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TITLE Dangerous ideas: the force of ideologyand personality in driving radicalization  
  
ABSTRACT

Graeme Wood’s book *The Way of the Strangers* gets as close as is humanly possible to an ethnography of recruiters and sympathizers of the Islamic State. Contrary to much writing on radical Islamism, he convincingly shows that the Islamic State’s ideas – rooted in a literalist reading of ancient Islamic sources – are central in motivating many of the movement’s followers. His accounts of individual adherents also suggests, implicitly, that personality traits influence who is attracted to radical Islamist movements – highlighting important parallels to my own work with Diega Gambetta about radicalism and personality traits.

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BIO NOTE

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Should we empathize with the members of the most ostentatiously brutal movement of modern human history? Graeme Wood’s *The Way of the Strangers* (Wood 2017), makes a compelling case that we ought to. It is the most psychologically nuanced account yet of the “Islamic State,” based on contacts and interviews with a wide range of recruiters and sympathizers of the organization. No other piece of research explains better how the deceptive clarity of the Islamic State’s ideology drives what appear to be fairly normal young men and women into extreme, murderous opposition to not only Western society, but all human society outside the (now almost eradicated) caliphate.

Empathizing with would-be mass murderers and torturers is a big ask, but Wood has done most of the work for us. In the process, he addresses fundamental questions about the role of ideas and, implicitly, the role of personality in processes of radicalization. He does so without the many political preconceptions that mar the debate about Islamist extremism. Wood refuses to reduce IS followers to pawns buffeted by economic deprivation or geopolitical forces. Instead he takes them, their ideology, and their arguments seriously, even if this means uncovering inconvenient facts about the religious roots of their extremism.

## *The Importance of Ideology*

Wood’s big argument is simple: ideas matter. This should be obvious in the debate about any radical movement, but it has received much pushback from sociologists, political scientists, journalists, and public intellectuals who prefer to blame all political violence on structural forces, be they economic disadvantage, dictatorship, or U.S. imperialism. All of these do matter, but they are insufficient to explain the timing, the social regime, and the sometimes bizarre strategic choices of the Islamic State. Structural factors also do not tell us why only a tiny fraction of the hundreds of millions of Muslims exposed to the Islamic State’s ideas decide to join up.

Wood’s meticulous fieldwork shows that some the Islamic State sympathizers might be oddballs, but that they are not dupes, unthinking adventurers, or nihilists, as some accounts of the Islamic State (and Al Qaeda) suggest. They are, in his words, “often smart, at times even gentle and well-mannered.” A few of the ideologues he describes are genuinely brilliant, however repulsive their ideas might be.

The book takes both secular and Muslim scholars to task for their willful ignorance of the Islamic State’s ideological claims. Wood demonstrates that the Islamic State’s followers care deeply about Islamic scripture and orthopraxy. While some have chequered histories of deviance and petty crime, they become meticulous about religious observance and Quranic knowledge once they join the movement. Many of them know a great deal of theology; instead of being ignorant of the Islamic canon, they follow a very particular reading of it. Few movements are as explicitly driven by ideas as the Islamic State, ranging from precepts about how public morality should be organized to prophecies of the end of days, during which true Muslims (i.e., Islamic State members) are supposed to fight a number of final battles with the unbelievers.

Islam’s history and founding texts, like those of Judaism and Christianity, contain many inconvenient facts for those who would uphold modernized variants. The Islamic State has simply specialized in digging these out and interpreting them in an extreme (although often simply literalist) manner, allowing it to portray other schools of Islam as heretical innovators. Thus, the Islamic State claims a scriptural base for its highly publicized brutality and abuse, including its widespread use of sex slavery. Wood points out that there are indeed many pre-modern Islamic legal texts on the enslavement of women and children, and that the prophet himself had at least two enslaved concubines who were prisoners of war. There are still conservative Muslim scholars who maintain that wartime slavery is permissible for Islamic rulers, and not all of these scholars are jihadis. If we reject the Islamic State’s sex slavery, we also reject a literal interpretation of Muslim religious texts.

## *Extreme Literalism as Strength and Weakness*

The Islamic State pushes the literal reading of religious texts further than other radical Islamist groups, many of which have a political agenda for action within established states, are less concerned with doctrinal purity, and make allowance for scholarly interpretations (and innovations) that have accrued over centuries. The Islamic State’s ideologues, by contrast, discount precedent and prior exegesis. Only the Quran and the traditions of the prophet and his followers matter and need to be read as immediate instructions with no leeway for interpretation. The beauty of this approach is its simplicity and the claim to follow the word of God directly. It creates a dissonance with modern moral sensibilities that the Islamic State duly exploits: When Muslims recognize that some of the corpus endorses slavery and brutal punishments, the Islamic State tries to convince them that the problem is not the unfiltered reading of the religious texts but rather the modern sensibilities—and enjoins them to let go of the latter.

Wood usefully points out that this recruitment strategy works better for Muslims who are *not* steeped in Islamic tradition, most of which is rooted in centuries of interpretation and practice that have accumulated since the time of the prophet, implicitly or explicitly making allowances for political and social change since then. It is easier to recruit Muslims who are not part of established Islam yet seek religious meaning. In this respect, too, the Islamic State’s literalism is a strength; combined with its binary worldview and millenarianism, it fuels commitment the movement and make its adherents fierce fighters for it.

The Islamic State’s claim of following Islam to the letter also explains why it is so proud of its atrocities and builds so much of its publicity around them. This makes the Islamic State different from most other violent political and religious movements, which try to downplay their brutality even if some of them have historically tortured and killed on a larger scale than has the Islamic State.

What also follows from the rigidity of the Islamic State’s ideology, however, is an inability to adjust to a modern world of nation states and a refusal of any kind of diplomacy or compromise, a weakness that Wood does not explicitly highlight. While other religious movements—including Saudi Arabia’s literalist Wahabism, which is theologically close to the ideology of the Islamic State—have reconciled themselves to modern politics to a substantial extent, the Islamic State’s boundless, otherworldly ambition has led to its failure as a geopolitical entity, even though it continues as a guerrilla and terror movement at the time of writing.

Islamic State members revel in their minority status and in the quixotic nature of their fight, convinced that the prophecies that guide them predict their eventual victory on a cosmic scale. According to one saying of the prophet popular among Islamic State followers, Muslims will split into 73 sects, all but one of which will go to hell. The Islamic State, of course, is the exception: the only rightly guided sect. Its leaders claim that key events like the seizure of Mosul fulfill ancient eschatological predictions, clearing the path for the end of times.

Such beliefs are mystifying to the secular world, but Wood reminds us that more than half of U.S. evangelicals (themselves about a quarter of the U.S. population) also believe in imminent doomsday. There are deeply weird beliefs in the corpus of most religions; the Islamic State just acts on them with particular determination. While many factors have contributed to the group’s success, Wood proves that its ideology has contributed to its vigor and has decisively shaped its actions. More than most other movements, the Islamic State means exactly what it says, and follows it without compromise.

## *Psychological Dimensions of the Islamic State’s Ideology*

There is another, rather implicit theme in the book: that, in addition to ideology, personality matters. This becomes clear in Wood’s subtle accounts of the motivations and choices of his interviewees. Without saying as much, he shows that some ideas resonate better with specific types of individuals. This claim might appear banal to psychologists, but it remains contested among researchers of extremism.

Diego Gambetta and I have made the case that there is an affinity between specific personality traits and radical ideologies in our 2016 book, *[Engineers of Jihad](https://press.princeton.edu/titles/10656.html)*. Wood’s biographical accounts, with more detail and anecdotal flourish than our statistically oriented work, buttresses these claims.

In our book, we identified three personality traits that increase one’s attraction to radical Islam: first, high “need for closure,” a trait that involves intolerance of ambiguity and a desire for clarity, certainty and control; second, a strong desire to draw boundaries between members of one’s in-group and out-groups; and finally, a proneness to disgust that is linked to a desire for traditional morality and moral purification. Experimental psychology has connected all three to conservative and right-wing attitudes and ideology. We argue that radical Islamist ideology fulfils an analogous function, as it contains very similar elements to the ideologies of right-wing movements. These include a strong desire for regularity, hierarchy, and the re-establishment of a lost order; the rejection of out-group members; and the intention to morally purify society and purge deviance.

The Islamic State as analyzed by Wood provides a particularly clean case of an ideology that caters to these three traits. The sense of certainty that the Islamic State’s literalist ideology and meticulous focus on ritual provide is central in his account of what makes the movement so attractive—especially, I would add, for individuals with a high need for closure. According to the Islamic State, religious scripture is no more complex than a “manual for a toaster,” as Wood (2017, 132) aptly puts it. Any ambiguity is expunged as followers experience “purity, vindication, the bliss accompanying banishment of uncertainty and participation in righteous struggle” (ibid., 103). The depth of certainty among Islamic State members is astounding: They regularly congratulate convicted sodomites before their killing, as they are convinced that the punished will go to heaven. One salafi-jihadi sheikh in Wood’s book praises Islam for the fact that it provides a rule for everything, including how to pick one’s teeth with a miswak stick (ibid., 5).

Wood’s careful sleuthing leads him to discover the role of “Dhahiri” thought in the Islamic State’s interpretation of Islam. Dhahirism is the most extreme form of Islamic literalism, according to which only the Quran, the hadith, and the consensus of the followers of the prophet count as legitimate sources. Trying to avoid any human interpretation, Dhahriri readings of the texts produce quirks such as permission for non-penetrative sex outside of marriage, as this is not explicitly forbidden. Wood points out that “there is something in Dhahirism attractive to young people prone to binary, totalizing worldviews” (ibid., 132)—individuals, that is, who appear to have a high need for closure, a trait that is on average more pronounced among men, especially technically oriented ones. Wood points out (as we do) that jihadists are “overwhelmingly left-brained, analytical types” (ibid., 147). He discovers that John Georgelas, an American convert to Islam who has turned into an important Islamic State ideologue, even reformulates some of his beliefs in mock computer code.

A craving to distinguish in-group and out-group – the second personality trait we link to Islamist radicalism – is served by the exclusivist ideology of many radical Islamist groups. But none pushes this further than the Islamic State. The obsession with takfir (the declaration of impure Muslims as infidels) leads Islamic State followers to declare declare fellow Muslims apostates and hence fair game in jihad just for refusing to endorse the Islamic States’ own takfir declarations. Thus, the Islamic State not only rejects unbelievers; even believers who do not actively enforce the in-group’s tight boundaries cannot belong to it. Similarly, Islamic State followers explain to Wood that any wayward imams deserve to be killed. One Islamic State sympathizer tells Wood that “even if you [as a Christian] were to pay jiziyah [a poll tax for non-Muslims under Muslim rule] and live under the authority of Islam in humiliation, we would continue to hate you” (ibid., 172). Islamic State ideologues cite medieval theologians who endorse the loneliness and social separation of true Muslims as a virtue in itself.

In addition, the Islamic State has much to offer individuals with a tendency to be easily disgusted, our third personality trait. Wood recounts how important rituals such as ablutions are to Islamic State followers. The Islamic State, in his reading, also preys on a constant feeling of self-incrimination, reminding Muslims that no life is sinless. Wood explores with great nuance how a desire for purification pushes radicalized Western Muslims into the arms of the Islamic State. He points out that purification requires being polluted in the first place, making the process particularly attractive for the deviants and petty criminals who are over-represented among Western Islamic State recruits. For them, the Islamic State functions as a

mission of cleansing and salvation.

Perhaps the book downplays its psychological dimensions because the ideological ones by themselves are (unfortunately) controversial enough. I am also not sure Wood would agree with my particular psychological interpretation of his work. But this is not the point. No matter what you make of our theory of three traits, *The Way of the Strangers* provides fantastic raw material for speculating about the broader links between ideas, personality, and radicalism.

Wood’s first-person, journalistic approach is quite distant from social scientific writing on radical Islamism, but this is precisely its strength. In his focus on personal encounters, Wood comes as close to an ethnography of modern jihadism as is humanly possible. Behind the readable style lies an interpretive depth, both exegetic and psychological, from which scholars will benefit for many years to come.

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