

# THE CALIPHATE & THE COSMOPOLIS

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La rue Montorgueil à Paris. Fête du 30 juin 1878 by Claude Monet, 1878. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In the days since the Friday the Thirteenth attacks in Paris, a vivid set of images has made its way through the media. First, there was the darkened Eiffel Tower: Paris itself in mourning, the gaiety of the city's central *belle époque* identity in abeyance. Second, there were the photographs of iconic structures in cities across the globe lit up in the blue, white, and red of the tricolor in solidarity.

These parallel images—the darkness in one city and the blazing colors in the others—highlight a particular feature of the war that this incarnation of Islamism has declared. It is a war not on one particular nation state, but on the cities of the West.

ISIS controls a defined geographical area and has—more or less—established political structures. The Western powers, nevertheless, don't want to dignify it by calling it a nation state. What we miss, though, is that the dignity it itself seeks is not the dignity of a nation state.

The acronym ISIS—Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—is a misleading one. It is partly misleading because it seems to limit the body's ambitions to Iraq and Syria; ISIL too is misleading, as this seems to limit the group's ambitions to the Levant. But both acronyms are

also misleading because of the assumptions that we have about the word “state.” ISIS does not want to be—they do not consider themselves—a nation state over and against Iraq and Syria.

“Rush, O Muslims, to your state,” al-Baghdadi called out to fellow believers upon being proclaimed Caliph in 2014. “It is your state. Syria is not for Syrians and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The land is for the Muslims, all Muslims.” In other words, there is no intended overlap between a nation and a state. Rather, the intended overlap is between the global community of all Muslims—the *ummah*—and the territory held by al-Baghdadi’s armies.

And the territory is not, of course, confined to areas of the Middle East, or even to territories like Spain once held by Muslims and taken back in the *Reconquista*. Al-Baghdadi does not mince words in his call to Muslims: “This is my advice to you. If you hold to it you will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills.”

ISIS is a conventional English-language rendition of the Arabic acronym *Daesh—al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Shaam* (the North, i.e. Greater Syria). *Dawla*, however, is not well-rendered as “state.” Instead, it is something closer to “dynasty” or “regime,” and the kind of regime is, of course, the Caliphate. Our closest analogy might be something like the Holy Roman Empire, which would have been confused—and then insulted—if in the year 900 an anachronistic commentator had called it a nation state.

Not itself a nation state nor aspiring to be one, ISIS did not attack Paris because it is part of the nation state of France. If ISIS attacks Washington, DC,

as it has threatened to do, it will not primarily be because DC is in the United States, or because it is the capital of the U.S. Nationalism, indeed, is one of the manifestations of Western decadence that al-Baghdadi seeks to overturn: he is quoted in the November 2015 issue of *Dabiq* calling for the West to “comprehend... hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, [which] will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy, and uncover its deviant nature”

This point was muddied in the September 11 attacks, partly because al-Qaeda had not—yet—birthed ISIS and partly because Bin Laden called the U.S. in particular the Great Satan. In its own way, this flattered our vanity: they hate us, we liked to say, for our freedom, and it was a particularly American kind of freedom we had in mind; they probably specifically hate the Connecticut Compromise or Federalism or the Bill of Rights or other things we learned about in Civics class; the image we had was of jihadis with a beef against James Madison.

It’s possible to go the same direction with the attack on Paris: they hate France for its *laïcité*; they hate it as the birthplace of Charles Martel. But this would be to miss the point.

The point is not that one nation-state attacked another. It is precisely that the Caliphate attacked one of the cities in... let’s call it the Cosmopolis, the collection of cities that are the capitals of what was once Christendom. In the view of the hardest-core of Islamists, surely these two things flow into each other: Christianity is polytheism, idolatry; is there any wonder that the idolatry of Christendom should have, in the

course of history, become the idolatry of the debauched cities of the modern West, the idolatry of the Cosmopolis?

There are several reasons that a Western Christian might have for rejecting this way of understanding what happened. Some make more sense than others.

First, our political philosophy is deeply committed to sovereignty embodied in nation states, and for mostly sound historical reasons; we don’t want to be post-national. So we say to ISIS, no, you are either a state or you are terrorists, but what you attacked was France, and that’s how we’ll respond.

Second, we of course don’t want to be forcibly defined as *dar al-Harb*, the House of War. So we say to ISIS, your division is barbaric and wrong.

Third, we in the U.S. don’t want to feel ourselves pressured to respond as though we had been attacked. We have had almost a decade and a half of war in the Middle East; every regime and half-regime we smash seems to leave room for a worse successor. We don’t want to go this route again. We are not good at “hydra-fighting.”

Moreover, even in the worldview of ISIS, it is not accurate to see this as a simple conflict between the House of Islam and Christendom. The *dar al-Harb* includes “unsubmitted” nominally-Islamic areas, and these are, if anything, greater goads, greater irritants, than those places that used to be the capitals of Christendom. Beirut was, after all, attacked the day before Paris; while historically Western-influenced, it was not one of the cities of Christendom.

It has a greater claim to be one of the cities of the Cosmopolis,



which makes it more objectionable, in the view of ISIS; it is a Muslim city that is appallingly un-Islamic, and that is the most offensive kind of city for some jihadis. Insufficiently Islamic Muslims will always be in more danger from their coreligionists than Western Christians and secularists. This is particularly true in the case of ISIS (and its progenitor, al-Qaeda in Iraq), which is far quicker than al-Qaeda “Central” or other al-Qaeda affiliates to proclaim other Muslims as *takfir*, apostates deserving of death.

But the fact is that in the days since the attacks in Paris, it has been accurate for New Yorkers and Londoners and Viennese to feel themselves targeted—more targeted than, for example, the inhabitants of a village in Normandy. ISIS does not have a particular problem with France, or with the French. It has a problem with the Franks. It is symbolic and emotionally gratifying to say *Nous sommes tous Parisiens*. But it is just a matter of grim realism to say that we are all Franks.

This is not how we think of ourselves anymore. We have trouble wrapping our minds around the concept of Obama as a lackey of the Pope, or an American soldier as one of the army of Rome. But it is how those who carried out the attacks understand the world, if we take them at their words—and it seems wise to do so.

It may be that, in this, our enemies understand more than we do. But Westerners understand it, too, in part. And that’s why it was the iconic buildings of what were the capital cities of the Franks, and those in the cities settled by their descendants and influenced by the remnants of their culture, that were lit up in solidarity.



It was the Cosmopolis blazing defiance to the Caliphate, as it has done, as it will do.

*Don't let it be this, we think. Let it be just the club of good humans, the good civilized real sensible whole world, expressing human solidarity with one city in that world. Let it just be that there is this group of disenfranchised and perhaps psychologically damaged victims of globalization who are lashing out using religious symbolism to give context to violence that is really about economics.*

That’s the instinctive explanation of the modern Western liberal, who refuses to see politics and religion as related categories. A November 14 piece in *Haaretz* described the unwillingness of many, even in the hard-hit 11<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, to talk about the attackers as acting on behalf of ISIS. They are disaffected, insane, economically marginalized—even criminal; even, perhaps, evil. But not political, and not religious.

But that’s not how the attackers understand their actions, and it will be impossible for leaders in the West to respond effectively unless they understand what they’re responding to.

One of the ways of describing the grievance that ISIS has against the West, and against France in particular, deserves further examination. It’s popular among both contemporary advocates of *realpolitik* analysis of current events and among those who identify with the Left. This analysis says that

ISIS’ grievance—the reason it chose France to attack, at this moment—was the series of air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which President Hollande began in late September.

On the principle that we should believe what ISIS tells us about why it does what it does, this is certainly correct. The unsigned lead editorial in *Dabiq* that covers the Paris attacks explains this with great clarity:

A year earlier, on “19 September 2014,” France haughtily began executing airstrikes against the *Khilāfah*. Like Russia, it was blinded by hubris, thinking that its geographical distance from the lands of the *Khilāfah* would protect it from the justice of the *mujāhidīn*. It also did not grasp that its mockery of the Messenger would not be left unavenged. Thus, the Islamic State dispatched its brave knights to wage war in the homelands of the wicked crusaders, leaving Paris and its residents “shocked and awed.” The eight knights brought Paris down on its knees, after years of French conceit in the face of Islam. A nationwide state of emergency was declared as a result of the actions of eight men armed only with assault rifles and explosive belts. And so revenge was exacted upon those who felt safe in the cockpits of their jets.

However, the *realpolitik* analysis—from both liberal and conservative sources—tends to conclude that all this talk of the attacks being “because of” religion, or in service of global jihad, are therefore nonsense.

But orthodox Christians are in a particularly good position to straighten out this misunderstanding. We share with Islam a vivid sense that history is where God acts; the “spiritual” world is not something that is simply a matter of eternal principles, divorced from concrete political and earthly realities. We, and ISIS, know that, because God acts in history, it is nonsense to say that an act has a concrete political reason and therefore has no “religious” reason.

Indeed, based on their own writings, it seems that ISIS sees France’s attacks on their Caliphate precisely as the latest instantiation of Allah’s enemies attacking his rule in the world. Christians can understand this, to some extent: we can look back and say with a fair amount of clarity that when, say, Nero was executing Christians, he was setting himself in hostility to the Body of Christ; that this historical act was something that had spiritual significance.

That doesn’t mean we agree with ISIS’ worldview, any more than we agree with the worldview of the apolitical, areligious secularist left. As Christians, we have other resources, but we must use them very carefully.

In the years after September 11<sup>th</sup>, a tendency grew up among American Christians to essentially agree with, but invert, the jihadist worldview. We were not in fact the *dar al-Harb*; we were Christendom, which was the political expression of the Kingdom of God, which was identical to the visible Church, which more or less in one way or another turned out to be best guarded by the institutions of the United States. The Pentagon became, in the crassest versions of this equivalence, the arsenal of the Kingdom of God. (And the

fact that arsenal had, at various points over the previous twenty years or so, been a major supplier of weapons to Islamists did not seem to make much of an impression.)

Of course no one really thought this way—not through and through. But American conservatives did have a remarkably difficult time, when considering foreign policy, in remembering that even the sphere of influence of our nation is not coextensive with the rule of Christ. (They have in many cases held this belief while simultaneously affirming that American domestic policy, particularly in regards to the life issues and sexual morality, is creating a regime that is coextensive with the rule of antichrist.)

Christians who are not pacifists have learned one of Niebuhr’s lessons—the one about the impossibility and irresponsibility of quietism in the face of a violent world—while forgetting the other—the one about the only-partial claim of any worldly citizenship, the only-relative nature of the virtue of any group.

It’s only by remembering both of these lessons that we’ll be able to respond to these new attacks. There are no perfect responses available. Pretend that they were attacks merely on France? Take our cue from Washington via Monroe and stick to our hemisphere? Let Putin and Hollande handle it between them? This seems like an unlikely outcome, and given the fact of Western involvement in the region in the past hundred years, an irresponsible one.

But to adopt a worldview that is a simplified and inverted version of ISIS—to see the *ummah* as constituting a single body, to see that body as the body of our

enemy, to decide ahead of time that some maximal combination of bombing and ground warfare is the one satisfactory and effective way to deal with this enemy—is no course for Christian realist wisdom.

To think that we can discern with absolute clarity what God’s purposes in history are at this moment—with the kind of clarity that ISIS believes it has, with the kind of clarity that we can have at this point about Nero—is to pretend to a level of insight we just don’t have. The Cosmopolis that ISIS is attacking is no paragon of purity; the City of God is not coextensive with Paris, and was not even when St. Thomas taught there.

But we do our best. Given that we are going to respond, we need to respond with at least some understanding, with a vivid sense of our own limitations as we seek to protect those who are innocent—not absolutely innocent, but innocent of aggression in this particular moment. Those who have the duty to defend our cities must at least attempt to do so, even though they act through the fog of war and what Jean Bethke Elshtain called the fog of politics, even though they act on behalf of a nation whose laws do not protect its own most vulnerable inhabitants, even though they are not themselves perfected saints. **P**

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