *New York Times* of ISIS's sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls in Iraq. "The Islamic State's leadership," Callimachi writes, "has repeatedly sought to justify the practice to its internal audience", and has enshrined a theology that intricately regulates it.[81] Sex with a pregnant slave, for example, is strictly prohibited, which explains why ISIS forces captive women to take birth control.[82] Callimachi quotes Cole Bunzel, a scholar of Islamic theology at Princeton University, who told her, "There is a great deal of scripture that sanctions slavery. You can argue that it is no

longer relevant and has fallen into abeyance. ISIS would argue that these institutions need to be revived, because that is what the Prophet and his companions did."[83] Rape is endemic in all wars,[84] and there is nothing remotely "Islamic" about the practice. But were it not for that scripture to which Bunzel refers, ISIS would not be openly acknowledging its embrace of this crime, still less bureaucratizing it.

Seen from this perspective, Dalia Mogahed's claim that ISIS's interpretation of Islamic scripture is driven by its brutality, rather than its brutality being driven by an interpretation of Islamic scripture, demonstrates not the causal insignificance of that scripture, but its centrality. For Mogahed, as we have seen already, "a violent reading of the Quran is not leading to political violence. Political violence is leading to a violent reading of the Quran".[85] Yet without the Quran, and the interpretive possibility of placing a violent reading on it, ISIS would not, *contra* Mogahed, exist nor do what it does in the ways that it does.

Kathy Gilsinan, discussing Mogahed's comments, is right to suggest that given terrorism "emerges again and again from societies with no Islamic traditions to speak of, there's a limit to the Quran's explanatory power when it comes to political violence".[86] But it's an essential reference-point for explaining the political violence of *ISIS*, since, together with the hadith literature (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), it provides, to use Mark Juergensmeyer's terminology, the "mores and symbols" that make possible its bloodshed. Of course these mores and symbols are selectively reinterpreted by the group to suit its own purposes, and in ways, as Juan Cole has rightly argued,[87] that are scarcely normative in Islam

and among Muslims. But to suggest that these mores and symbols do not exist or are not a part, however marginal, of the Islamic tradition is some kind of denial, as is, correspondingly, the argument that Islam has no causal role in the emergence of ISIS and how it acts. This raises a difficult question: Is there something inherent in religion, and specifically Islam, that renders it susceptible to demagogic political manipulation?

THE NATURE OF THE WARRANT

In an op-ed article Will McCants, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, took both President Obama and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump to task for their views on Islam.[88] For Obama, "Islam is a religion that preaches peace,"[89] whereas for Trump, "Islam hates us".[90] "Both men are equally wrong", McCants wrote. "Islam neither hates nor preaches [peace?] - its followers do. Islam is what people make of it, and they have made it many different things."[91] According to McCants, 'Muslims abstain and Muslims drink... Muslims defend and Muslims demolish... Muslims kill and Muslims tolerate... Muslims war and Muslims ally'.[92] And so on. McCants's point is that Islam encompasses an extraordinarily diverse and contradictory range of actions and practices. There is not one Islam, but a plurality of Islams, and what Islam means is determined not by 'ancient, immutable scripture' but by Muslims and their ever-evolving approaches to their faith. 'Rather than talk about what Islam does and what Islam believes,' McCants advised, 'politicians should talk about what its followers do and what its followers believe.'[93]

This is a salutary corrective to the tendency among politicians and polemicists to speak of Islam as though it contains a "true" essence or face, whether pacific or violent. It also makes good sociological sense, and applies not just to Islam but to all religions. Religion, from this perspective, is a moral, cultural and intellectual resource on which people draw and which they use for a variety of private and public purposes. It provides the guiding scripts and rituals for a whole range of social activities.[94]. But it is equally important to recognize that just as religion enables, it also constrains in significant ways, liming the scope of that which is permissible and hence possible.[95] Islam, as the Islamic studies scholar Michael Cook has argued in his 2014 book *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics,* is an immensely rich resource. It can warrant a multitude of social arrangements and practices. But it can't warrant just *anything*. Like all religions, Islam is malleable, but not indefinitely so. This is Cook:

> I have sometimes been tempted to think of a religious heritage as a set of circuits that the politically inclined may or may not choose to switch on or as a menu from which they may or may not choose to make a selection; that is to say, an ancient religion, like a menu, provides its modern adherents with a set of options that do not determine their choices but do constrain them.[96]

In a footnote to this, Cook added, by way of qualification, that "even this may exaggerate the degree of freedom of choice. Often one should perhaps think rather of a menu dispensed by a waiter anxious to sell the house specials".[97]

"Muslims abstain and Muslims drink," McCants observes.[98] No doubt this is true (and we all by now know just how much Salah Abdeslam[99] and the troubled cousin of Abdelhamid Abaaoud Hasna Ait Boulahcen[100] liked to get their drink on). But, as McCants must know, the consumption of alcohol is not normative in Islam. Nor is swinging, necrophilia or a whole range of other sexual perversions, and nor are they ever likely to be. Like any tradition, Islam has limits as to what it can warrant. Ideological innovators within the faith try to redefine these limits. Moderate Muslims, for example, have sought to question the medieval apostasy laws, according to which apostasy is a capital offence.[101] Their efforts have centered on reinterpreting Chapter 2: verse 256 of the Quran –"There is no compulsion in religion" - as a doctrine of religious tolerance,[102] instead of a judgment denying the feasibility of coercion in matters of faith (The entirety of 2: 256 reads: "There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break."[103]) Although it is a stretch to read it in this way, especially given how condemnatory and threatening the Quran is toward unrepentant disbelievers, a case can be made for it. By contrast, it is far more difficult to find in the Quran, still less the hadith (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), a warrant for same-sex marriage. But it is not especially difficult to find within its pages a doctrine of religious martyrdom, and although, as Bernard Lewis has sagely observed,[104] it is a dangerous interpretive liberty to extend this to suicide bombing given how potently suicide is forbidden in Islam, the case for it is not wholly without foundation and in fact enjoys some moral and cultural plausibility among not a few Muslims.[105] According to Assaf Moghadam, Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden's mentor in Afghanistan, was the "first theoretician to succeed in turning martyrdom and self-sacrifice into a formative ethos of future al-

Qaida members".[106] But it was Al Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who laid the revolutionary rhetorical groundwork for this highly controversial tactic, as Moghadam explains:

> Zawahiri made a claim that many other supporters of suicide attacks would repeat: the suicide attacker does not kill himself for personal reasons, but sacrifices himself for God. He is therefore not committing suicide, but achieving martyrdom. It was a game of words, but it provided justification for hundreds of future suicide bombers to emulate these early *shuhada* [martyrs].[107]

Islam does not, as Robert Pape has shown,[108] have a monopoly over the use of suicide bombing as a tactic, but since 2001[109] the vast majority[110] of suicide missions have been carried out by radical Islamist groups. The reasons for this are complex, and although it is implausible to suggest that Islamic imperatives are centrally driving this, the causal role Islam cannot be discounted. As Diego Gambetta has suggested, "a tradition of combative martyrdom, which is stronger in Islam than in any other main religion, seems to provide a rationalizing narrative for the perpetrators, their families, and constituencies without which an organization that banks on popular support could not run SMs [suicide missions]".[111] "It can also", he continued, "lift social and normative constraints against abandoning one's family and worldly commitments by providing justification for high-cost, higher-order goals."[112] Gambetta concedes that "to accept SMs as a legitimate means, people need to experience an intense level of political and economic oppression and possibly fear for the survival of their group."[113] But if they do experience that: "then a tradition which provides a repertoire of beliefs that acknowledges aggressive martyrdom as a self-sacrifice

and links it to an array of worldly and heavenly rewards is suited to sustain unpromising conflicts *because* it is more suited to sustain self-sacrifice."[114] Hence: "While the real sources of the conflicts in which SMs emerge are ultimately social and political, and secular groups can resort to these attacks too, those organizations that can bank on the 'right' religious beliefs can more easily summon the energy to enter into or to continue fighting against all odds."

None of this is to suggest that Islam is the root cause of violent conflict, still less that it "poisons everything", as the late Christopher Hitchens preposterously said of religion in general,[115] but it does seem to possess a potential for violence that can be readily mobilized to advance sectional interests and objectives. This is assuredly a problem, although it is not clear what can or should be done about it, other than to support Muslims who assert the progressive elements in their faith.

CONCLUSION

The whole debate over the religious character of ISIS has become polarized between those who insist that it has everything to do with Islam and those who insist that it has little or nothing to do with it. In fact, it has become a proxy debate for a much wider debate about the role and nature of Islam and its relationship to the secular west. This is why the response to Wood's article generated so much more heat than light. It is also why so much scholarly discourse on jihadist terrorism is morally gamed toward minimizing the role of religious ideology. Scholars, who for the most part are liberal-leftist in outlook, don't want to denigrate Islam, so they relocate the causal

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center of gravity away from it. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is right: "Religion as a topic makes most Western scholars extremely uncomfortable: not only do they not understand the Islamic faith well, but also dwelling too much on religious ideology surely risks accusations of bigotry. So they negate religious ideology as a causal mechanism."[116]

The "is ISIS Islamic?" debate can often seem tortured and polemical. But, as Shadi Hamid has argued, it is an important and necessary one, because religion matters in social and political life.[117] The serious intellectual and political task lies in understanding *how* it matters and in what ways it intersects with the other things, including especially politics and human emotions, which also matter. Quentin Skinner's methodological insights help illuminate this fundamental question. Religion matters because it is a legitimizing resource of real potency, and, in the hands of innovating ideologists, provides moral justifications for violence. This doesn't mean that religious ideology is the sole or exclusive cause of violence carried out in the name of religion. But it is a key element in any causal explanation of its occurrence, and any account that marginalizes or denies this role is unlikely to be particularly helpful in illuminating the conditions that enable people to kill for self-proclaimedly religious purposes.

The practical implication that flows from this is that ideas are causally important and that ideas which promote violence against innocents must be vigorously repudiated and denied legitimacy. They must also be countered by better, more compelling, ideas. One of the most urgent policy questions is working out exactly what these ideas are and how to rhetorically frame and disseminate them. This task is made all the more difficult in an ironic, post-modern age that is innately

suspicious of "grand narratives" and where facts are relegated to the status of "just one more story". ISIS may be on the back foot militarily, but it is not a propitious moment for engaging in the "war of narratives",[118] given that one side in the battle seemingly lacks all conviction, and the other is full of passionate intensity.

NOTES

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than a mixture of killers, of kidnappers, of criminals, of thugs, of adventurers, of smugglers and thieves." "And," he elaborated, "they are above all apostates, people who have hijacked a great religion and lie about its real meaning and lie about its purpose and deceive people in order to fight for their purposes."

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jihadi-ideology-matters/ (accessed May 11 2016), nor would they take issue with Mehdi Hasan's point that there is no single linear route or "conveyor belt" leading from so-called "radical" or "extreme" beliefs to violence (Mehdi Hasan, "So, prime minister, are we to call you an extremist now?", *The Guardian*, June 9 2011. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/jun/09/cameron-counter-terror-muslims (accessed May 11 2016)). On the contrary, it has now become a convention in CVE circles to acknowledge, however perfunctorily, that there is no single path to radicalization and no single social or psychological profile of a violent extremist (see Brian Michael Jenkins, "Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001," RAND Corporation 2010. Available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2010/RAND_OP292.pdf (accessed May 11 2016); John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 618 (1) (2008), 80-94).

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