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Clash Course: Review of George Weigel's Faith, Reason, and the War against Jihadism

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Faith, Reason, and the War against Jihadism
A Call to Action
George Weigel
Doubleday, $18.95, 195 pp.

George Weigel offers this book as a guide to the war on jihadism for a bipartisan "Coalition of Those Who Understand." Weigel believes that American prosecution of the war against terrorism has been hobbled by unclear thinking and failure of nerve on the part of the American people. The book is divided into, not chapters, but "lessons," through which Weigel hopes to instruct us on what we should have learned since 9/11.

Lesson 1 for those who don't yet understand is that the conflict is, at root, theological. Ideas have consequences, and the jihadists have gotten hold of a particularly noxious ideology with its roots in Islam. Although the enemy is jihadism, not Islam as such, lesson 2 is an analysis of the defects inherent in Islam that lend themselves to a jihadist interpretation. The question for us, Weigel writes, is whether St. John Damascene was right when he said that Islam was a heresy that combined defective Christologies with bad ideas from pagan Arab tribal religions. Weigel does not directly answer this question, but he does argue that any attempt to talk about the "three Abrahamic faiths" should be retired. "Islamic supersessionism has a built-in tendency to set in motion a dynamic of conflict with Judaism and Christianity that is not 'required' vis-à-vis Islam by the deep theological structure of Judaism and Christianity." Among other defects, Islam lacks the

"beauty of spiritual and moral wrestling with a sacred text," and the God of Islam is distant and cold—an absolute power whose requirement of obedience rules out pluralism or any division between sacred and secular. As a result, Islam has not been able to accommodate modernity as the West has. For Weigel, modernity seems to be less a particular development of Western culture than a universal given, like the force of gravity.

Weigel admits that Christians have been aggressively supersessionist at times; he also acknowledges that Muslim theology does not "*necessarily* require violent conflict between Islam and the 'rest,' although that is a face of itself that Islam

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has displayed throughout its history." Islam does not have to result in jihadism. In several places, Weigel acknowledges that medieval Islam was a dynamic civilization in which intellectual creativity and limited government flourished. Nevertheless, Islam was simply unable to deal with modernity, the advent of science, democracy, freedom. "Over time, that pattern of intellectual stagnation in Islam would yield drastic results." The lesson is clear: If ideas have consequences, and this conflict is primarily theological, then we need to explore the roots of jihadism in Islam itself.

As a theologian, I am happy that someone is taking theology seriously enough to weigh its consequences in the real world. Weigel is right to critique the way that theology is often dismissed as a real motive for conflict in favor of economic or sociological or psychological explanations. He is right as well to criticize those who would rule out any kind of normative judgment of other traditions. At some point, a Christian theologian is going to have to contend that the Muslim presentation of Jesus Christ is deficient. It may be that the Gospel portrait of redemption in Christ offers resources for human flourishing that are obscured in Islam. Unfortunately, Weigel's presentation of the "deep theological structure" of Islam and Christianity is little better than a caricature. Sufism, different schools of Qur'anic interpretation, and widely variant forms of Islamic politics are ignored. The relentlessly negative portrait of Islam is complemented by a relentlessly positive account of Christianity, which has given the world democracy, civil society, the rule of law, human dignity, and all that is right and good.
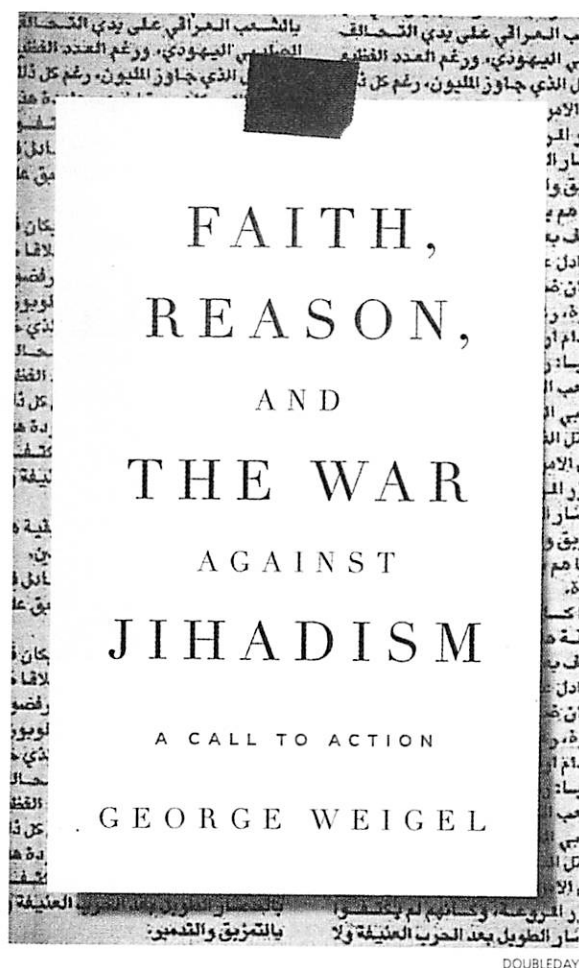
The problem is not simply that Weigel's theological judgments are superficial and one-sided. The deeper problem is that privileging theological ideas as the cause behind jihadism seems to license Weigel to ignore material history. In lessons 3 to 5, the rise of jihadism is traced as a history of ideas: the defects inherent in Muslim thought were compounded by the defensive posture developed by ibn Taymiyya in the face of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. Taymiyya developed the notion that jihad required an absolute love of God and an absolute hatred of all that is not of God. This attitude of Islam versus the rest of the world was developed by Wahhab in the eighteenth century and al-Banna and Qutb in the twentieth. A tour through the writings of these figures suffices to understand the mentality of jihadism. It is an ideology, and Weigel is dismissive of those who would seek "root causes" of jihadism in economic deprivation or other material factors.

Weigel acknowledges the "sense of failure" and "experience of humiliation" brought on by the Western colonial conquest of most Muslim lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; from the Muslim point of view, "the world had not turned out the way it should have." But the "deeper roots" of jihadism's inability to deal with modernity antedate modernity, and go back to the "loss of intellectual vitality" in the late Middle Ages. Other than a few widely scattered mentions, colonialism is absent from Weigel's version of the causes of jihadism. When it is mentioned, Weigel actually suggests that the "rise of European colonialism and imperialism" is not the product of intra-European factors, but "a great flanking movement in response to Islamic advances into the continent of Europe." For Weigel, even European colonialism is the fault of Muslims.

Jihadists are quite clear about their motives for attacking the West. The 1998 fatwa that sets out the mission of Al Qaeda sees the struggle as a defensive movement on the part of Islam, and lists very specific grievances against the West, all of which have to do with Western intervention in the Muslim world: the presence of U.S. troops in the Prophet's country, support for corrupt and tyrannical Arab leaders, the plundering of Muslim countries' oil riches, aggression against Iraq (including the sanctions), support for Israel over the Palestinians, and so on. Weigel does not refute these charges, but ignores or dismisses them. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, gets only three sentences:

Jihadists do not hate the West because of Israel, they hate Israel because it is part of the West.... The indictment of Israel is also, as Walter Laqueur notes,...an example of the "time-honored tradition in the Muslim world to put most or all of the blame [for] its failures on foreigners rather than on their own shortcomings." This disinclination "to engage in self-criticism" has one of its roots in Islamic supersessionism—reasons for Muslim failure *cannot* be the result of any deficiencies in God's final revelation—and helps explain why the fact and success of Israel seem to so many Muslims to be the result of a vast global conspiracy against them.

For Weigel, there is no need even to consider Palestinian grievances or to reconsider U.S. support for the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. The real cause of jihadism is pathologies in the Islamic world based in defective theology.

Of course the direct targeting of civilians is an inexcusable evil, and it would be an unjust oversimplification to say that Western colonialism and other types of intervention are the cause of terrorism. There are certainly Islam-versus-the-rest dynamics within (for example) contemporary Shiite Islam, which would not disappear in the absence of Western intervention. It is equally certain, however, that Iranian Shiite militancy would not have developed its current form of virulent anti-Westernism had the United States and Britain not colluded in the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and installed and supported the brutal regime of the Shah—all for the sake of protecting Western oil interests. Weigel mentions none of this, but picks up the story of Iran in 1979, when the Islamist regime took over and began violating "basic standards of decency," as if SAVAK, the Shah's secret police agency, had not already tortured and murdered thousands.

This type of amnesia accompanies a worldview in which the evil of terrorism directed against the West seems to imply the West's innocence. Weigel approvingly quotes David Gelernter: "They believe in and cultivate death; they are the party of death. And we are the party of life—and they hate us for that and hope to destroy us because of it." They do not hate us because of the coup in 1953; or because we used to support Saddam and the Shah; or because we currently support repressive regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia; or because UNESCO said that our sanctions against Saddam's Iraq were causing a half-million children to die each year and Madeline Albright said it was "worth it" (she later called that "a mistake"); or because our military occupies two Muslim countries; or because we give *carte blanche* to Israeli occupation and settlement of Palestinian territory; or because of Abu Ghraib or Halliburton or Guantánamo Bay or "extraordinary rendition." No. They hate us because they hate life. Such self-serving hogwash ironically reproduces the worldview of jihadism: the binary division of the world into good and evil, the dehumanization of the enemy, and the inability to engage in self-criticism.

Weigel agrees with Tony Blair that, above all, we must refuse to consider the idea that "somehow we are the ones responsible" for terrorism. The final part of the book begins with a lesson titled "Cultural self-confidence is indispensable to victory in the long-term struggle against jihadism." Weigel wants to counter what he sees as the relativism and self-contempt endemic in American society, and appreciate the freedoms that make our way of life worth struggling for. While I agree that it is good to value what is good in American society, I am not sure that America's biggest problem is a lack of self-confidence. The United States spends a half-trillion dollars a year on its military to project its power into every region of the globe. A little

more humility and a willingness to examine critically how America has used its power in the Middle East might help defuse some of the animosity directed toward the United States. Winning over hearts and minds is more than a matter of "dominating the information dimensions" of the Iraq war or giving Foreign Service officers specialized training in combating anti-Americanism. Defusing anti-Americanism requires a self-critical willingness to examine the justice and wisdom of American policies toward the Muslim world, and to adjust our actions accordingly.

Indeed, a little self-criticism on the subject of the Iraq war might have helped make this book more palatable for those of us who don't yet understand. One of the reasons I found Weigel's scolding tone particularly off-putting is that the lessons are delivered by someone who was so publicly and vociferously wrong about the need to invade Iraq in 2003. In this book, Weigel addresses the Iraq war only to chide its planners for muck-ing it up. They failed to realize what a mess Iraqi society was, living as it was in "a world characterized by that distinctive 'Arab mix of victimology and wrath.'" Such intra-Arab dynamics worked "to impede the 'foreigner's gift' to Iraq of political freedom and the forms of democratic self-government." Weigel places the blame for the failure of the Iraq invasion squarely on the dynamics of Muslim Arab culture and the consequent unwillingness of the ungrateful Iraqis to accept the magnanimity of the invaders. He goes on to insist that we cannot abandon Iraq now because it is the "strategic center of gravity" in the war on jihadism. The fact that it became that center only because of the invasion of Iraq—the greatest boon to recruiting that Al Qaeda has yet seen—has apparently not caused Weigel to rethink his enthusiastic support for the war.

The war on jihadism does need theological analysis, but not of the kind offered in this book. Weigel's one-sided portrayal of Islam's defects can only alienate Muslims with whom Christians could make common cause. Weigel's equally one-sided refusal to examine critically America's foreign-policy history and the pathologies of American civil religion can only exacerbate the anti-Americanism on which jihadism feeds. Those who proclaim a "clash of civilizations" help to perpetuate what they see: two essentially opposed cultures locked in a life-or-death struggle. Taking theology seriously could help defuse such a struggle through patient dialogue with Islamic leaders. Taking theology seriously could also tap into resources for truth-telling, repentance, reconciliation, and peacemaking, resources that could illustrate the critical distance between Christianity and American foreign policy. ∎

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