

VII. THE ISLAMIC STATE

What is an Islamic State?

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In June 2014, the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS¹, declared a new state in its occupied territories in the Middle East and demanded allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Given ISIS's brutal treatment of those deemed its enemies, this widely publicized declaration reinforced the common Western stereotype that Islam encourages an anti-democratic, oppressive form of government. The overwhelming majority of Muslims reject ISIS's claim, but misunderstandings about what sort of government Islam encourages still prevails in the West.

The truth is that there has been considerable debate in the history of Islam over what constitutes the preferred Islamic state. Part of this is due to the fact that Islam's core texts, the Qur'an and the hadith, have much to say about how Muslims are to live in relation to God and one another but little to say in terms of which form of government to adopt.

Controversy over the political leadership of the Muslim community arose early in Islam's history after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The majority of Muslims, known as Sunnis, believed that the Muslim community should elect a leader, or caliph, to rule. A minority party, known as the Shia, believed that leadership should be passed down

¹ Sometimes referred to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or even IS

through the Prophet's family, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali.

Because Islam's core texts do not contain specifics about how to create and maintain political institutions, Muslims historically have created differing political systems that were in part inspired by Islamic law, particularly the Qur'an and the teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad, and in part by the political customs of the lands they conquered. In Sunni Islam, the concept of the caliphate, a political community ruled by the caliph, has historically spanned these different systems of government, though in practice, caliphs often functioned more as symbolic political figures, with real political power exercised by local and regional rulers.

Most scholars agree that the caliphate came to an end when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881–1938), with the support of the British Empire, abolished the Ottoman caliphate and declared the secular state of Turkey in 1924. In the course of the twentieth century, Muslim-majority countries have implemented diverse political systems. Some of these countries refer to their polities as Islamic states, but the form of government varies considerably. Saudi Arabia, for example, is a monarchy, ruled by the Al Saud family. Iran, by contrast, is an Islamic republic, complete with a president, a parliament, and an electoral process. Yet neither a monarchical nor a republican form of government is an obvious extrapolation from Islam's central texts. This diversity, moreover, cannot simply be explained by the fact that Saudi Arabia is a Sunni nation and Iran a Shia one.

We also encounter examples of Muslim-majority countries in modern history that have sought to adopt democratic polities, including Tunisia, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. Moreover, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center study, majorities in countries ranging from Lebanon to Egypt to Jordan believe that democracy is the best form of government. They also believe that Islam is compatible with democracy and therefore desire a prominent role for Islam in the laws of their nations. "Shura" is a

type of consultative body which balances majority rule with the principles of Islam. Separation of religion and the state is not a position that holds sway among many Muslims seeking a democratic government.

ISIS's declaration of a caliphate needs to be understood in this context. ISIS believes that the challenges and setbacks Muslims now face are due in part to un-Islamic innovations in government, including the creation of national borders in the Middle East by European powers in the early twentieth century and the introduction of what al-Baghdadi calls "the idol of democracy."

When ISIS declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, it was in effect attempting to revive the classic notion of the early transnational Islamic empire under the leadership of the caliph or political successor to the Prophet Muhammad. It was also asserting that there is only one form of Islamic government that is allowed according to Islamic law.

But its claims and its methods have generated frustration and fury among Muslims. In an open letter to al-Baghdadi in September 2014, over one hundred Muslim scholars excoriated the self-proclaimed caliph for violating Islam's core principles, particularly prohibitions against killing innocent people, harming "People of the Book" (including Christians), torture, the reintroduction of slavery, the denial of rights to women and children, and declaring a caliphate without the consensus of the entire Muslim community. In short, they insisted there is nothing "Islamic" about al-Baghdadi's "Islamic State."

The overwhelming majority of Muslims shares this sentiment. Muslims may differ widely over what constitutes a legitimate Islamic state, but most agree that ISIS represents nothing more than a terrorist organization whose claims to power and brutal methods of rule have nothing to do with Islam.

Response to: What is an Islamic State?

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When it comes to mixing religion and government, many Christians will claim the phrase “separation of church and state” as a bedrock principle. The phrase is not in the Bible. And while many think it’s in the U.S. Constitution, the phrase actually originated in an 1802 letter by Thomas Jefferson to a Christian association.

The U.S. Constitution does makes clear that there should be no “religious test” for public office, and the First Amendment states that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Professor Green explains that the Qur’an and the hadith have little direct teaching on what form of government to pursue. Similarly, most of the Bible—and especially the New Testament—is the story of God’s people under the yoke of oppressive governments. Roman rule and its soldiers crucified Jesus, but in his teaching Jesus did not make clear what type of governmental system to adopt.

In the book of Romans, Paul instructs the church in Rome that they are to pay taxes and be subject to the governing authorities. Paul also tells them to, “live in harmony with one another,” to love one’s neighbor as one’s self, and that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 12:16, 13:9-10).

As a person living in the U.S. today, our government affords me certain rights. On the one hand, even if 100% of those in my neighborhood called for it, our laws make clear that the government would not establish a state church (or a state-owned mosque or synagogue for that matter). On the

other hand, as a Christian I believe God calls me to live out a public faith that means I love my neighbor in my voting, paying taxes, and public advocacy.

Put another way, Christian discipleship calls me not to separate how I treat my neighbor when I'm at church and how I treat my neighbor in public. I can't leave my faith at home. On my best days, how I act in public shows others what it is to follow Jesus.

The Christian notion of *vocation*, or as Douglas Schuurman puts it, "serving God through serving the neighbor" means my faith cannot be compartmentalized. Vocation includes what I do with my time, talents, resources, privileges, and power—all the time.

It's often said that, "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." Though Jesus was a world-changing teacher, a wise leader, and, as I confess, my savior and Lord, he was not a Constitutional scholar. And yet, God calls Christians today to study law, to vote, to run for office, and most of all, to love our neighbor as ourselves.