

# The Fictional Islamic State

By JUDE DOUGHERTY

There is reason to believe that the so-called "Islamic State" is a fictional being rather than a reality. A state has borders, a central government, and a bureaucratic structure. None of this has been claimed for ISIS, although some have spoken of ISIS as a proto-state. What we have in fact is an armed, slash-and-burn military force seeking control of ever-expanding territory.

"U.S. Misjudged Islamic State Reach" is the heading *The Wall Street Journal* gave to a front-page report on November 16. There is evidence that the reach was not from abroad, but from a home-grown, shared vision of Islam itself and its long-range plan to conquer Europe.

In the words of Anthony Browne, "Islam really does want to conquer the world. That is because Muslims, unlike Christians, actually believe they are right, and that their religion is the path to salvation for all." He wrote that in the *Spectator*, July 24, 2004.

Western leaders find that hard to believe. The fictional "Islamic State" permits the West to ignore the real threat posed by Islam to Western institutions and allows them to save face by attacking insurgents on the ground. Islam is the antithesis of Europe. Tolerating the intolerant has time and again borne its consequences. The recent destruction of a Russian airliner and the attacks in Paris are only two examples.

For insight into Islam a good place to start for an unbiased account is Ignaz Goldziher's *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*.

The book has an interesting history. Responding to an invitation in 1906 to deliver a series of lectures in the United States, Goldziher wrote the lectures in German, but for reasons of health and his inability to secure a reliable English translation, he never made the trans-Atlantic voyage to deliver them. A German edition was published in 1910, but a satisfactory English translation was not available until 1981, when Princeton University Press issued a translation by Andras and Ruth Hamori.

Bernard Lewis provided the introduction. Goldziher, Lewis tells the reader, was a Hungarian Jew by birth, and by virtue of interest and linguistic ability became a respected "orientalist," as Middle Eastern scholars were called in the Vienna of his day. In the judgment of Lewis, as a guide to Muslim faith, law, doctrines, and devotions, Goldziher was much better placed than Christians to study Islam and to understand Muslims. To know rabbinic law and to submit to rules makes it easier understand the Holy Law of Islam and those who obey it. Remi Brague, whose

work we will consider momentarily, similarly praises Goldziher as perhaps the greatest student Islam ever had.

The word "Islam," Goldziher reminds his reader, means submission. The word expresses first and foremost a feeling of dependency on an unbounded Omnipotence to which man must submit and resign his will. Submission is the dominant principle inherent in all manifestations of Islam, in its ideas, forms, ethics, and worship, and it is, of course, demanded of conquered peoples. Adherence to Islam not only means an act of actual or theoretical submission to a political system but also requires the acceptance of certain articles of faith. Therein lies a difficulty.

The Prophet cannot be called a theologian. The development of a theology was necessarily the work of subsequent generations. Islam does not have the doctrinal conformity of a church. Its history and inner dynamics, Goldziher shows, are characterized by the assimilation of foreign elements. He speaks of the dogmatic development of Islam under the influence of Hellenic thought, the indebtedness of Islam to Persian political ideas, and the contribution of Neo-Platonism and Hinduism to Islamic mysticism. Differences between Sunni and Shia can be explained by external influence.

One hundred years and decades of scholarship later, the orientalist of times past is now apt to be recognized as a professor of Middle East or of Islamic Studies. Remi Brague, who holds the title of professor of Arabic Medieval Philosophy at the University of Paris, has recently published a volume entitled *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism and Islam*.

Addressing the genesis of European culture, Brague reminds his readers that Europe borrowed its nourishment, first from the Greco-Roman world that preceded it, then from the world of Arabic culture that developed in parallel with it, and finally from the Byzantine world.

In illustrating the differences among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Brague points out that for Christians revealed truth is the all-important bond. Muslim and Jewish revelations, which are presented as laws, do not pose the same problem as Christian Revelation. Reconciling religion and philosophy is an epistemological problem in Christianity, but in Islam and Judaism reconciling religion and revelation is a political problem. Furthermore, unlike Islam and Judaism, Christianity includes the Magis-

terium of the Church, whose teaching is granted authority in the intellectual domain.

To illustrate the difference between Christianity and Islam, Brague draws upon the work of Ibn Khaldun, a 14th-century Muslim scholar. According to Khaldun the Muslim community has the religious duty to convert all non-Muslims to Islam either by persuasion or by force. Other religious groups, Ibn Khaldun recognizes, do not have a universal mission and holy war is not a religious duty for them, save for purposes of defense.

It has thus come about that the person in charge of religious affairs in other religious groups is not concerned with power politics. Royal authority outside of Islam comes to those who have it by accident, or in some other way that has nothing to do with religion, and not because they are under the religious obligation to gain power over other nations. According to Khaldun, holy war exists only within Islam and is imposed upon its leaders by the law of Sharia.

Its theological warrant aside, Brague asks how jihad is viewed from the vantage point of Islam's greatest philosophers. He puts the question to three Aristotelians — al Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. All three permit the waging of holy war against those who refuse Islam — al Farabi and Averroes against Christians, Avicenna against the pagans of his native Persia.

Al Farabi, who lived and wrote in the lands where the enemy was the Byzantine empire, drew up a list of seven justifications for war, including the right to conduct war in order to acquire something the state desires but is in the possession of another, and the right to wage holy war to force people to accept what is better for them if they do not recognize it spontaneously.

Averroes, writing in the western part of the Islamic empire, approved without reservation the slaughter of dissidents, calling for the elimination of a people whose continued existence might harm the state. Avicenna similarly condones conquest and readily grants leaders the right to annihilate those who are called to truth but reject it.

Western leaders who are committed to fighting ISIS refuse to confront the genuine motivation of those committed to jihad. Either cowardly or woefully ignorant of history, those Western leaders may at the peril of Europe continue to speak of "the far reaches of ISIS," without confronting the real threat.