

The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State

Graeme Wood

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Despite the considerable scholarly work which has gone into understanding the Islamic State (IS), the depths of the motivations and psychology of its members and supporters have not been truly plumbed. Graeme Wood chronicles his forays into the minds of adherents of the organization in *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* and does an impressive job of laying bare the thought behind the group and its attention-grabbing brutality. While it is regarded by most of the world as a collection of psychopaths, notably by the vast majority of Muslims, who consistently denounce the group and its claims to religious legitimacy, Wood argues that it does have a logic and basis in religious scripture that is by and large internally consistent, if morally repugnant, and notes that only by understanding this logic—and, therefore, the beliefs of its ardent supporters—can the rest of the world combat it most effectively. He also provides an interesting window into the group’s recruitment process by examining some individuals whom he terms “seducers”, those who encourage others to immigrate to the group’s territory in Iraq and Syria. While this last part may seem somewhat outdated, it will unfortunately retain importance as IS coalesces elsewhere and perhaps even attempts a resurgence in those two countries; the examination of this possibility falls far outside the scope of this review, but its existence at all sees this aspect of the book retain its importance.

Wood begins the work with an account of his interactions with Hesham Elashry, an Egyptian tailor who turned to Salafism later in life and came to recruit for IS. The author reveals the impressive extent of Elashry’s

command of Islam and its scriptures, but perhaps most interesting are the holes which appear in the tailor's arguments and claims. Wood, throughout the book, does an excellent job of presenting the arguments of recruiters and supporters of IS as they are presented to him; they often include a startling degree of coherence and scholarship, but are always accompanied by hypocrisy or other flaws which Wood expertly points out, often in an entertaining tongue-in-cheek fashion.

The book includes accounts of the author's interactions with a variety of other figures, some better known than Elashry. The American jihadist, John Georgelas, a.k.a. Yahya Abu Hassan, and his Australian student, Musa Cerantonio, are each the subject of chapters in Wood's work. One of the most interesting sections of the book, from a religious studies perspective, comes during the section on Cerantonio: Wood discusses in some depth the mostly-extinct Zahiri school of Islamic thought and its main progenitor, Ibn Hazm. While this school is not in any way the official one of the Islamic State, its currents of thought are evident in the group's religious interpretations and the school has been reportedly cited in some fatwas issued by the organization's judges. Zahirism prioritizes the hadith, even the weakest among them, over analytical reasoning or scholarly opinion. It also favors the apparent meaning of any given verse over any potential hidden meanings; the school's proponents ask why God, all-knowing and all-powerful, would conceal his true meaning.

Wood does not restrict the subjects of his interviews only to Islamic State supporters (he does note at various points that many of his interlocutors, including Musa, avoid directly proclaiming support for the organization due to fear of anti-terrorism laws in their countries of residence, but the inclinations of those Wood interviews are always made clear despite their obfuscations). He also discusses the Islamic State with some Muslims whose ideological perspective is somewhat close to that of the group's but still not in line with their violent methodology; these include Hassan Ko Nakata, a Japanese convert who visited Syria and has called for a planet-wide caliphate, and Yasir Qadhi, a well-known and well-regarded American Salafist. Both express ardent opposition to IS, but the discussions Wood has with them are illuminating as to more mainstream Salafist thought on issues like the caliphate at a conceptual level.

Wood also devotes a chapter towards the end of the book to a survey of Muslim eschatology. He draws comparisons between IS and various other apocalyptic cults, including the Millet Ibrahim group which operated in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 80s. He notes that Abu Muhammad al-Ma-

qdisi, the well-known militant Islamist preacher, admired that group's leader and that Maqdisi himself was the teacher of Turki al-Binali, a prominent and recently deceased religious leader in the Islamic State. The chapter also discusses the Islamic view of the end of the world, including the return of Jesus, the advent of the Mahdi, and the ravages of Gog and Magog. Wood claims that Western leaders and scholars doubt the seriousness of the group about declaring this imminent apocalypse. He cautions that such a view of the devotion of those pledged to the Islamic State is erroneous and may potentially lead the West to misunderstand the motives of the organization, at its own peril. This chapter includes explanations of the group's specific interpretations of world events in the context of the coming apocalypse; the lack of true specificity in the prophecies allows the group to predict a coming apocalypse while still explaining away its defeats as divinely ordained. One well-known example is the town of Dabiq, where the true Muslim forces will supposedly confront the armies of Rome (whose identity is up for some debate) and emerge bloodied but victorious. When the Islamic State seized the town several years ago there was exultation among its ranks regarding the coming defeat of the Crusaders at Dabiq; once the town was lost, the group reminded its soldiers—and the world—that prophecy implied that Mecca and Medina must fall to the caliphate's forces before the battle at Dabiq, and that this had not yet occurred. The Islamic State's self-serving manipulation of prophecy and religious scholarship is a continuous theme throughout the work, but it is most highlighted in this chapter, to no small effect.

Within the broader literature on the Islamic State group this book occupies an interesting place. It provides perhaps the most detailed account of the group's version of Islamic eschatology to date, delving farther into the murky prophecies than even works like Will McCants' excellent *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, which provides a more historical account of the rise of IS with some notes on their beliefs. In contrast, Wood focuses on the ideology of the group, as interpreted and promulgated by its supporters and detractors around the world, and includes a few notes on the history of the group throughout. It is the series of interviews with figures like Musa Cerantonio, Hesham Elashry, Hassan Ko Nakata, and others which makes this work truly interesting, as it reveals the ways in which individuals can attribute their personal desires and hopes to group as a whole.

For a work which largely avoids being sensational—or at least to the extent possible—the inclusion of a full chapter on John Georgelas is some-

what disappointing. Georgelas is an American-born member of the Islamic State, but the fact that the author does not directly interview or communicate with him makes his inclusion in the work anomalous. One wonders whether he was given such a full treatment due to the fact that he is an American, or if Georgelas' story, without the inclusion of his own voice as is the case for the majority of Wood's other subjects, warranted a full chapter to itself.

The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State is an incredibly well-researched work which dissects both the psychology and religious beliefs of Islamic State supporters. The work is successful due to both the seriousness with which it treats the opinions of these men (all of Wood's major subjects are male) and how it challenges those who disagree with the Islamic State to seriously engage with the group's intellectual thought, however repugnant they might find it. Wood's argument that we must truly understand an ideology to defeat it is convincing, and his book makes a significant contribution to this effort.

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