

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ALI BANUAZIZI is a political science professor at Boston College. His research focuses on the political cultures of the Middle East, and includes a comparative look at religion and civil society in the region. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the “Politicization of Religion or Sacralization of Politics: Two Faces of Political Islam.”

OWENS: What is the value of the grand narrative in looking at the Middle East—something like the clash of civilizations—as opposed to a more contextualized or nuanced version that focuses on diversity within Islamic cultures and religious traditions? Where do you start on that spectrum in your own work, and what’s most productive for the rest of us who aren’t experts in the Middle East?

BANUAZIZI: I think the appeals of grand narratives are quite natural and understandable. We all want to fit ideas and events into broader and more coherent frameworks. But often, when we examine our grand narratives closely, we find that they don’t quite map onto the realities on the ground and their applicability is limited in particular contexts and times.

In the case of Islam, the problem is compounded by the great diversity of the societies that comprise the Islamic world. Today, Islam has over 1.5 billion adherents, the vast majority of whom don’t live in the Middle East. And yet it is usually the Middle East—with its own diverse cultures, religious traditions, and political regimes—that we have in mind when we talk about Islam. We should also remind ourselves that the vast majority of Muslims, no matter where they live, lead ordinary lives, preoccupied with issues and problems that have little to do with

the current wave of Islamic radicalism and violence.

Moreover, most of the the grand narratives about the relationship between Islam and politics are of fairly recent origin and have been offered in response to the



recent wars, revolutionary upheavals, sectarian conflicts, or acts of terrorism. The question is whether we can legitimately make broad generalizations about the character or spirit of Islam—a religion that has been around for over fourteen centuries—based on the violent deeds and radical ideologies of a tiny proportion of its adherents at a particularly turbulent period in its history?

OWENS: In the title of your talk today, you offer a dichotomy between the “sacralization of politics” and the “politicization of religion.” Is there a difference between the two, and can you say a bit about what you mean by both?

BANUAZIZI: I think there is a useful distinction that can be drawn between the two, though I don’t want to suggest that these are two entirely distinct varieties of political Islam. By “politicization of religion,” I mean the active engagement in politics by individuals or groups primarily on the basis of their religious beliefs and convictions. As you know, few people subscribe anymore to the so-called “secularization thesis,” the notion that socioeconomic development and modernization lead inevitably to the decline of religion and its confinement to the private and personal spheres of life. In reality, with the exception of northern Europe, we find no such decline in religiosity or in the representations of religion in the public sphere. In fact, we see a greater presence of religion in politics in nearly all religious traditions, including Judaism (various “religious-nationalist” and ultra-orthodox political parties in Israel); Christianity (the rise of the Christian right and the evangelical movements in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere); Hinduism; and, somewhat paradoxically, even in post-communist Russia. In the case of Islam, for both doctrinal and historical reasons, separating the private and the public spheres is far

more difficult, leading to an ever-present and pervasive role for religion in politics. It is important to keep in mind, however, that until a few decades ago those whose engagement in politics was based on their religious convictions or Islamic ideologies did not seek to exclude secular groups from the political stage and no regime in Muslim-majority countries sought to base its political legitimacy on divine authority.

What I have labeled as the “politicization of religion” may be contrasted to a different type of political Islam, one that seeks to sacralize an ideology, a political movement, or a territorial state by claiming that they are based on divine will and providence. A dramatic example of this form of political Islam happened in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. What had been a popular and broadly based revolutionary movement was overtaken by Ayatollah Khomeini and his coterie of clerics with a theocratic vision. They succeeded to create an “Islamic Republic” led by a supreme leader who claims to derive his authority from the prophet and ultimately from God. What complicates the Iranian political system, however, is the fact that the post-revolutionary government bases its legitimacy not only on its putative divine authority, but also on popular sovereignty as a republic with periodic elections and a semblance of political pluralism. Since the Iranian revolution, groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Boko Haram in Nigeria, and more recently the so-called “Islamic state” have waged what can only be described as campaigns of intimidation, terror, and indiscriminate violence and savagery in the name of Islam, claiming divine inspiration and promising the (re-) establishment of the Islamic caliphate. Their oft-stated goal of a return to the golden age of Islam (a period of ten years, from 622–632 C.E., during which Muhammad led the Islamic community in Medina as both its spiritual and temporal leader) mistakenly equates a small community of the faithful during the

prophet’s life with the idea of the modern “state”—a concept that developed centuries later.

OWENS: Let’s talk about the group that calls itself the Islamic State now, or ISIL or ISIS. You’ve already noted the irony of using the term “state” for a group that

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claims to be reclaiming the traditional Islamic mode of governance, which predates the modern state. I wonder if you disagree with Graham Woods’s recent essay in the *Atlantic* (March 2015), which argued that the Islamic State sees itself as authentically Islamic in the way it re-enacts the rules of war and culture that existed at the origins of the Islamic tradition, and that they are pursuing an apocalyptic agenda. The upshot is that because they take it seriously, we ought to take it seriously. Do you take a different view of the Islamic State?

BANUAZIZI: As I mentioned before, the idea of an “Islamic state” is an “invented tradition,” which has been denounced by nearly all leading Muslim scholars and

theologians around the world. Islamic theology offers no blueprint for establishing an “Islamic state” and has relatively little to say about managing the political affairs of the community.

I regard ISIS as a lethal threat, not only to religious minorities in the region, but also to Muslims who do not follow its highly distorted view of Islam. The threat is far greater for other Muslims and neighboring states than it is for the West. And in that sense, the rise of the “Islamic state” represents more of a war within Islam than one by Islam against the West. Furthermore, as it has become increasingly clear in the past few months, ISIS is not a small, ragged group of men operating from hidden caves, but a relatively modern political organization with a sophisticated, battle-tested military command structure that includes elements of the Baathist Army of Saddam Hussein. It now controls over one-third of Iraqi and Syrian territories. By some estimates it already has over \$2 billion in liquid assets. It levies taxes, draws revenues from the sale of oil, pillaging and smuggling, and collecting ransoms from its captives and their families and others.

OWENS: That was precisely a follow-up question I had. Many people are feeling hopeless about the possibility for a peaceful resolution of the regional wars in the Middle East. But it sounds like this is a moment, from your perspective, that strong force is required from multiple directions.

BANUAZIZI: I don’t believe that there is any likelihood to stop the onslaught of ISIS, with its apocalyptic vision and commitment to violence and terrorism, through negotiations.

OWENS: Can the current context in Syria, Iraq and Iran be seen in any meaningful way as an upshot, or as a failure, of the Green Movement and then the Arab Spring, or is this something that develops on its own terms, that isn’t about a sort of hopelessness among the populace that can’t see any other way forward?



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BANUAZIZI: The origins of ISIS and the reasons for its rapid rise have of course been the subject of much recent debate. There are those who attribute its success to the breakdown of state authority in its base countries. This certainly sounds like a plausible explanation when we consider the fact that ISIS and, more generally, Islamic extremism, have thrived most readily in countries as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen. And, without a doubt, some of our ill-conceived policies in the region—most notably the invasion of Iraq and the manner in which the war and the occupation were handled—must carry some of the blame.

Others see the rise of the “Islamic state” as case of terrorism writ large. They point out that the fighters on the frontlines of ISIS are typically unemployed, alienated, and angry young men, some with past criminal records, who act more out of a sense of desperation and lust for power and glamor than religious fervor or devotion. We see many of these characteristics in the background descriptions of some of the captured or killed ISIS operatives and its potential recruits. I recall press reports, for example, that two young men who joined ISIS from the U.K. last May (2014) had bought copies

of *Islam for Dummies* on their way to the holy war.

I believe our principal task as scholars of religion and politics is to understand the causes and consequences of religious extremism and violence, whether in the form of the politicization of religion or in the ill-conceived quest to sacralize politics. In this pursuit, it is certainly important to take into account the material conditions, social and structural factors, and foreign interventions that may lead to or encourage extremism and violence. But of no less significance, I believe, is the challenge to understand, expose, and stand against the literalist, puritanical, and intolerant interpretations of Islam, with their frequent glorification of jihad and violence, that help inspire and provide tacit or active communal support for such extremist ideologies.

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