

## II. Research Note

### IS and its Predecessors: Violent Extremism in Historical Perspective

by Bob de Graaff

#### Abstract

*Islamic State uses an age old apocalyptic narrative to attract followers and legitimize its existence. This research note show which narrative elements were used during previous violence-inciting apocalyptic manifestation in Christianity and Western ideology and how they can be retraced in the communications and enactments of Islamic State. The use of such narratives explains why the movement has been so much more powerful in attracting followers than al-Qaeda. Based on historical experience the prospects of fighting such a movement without annihilating it are gloomy, the more so as apocalyptic movements have a tendency to provoke a confrontation with their opponents as a manifestation of the promised final battle between the forces of Good and Evil which will produce the salutary end state, both of which are central elements in their narrative.*

**Keywords:** Al-Qaeda; Apocalypse; End of Times; Islamic State; ISIS

#### Introduction

Some ninety years after the Islamic caliphate ended, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a new worldwide caliphate in Mosul on June 29, 2014. With this proclamation, the leadership of the Islamic State (IS) aroused a certain sense of pride among many Muslims around the world, as he claimed to put an end to a long period of humiliation and deprivation. The lure of the caliphate led to a larger number of foreign fighters to go to Syria compared to jihad travellers in previous jihadist conflicts. What was the magic formula with which Islamic State brought this about?

IS emphasized in its communications that the caliphate is geographically situated in the area that, according to the Islamist's interpretation of certain traditions, will be the location of the final battle between Good and Evil as well as the locus of the establishment of the salutary end state of Islam. The Internet magazine of the movement, which appears in different languages, is significantly called *Dabiq*, named after the place where the end of times final battle will take place—a place which was until very recently under the control of IS, although when the city fell into the hands of Turkey-backed rebels, IS was quick to claim that this was not yet the apocalyptic battle foretold in a hadith. IS is a mixture of peddling stories about the victimization of Muslims and the allotment of horrific violence against those who do not share its extreme visions. In its understanding, it is only logical and legitimate that those who were once victimized now should become perpetrators. This form of counter-humiliation eminently suits apocalyptic movements: at the End of Times the first will be last and the last will be the first. There is nothing new here. This involves the use of a story in which a beneficial state is proclaimed as the last stage of history, a narrative that incites the use of violence to bring it about. IS makes use of story elements that have already been used for centuries to encourage people to use violence to bring about the End of Time, in Christian, secular as well as Islamic variants.[1]

William McCants described IS already as an apocalyptic movement, but did not pay much attention to the long narrative tradition which ISIS follows.[2] Frances Flannery does see ISIS as part of a somewhat broader apocalyptic phenomenon but she distances herself from definitions of apocalypse that stress the element of belief in an End Time – something which precludes comparison with movements and authors that did.[3] This Research Note seeks to place the Islamic State's belief in a centuries-old tradition, stressing the continuity

of certain narrative elements, the changing patterns and the not so bright prospects of the changing technological and geographical context in which a movement such as Islamic State operates. It follows in the footsteps of John Gray, who a decade ago also placed al-Qaeda in the apocalyptic tradition.[4] Now it is possible to extend this line of reasoning even further and, more convincingly, apply it to the Islamic State.

### ***Apocalyptists in all Shapes and Sizes***

Stories about such an end state have manifested themselves for thousands of years all over the world and among all faiths and belief systems. Such apocalyptic narratives promise an End of Time where the good elements will finally overcome the forces of evil and then reach definitive salvation. In religious versions it is God who has a plan of salvation for mankind in store and who intervenes in the earthly pool of misery to save his wretched followers. In secular variations the History of Mankind, either by human action or by collective powers, tends to a final End of History state that is beatific.

To be sure, not all apocalyptists are necessarily violent. Broadly speaking, one can distinguish four groups of apocalyptists. The first group believes that man must leave the determination of the End of Time to God or to the course of history. One might call them *the determinists*, with a reference to Marx, who thought that some economic stages had to be traversed before the stage of the bourgeoisie would be sidelined for the ultimate beneficial dictatorship of the proletariat.

A second group believes that although people have no bearing on the time when the heavenly End of Time arises, they may be able to try to push an end in the desired direction by way of small steps and good deeds. We could call them *the reformists*.

A third group believes that the world is so corrupt that it is an illusion to think that they themselves will be able to change it for the better. However, well-intended people may try to isolate themselves from the evil and create a precursor of the final paradise as much as is in their power. These people have, for example, founded utopian colonies; and hence one might term them *the colonists*.

These three groups abstain from using violence in order to bring the salvation empire any nearer. However, this is exactly what the fourth group does: *the fanatics*. They are convinced that God must be given a helping hand or that the course of history should be accelerated. Consequently, fanatics are voluntarists: they do not want to wait, but instead impose their will on history and others.

Why and how this fourth group does so is the subject of this Research Note. To better understand the behavior of fanatics, it is necessary to identify the narrative elements apocalysts use.

### ***Ingredients of the Apocalyptic Narrative***

Although we might go even further back in time to find the primordial sources of the apocalyptic story, here I will take as a point of departure: the book of Revelation, the last book of the Christian Bible, a text attributed to John of Patmos. There we find already all the apocalyptic narrative elements that would return again and again in later stories. John thanked the addition 'of Patmos' to the fact that the Roman rulers banished him at the end of the first century after Christ to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea because of his Christian beliefs. This offers us already one of the characteristics of many authors of apocalyptic narratives: they are often socially excluded, and frequently people who are put in prison. They feel a strong urge to use this type of story as a payback for those who humiliated them. Within the actual or imagined prison walls they are left with only two weapons for this form of revenge: their imagination and the written word that may be smuggled to the outside world.

They use those weaponized words to match their personal humiliation with a social group to which they feel related and which has also been humiliated in their eyes. In the case of John of Patmos this group consisted of the persecuted Christians. His book was partly intended to comfort those Christians with the promise that at the End of Time the then first ones—the infidels, the powerful and the rich—would become the last and simultaneously the oppressed and wretched true believers would become the first. And there was even more consolation for the oppressed: the direr their circumstances would be, the sooner the end would arrive. But before justice and salvation would be delivered, first a battle between the forces of Good and Evil would still have to take place. Due to the fact that the good God would be on their side, the true believers would eventually win and the disbelievers—the former rulers and the mighty—shall burn in hell. Thus the End of Time does not bring forth any kind of egalitarian society. Fanatics always assume the final state to be a paradise for one group only: their own. The others, the disbelievers and misbelievers, cannot suffer enough. *Schadenfreude* [taking pleasure from the misfortune of others] about their fate or so-called ‘apocalyptic jouissance’ [5] often runs rampant in apocalyptic writings as those of John of Patmos. In the book of Revelation John is allowed to cast a look ahead of this good state, a kind of celestial sightseeing. This element—looking like Moses from a mountain at the promised land of the future—also appears in many other apocalyptic stories.

This element has a specific function. Apocalyptic narrators juxtapose the world of today—a world of injustice—to an ideal world in which justice reigns supreme. They frame justice and, by implication, they frame injustice. In the case of the Book of Revelation God, first supported by the true believers who engage in the fight against Evil, finally brings justice on the Day of Judgment by separating the sheep from the goats. Every religion or *Weltanschauung* makes a distinction between the real world and the ideal world, but apocalyptic fanatics make this tension between justice and injustice so great that it seems immoral to not blow the real world to smithereens, thus creating space for the new ideal world. The old world must, according to the apocalyptic narrative, be destroyed to beget the new one.

This struggle between Good and Evil is binary: there is no place—no grey zone between white and black—for an intermediate group. If possible, even more forcefully than against the evil persons of the earth, John rages against the neutrals or ‘lukewarm’. Their indifference is an eyesore to apocalyptic fanatics who believe in an all-enveloping cosmic struggle. This creates a very sharp ‘Us versus Them’ dichotomy. And the bigger the (stated) love for one’s own group, the greater is the hatred of others, who stand after all in the way of the execution of justice which true believers and the oppressed claim to generate.

### ***Apocalyptic Thinking in Europe***

In the paragraph above, the terms ‘true believers’ and ‘oppressed’ more or less coincided. This is understandable in the context in which John of Patmos wrote his Bible chapter. Christians were discriminated and persecuted in the Roman Empire, although not as severely at the time of John as he would have us believe. If Christians would live according to the rules that John saw fit, they would have to abstain from using Roman coins, as on these coins the emperor was depicted as a divine figure. Thus arose the image of a contrast between, on the one hand, power, wealth and infidelity and, on the other hand, powerlessness, poverty and true belief—an antithesis that would end with the victory of the latter over the former. In short, the story of John promised, what we would today call empowerment. Because of this juxtaposition of an injustice frame and a justice frame, the story of John of Patmos could easily transcend the limits of a purely religious setting and become a story that would have a subversive effect upon existing earthly power relations. Therefore, when later, during the Roman Empire, the Christian church became more or less the state church, prelates exerted themselves to quell such a subversive, earthly explanation of the book of Revelation.

This worked until the thirteenth century. Then came several centuries during which violent apocalyptic movements regularly flared up in South, West and Central Europe, for example in Italian Florence in the

late fifteenth century under the leadership of the Dominican monk Savonarola. Another example are the Taborites, who during the first half of the fifteenth century teamed religious-extremist views with cunning strategic thinking in and from their stronghold in Bohemia, so much so that for a long time they were far superior to large opposing armies. On the other hand, strategic insight was not the strong side of Thomas Müntzer, who with his apocalyptic expectation took the lead of a peasant army during the German Peasant Wars. He and his followers suffered a humiliating defeat in the battle of Frankenhausen in 1525. The best example of an early modern Christian apocalyptic movement is probably the occupation of the city of Münster during 1534 and the first half of 1535 by Anabaptists who mainly originated from the Low Countries. They expected the New Jerusalem to descend upon the city, which would indicate the beginning of the End Times. England also had its share of apocalyptic violence, e.g. both under the Cromwellian practices and the troubles caused by the so-called Fifth Monarchists, who tried to push the prophecy that the world would come to an end in 1666.

What many of these movements had in common was their criticism of the traditional Catholic church, which in its pursuit of worldly power and wealth had, in the eyes of such critics, become rather the Anti-Christ than the representative of God on earth. The new beliefs were often launched and taught by monks and priests who came into conflict with the church, but were also propagated by some lay priests. In all this, the advent of the printing press played an important role. Without the intervention of the traditional clergy believers now began to explain the Bible themselves in their vernacular, and they found a new audience, which partially was becoming literate itself by this time. Thus there was a cocktail of confusion about the accuracy of existing relationships, new spiritual leaders, a new medium and a new audience—a combination that turned out to be a good breeding ground for apocalyptic movements.

### ***The Ideological Apocalypse***

After 1700 the apocalyptic ideology did not disappear completely from Western Europe, but the violent variant now manifested itself primarily in ideological terms. This involved systems of meaning in which the transcendent was no longer present; in other words: 'God was taken out of the equation.'<sup>[6]</sup> This did, however, not mean that ideologies and their implementation could not contain religious elements. Some of the movements described below, such as Communism or Nazism, are therefore characterized as 'political religions.'<sup>[7]</sup> Ironically, some Enlightenment philosophers who wanted to curb religious fanaticism, paved the way for a new form of fanaticism. An important contribution to this end was made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who sought an ideal civil society, which would do away with the old institutions, but which would not be a place for people who would not abide by the common social contract. He was also a strong supporter of transparency.

Fifteen years after the death of Rousseau, Robespierre was, as it were, the executor of the political testament of Rousseau's thought. The French Revolution created an ideology of equality among the French patriots, in which Robespierre surfaced as the one who knew how to link rhetorical gift to the relentless will to propel and defend the revolution. Meanwhile the group of counter-revolutionaries and 'lukewarm' kept increasing, while that of the 'good ones', i.e. of 'true' French patriots, kept getting smaller. But within a year, in 1794, Robespierre himself fell prey to this distinctive mechanism and his head rolled from the same guillotine to which he had condemned so many others.

The nineteenth century showed—especially in Russia—a continued combination of revolutionary fervor and an expectation of salvation time. A nowadays hardly known, but in his time among Russian students extremely popular writer was Nikolay Chernyshevsky. His novel *What is to be done?* became a great source of inspiration for many Russian revolutionaries, including Lenin. In this novel, which he wrote in prison, Chernyshevsky outlined how a kind of super people continuously and with great self-sacrifice worked towards revolution. A well-known part of his novel is the fourth dream of Vera Pavlovna, one of the

protagonists of the book. Pavlovna—wholly in line with the standard apocalyptic narrative—gets a look into the ideal world that will emerge after the revolution.

Another important ideological apocalyptic movement was National Socialism. It was an answer to the great humiliation that many Germans felt after losing the First World War. If one wants to get the real understanding of this feeling of confusion one should consult the 1920s diaries of Third Reich propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.[8] Like many of his contemporary country-fellowmen, Goebbels had the feeling that the world in which he lived had been turned upside down. In such times of *Zusammenbruch* [collapse] a new worldview in the form of an apocalyptic idea stood a good chance. In his diary, Goebbels wrote for instance in pure apocalyptic style the supplication: ‘Lord, show the German people a miracle! One man!!!’[9] Goebbels finally found his saviour in Adolf Hitler and his movement who announced the coming of a Third Reich. Part of the German clergy went easily along with National Socialism, while other church leaders stood impotently by, wringing their hands and wondering why National Socialism with its salvation claims had so much more promotional traction than the word of God, which they spread in half-empty churches.[10] This perplexity is also a phenomenon that is not unusual in the light of an apocalyptic movement: traditional spiritual leaders have to watch how the newcomers with their apocalyptic narrative sideline them in the eyes of a wide audience.

### ***Self-fulfilling Paranoia***

Those who think that after the Enlightenment the idea of a (violent) apocalypse entirely disappeared from the West are mistaken. In the United States, the idea that the End of Time will come during one’s own lifetime is widespread. Regularly Christian militias and their families withdraw from the world on farms or compounds and arm themselves for the big fight at the end of time. Alarmed by the accumulation of weapons in the hands of these true believers, the authorities get literally up in arms, and firmly so, because the expected armed resistance is high. The apocalyptists who see this *force majeure* approaching, see it as a confirmation that the End Times have now actually begun with the arrival of the forces of Evil. It is a kind of self-fulfilling paranoia[11] on both sides, illustrating the cumbersome relationship between apocalyptists and their opponents. The authorities have the impression that is impossible to talk to the apocalyptists because they are on a different wavelength and that, in light of their threat, a violent confrontation is the only way out. For apocalyptists this confrontation is proof that they have been right from the start; therefore they have a tendency to provoke such a prophesied confrontation.

Such a violent confrontation is often the essence of popular depictions of the apocalypse, both in Christian America and the Muslim Middle East. In the U.S., novels about the End of Time have taken several runs of millions of copies in recent decades. Time and again bible quotes are related to current political situations in these novels. Troops of the Anti-Christ were for many years equated with the Soviet Armed Forces. After the end of the Cold War, the ultimate evil in this kind of novels became Islam. This time, the Islamic savior, the Mahdi, became the representation of the Anti-Christ. And the other way around in recent Islamic apocalyptic narratives, Western armies are seen as the auxiliary troops of the Islamic version of Anti-Christ, the *Dajjal*.

Hence Christian and Islamic End-of-Time expectations mirror each other. Popular Islamic apocalyptic stories often use Western elements. Thus, one can read that the Islamic Anti-Christ dwells in the Bermuda Triangle, moves with a UFO and has the support of Freemasons. To legitimize their own End-of-Time thinking, Islamic apocalyptists rely on such unlikely authorities as certain American television evangelists or former President Reagan. Many of the popular Islamic representations of the End Times end their story with the US fleet steaming up in the Mediterranean, after which a nuclear confrontation takes place, which leads miraculously to the victory of Islam over the world and the establishment a kind of paradise in Jerusalem. [12]

### *Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*

Against this background, it is not surprising that some Muslims launched the idea that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who took on the Americans head-on, might be the divinely guided Mahdi, the messianic deliverer for whom they had been longing for so long since he would restore the faith, spread justice and defeat the enemies of Islam. Osama bin Laden never took a liking to that idea.[13] He saw himself not as an End of Days figure and thought that his movement should continue to exist after him. He pictured himself only as a martyr on the road that would eventually lead to the restoration of the caliphate, which had been lost in 1924. To him the caliphate was only a distant dream and it had mainly a rhetorical function.

This was partly due to a doctrinal problem that bin Laden had. He stood in the tradition of the godfather of Islamism, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb. In his writings which were smuggled out of an Egyptian prison, Qutb had argued that there was only one who could rule over Muslims: Allah. Whoever called himself a Muslim ruler was, according to Qutb, by definition, not a good Muslim.[14] This view came in handy as long as Islamists were bent on denouncing and overthrowing the ruling regimes in the Middle East. But at the same time this view was an unsurmountable obstacle for building a new state in the form of a caliphate. Bin Laden and other Islamists were therefore tongue-tied when it came to the question how their new society would look like. They did not come much further than the idea that there and then Sharia would prevail.

This was very different with the people who stood at the origins of Islamic State, like al-Zarqawi. They assumed that wherever two or more Muslims were gathering, one was the sheikh or emir.[15] This assumption allowed for hierarchy and rule in a state. While Bin Laden had called for a gradual establishment of a caliphate, following upon the assent of as many Muslims as possible, one of the successors of al-Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi, proclaimed the caliphate in mid-2014 without consulting the view of many Muslims, let alone others. 'Hasty and rash', bin Laden would have said if he had lived, just as, while still alive, he had criticized al-Zarqawi and his followers because of the extreme violence they used against disbelievers and misbelievers. According to bin Laden and his deputy and later successor, al-Zawahiri, Muslims would be alienated by the extreme violence and this would make the gradual growth of the Islamist movement impossible. Thus Bin Laden and his followers had not achieved much more than the Anarchists around 1900: they did try to destroy the old world, but accomplished very little in terms of creating a new one.

The Islamic State of voluntarists, on the other hand, saw how their strategy, at least initially, achieved much success. Thanks to the proclamation of a caliphate there was now a territory where Sharia could actually be applied and where Sunni Muslims no longer had the feeling of being forced to live in the midst of sin. Moreover, they could get rid of their victimhood complex there. There was 'empowerment': victims became perpetrators, a change that was symbolized in the beheadings of Western victims dressed in the same type of orange overalls that Islamists in the American prison camp at Guantánamo Bay have to wear.

All central elements of apocalyptic narratives can be found in the story-lines of IS: the idea of an End State, in the form of the caliphate, where justice prevails because Muslims can be themselves and their lives are governed by Sharia law as well as a sharp 'Us versus Them' antithesis, to which Christians, Shiites, Yazidis and others would fall victim in the caliphate. The fact that the roles are reversed between victims and perpetrators, between first and last, is depicted with the stagings of beheadings. The exercise of rule is totalitarian and evokes memories of previous expressions of apocalyptic exercises of power, from the Anabaptists in Münster to the Third Reich of the Nazis. Setbacks do not discourage those rulers, because these are only temporary and can be seen as tests by Allah. Yet with God on their side, they are sure to win the final battle.

For some Muslims in the West who feel disadvantaged, this caliphate idea holds a strong appeal. Traditionally, some internal armed conflicts have attracted foreign fighters who are persuaded that they are under a moral obligation to help their community, which is distressed.[16] For this reason the conflict in Syria, even before the proclamation of the caliphate, attracted many who identified themselves with the fate of the brothers and

sisters in the Levant. And there was more: right before their eyes would be waiting to happen *the* most world historical event that man could imagine: the End of Time! The foreign fighters could be there as it happens and participate in this final battle. ‘Do not miss the boat’, was essentially the slogan with which Islamic State’s social media attracted recruits from more than one hundred different countries, including more than 6,000 European Muslims.[17] Moreover, those who would join this final fight would be forgiven their sins. In fact, in Syria and Iraq an enhancement of the small-criminal existence that part of these recruits had led in their home countries became possible through the holiness of the goal. It was a kind of romantic rapper-ideal: you were acting criminal, but ‘somehow’ you were doing something really noble.

The propagandists of the Islamic State captured this apocalyptic element in many ways, e.g. through its glossy Internet magazine that goes under the name *Dabiq*, which refers to the IS occupied site in northern Syria where the final battle will, according to a hadith legend, play out between Good and Evil. The twitter app of IS was named ‘the dawn of glad tidings’. The IS rival movement Jabhat al-Nusra does not want to do with less and has a media channel called *Al-Manarah Al-Bayda* or ‘The White Minaret’—a reference to a place east of Damascus, where, according to Islamic tradition at the End of Times Jesus will descend to start fighting the forces of Evil. As a matter of fact the whole area of Bilad al-Shaam where IS has established itself is in Islamic tradition expected to be the region where the final battle will be fought at the End of Times.[18] The geographical proximity of Jerusalem, the city where not only many Muslims, but also Christians and Jews hope to experience the End of Times, increases the apocalyptic fervour even further.

### **Conclusion**

IS thus makes use of an apocalyptic narrative thousands of years old, of which the ingredients are available in the form of a number of narrative story elements. To lure supporters, IS apocalyptists had to re-create a new recipe from these ingredients, adapted to the demands of a new time and new circumstances. The leaders of IS succeeded in doing so. They have taken steps the leadership of al-Qaeda did not dare or could not take: extreme violence against other Muslims, particularly the Shiites, and the establishment of the caliphate. Thus IS has a much broader palette of violence at its disposal than the occasional terrorist attacks that were the trademark of al-Qaida. Contrary to the expectations of Osama bin Laden, who advocated a degree of gradualism, the extreme violence exercised by Islamic State appeared to have a great appeal: it serves as a form of empowerment which offers the last the chance to become the first. And, as said before, the revival of the caliphate created in their eyes a world historical momentum that produced a sense of ‘do not miss the boat’ among those willing to believe.

Simultaneously, the Islamic State is in its apocalyptic appearance a superlative compared to previous manifestations of violent End Times beliefs. Where earlier apocalyptic movements believed that the New Jerusalem would take place in their own environment (Münster, London, etc.), attention is now focused upon the real Jerusalem. While previous apocalyptists could only *dream* of the actual destruction of the world, the apocalyptists of IS have come a few steps closer to making this dream come true. Experimenting with poison gas attacks is an ominous portent, but it is nuclear arms that are the ideal weapon in the romantic apocalyptic imagination, having the flash, the bang and the destruction that one would associate with the End of Times. It is a pressing question how long the usage of weapons of mass destruction will remain out of reach for apocalyptists. A somber lesson from the past anyway is that the opponents of apocalyptists also often acted with considerable violence, whether provoked or not. This raises the specter of Western interventions on the ground, in Syria, Iraq, Lybia or elsewhere, where IS or its affiliates hold sway.

The alternative is to lay a *cordon sanitaire* around the new caliphate, with all the consequences for those millions of people who abide therein against their will. That does not provide a very pleasant prospect for them, as IS as the umpteenth apocalyptic movement in history demonstrates that what begins as a call for justice easily degenerates into the very opposite.

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## Notes

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