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Fundamentalism: The Branch Davidians and the Islamic State

A CAREFULLY
SELECTED
CANON FEEDS
THE FUNDA-
MENTALIST
NARRATIVE.

ON 19 APRIL 1993, A RELIGIOUS SECT KNOWN AS THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS, living near Waco, Texas, became a household name when the world watched live on television as 76 followers died at the hands of the FBI.¹ The FBI described those who died in the inferno as members of a murderous cult who were being manipulated by a religious charlatan and who were committed to violently resisting any intrusions. As investigations unfolded, however, the FBI's narrative increasingly appeared to be inaccurate. The Branch Davidians were not a cult in the vein of Jonestown or Heaven's Gate, as the FBI had described them, but embraced a fundamentalist interpretation of Christian Adventist ideology.² In dismissing their religious nature and labeling them as a murderous cult, the FBI profoundly misunderstood the Davidians and their motivations. Similarly, fundamentalist Muslim ideologies that have taken hold in the Middle East, in the form of ISIS and the Taliban, for example, cannot accurately be characterized as "murderous death cults" or as inherently un-Islamic, as US and other Western policy makers have repeatedly asserted.³ Just as the Branch Davidians espoused an exceedingly fundamentalist interpretation of Christian Adventist thought, ISIS and its unique brand of Salafism represent an exceedingly fundamentalist view of Islamic dogma. If we do not wish to see the tragedy of Waco unfold on the global stage, the United States and its allies cannot afford to make the same mistakes that the US Justice Department made with the Branch Davidians. ISIS's opponents must fully understand the group's fundamentalist motivations in order to effectively counter them.

Definitions: Millennialism and Absolutism and Inerrancy

The paramount defining trait of fundamentalist religious thought is the notion of returning to a "golden age" or a "sacred past," and the assertion that mainstream religion has lost its way and must return to the more righteous days of old.⁴ Based on this conviction, fundamentalist leaders like Branch Davidian David Koresh and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIS claim that their teachings are not novel or new in any way. To expose the corruption of the status quo and reinforce their point of view, fundamentalist leaders will often cite strict interpretations of judiciously selected religious texts. A carefully selected canon feeds the fundamentalist narrative, while conveniently ignoring any passages that may contradict it.⁵ For fundamentalists, there is no other way, no acceptable alternative course than this return to the religion's beginnings. In such a worldview, these beliefs and teachings are inerrant and absolute because they derive directly from the source, which is God. To imbue a further sense of urgency, leaders often incorporate millennialist designs into the message, as is apparent with both the Davidians and ISIS. This article examines the fundamentalist attributes of millennialism, absolutism, and inerrancy, and sharp boundaries (between believers and non-believers) in the context of both the Branch Davidians and ISIS.

Millennialism

The Branch Davidians trace their roots to William Miller, the founding father of Adventist thought. Miller's followers believed that scriptures revealed the Christian messiah's return (the Advent) and that the ensuing end of time would occur on 22 October 1844.⁶ When this date came and passed without incident, disillusioned Adventists dispersed throughout the United States, taking their unique brand of Christian millennialism with them. Adventism grew rapidly throughout the United States in the early 1900s, and several distinct branches formed.

One of these sects, the Branch Davidians, attracted committed followers in the early part of the twentieth century by placing notable emphasis on Adventist millennialism in the vein of William Miller's teachings ("Davidian" refers to the founder's belief that he was the manifestation of King David).⁷ Throughout the sect's history, belief that the return of the messiah was imminent was foundational, despite several prophetic disappointments. When David Koresh took over as the sect's leader in 1987, he maintained that only he could anticipate Christ's return. Prophecy and apocalyptic readings from the Book of Revelation and descriptions of the end times dominated the Davidians' beliefs—millennialism provided structure and urgency to all of Koresh's teachings. He and his followers believed that the culmination of their struggles on Earth would usher in the violent end of history, and it was their duty to be ready. To prepare for this impending struggle, the Branch Davidians began amassing a large arsenal of firearms and explosives, which naturally drew the attention of law enforcement and resulted in a forceful confrontation.⁸ Violence is the sought-for and inevitable end of millennial thought, and the FBI brought that fight to the Branch Davidians' front door.

Similar to the Branch Davidians, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), forerunner of ISIS, grew as an offshoot of a larger religious movement under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.⁹ Operating against the US-led coalition within Iraq under the auspices of al Qaeda, Baghdadi and his followers began to proclaim an increasingly apocalyptic narrative, resulting in their expulsion from the terrorist group.¹⁰ Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in April 2010, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi succeeded him as leader of the ISI. Bakr al-Baghdadi's faction, now known as ISIS, commenced its own brand of jihadist violence, declaring the revival of the mytho-historical caliphate, seizing territory across Iraq and Syria, and expanding its apocalyptic narrative of Islamic renewal and victory over the West. The "end of days" is as eminent to ISIS as it was to the Branch Davidians, and ISIS's role in ushering it in is not any less central to the group's beliefs. In the Syrian town of Dabiq, which it captured in 2014, ISIS eagerly awaited the opening salvos of the battle that would usher in the apocalypse. Citing Islamic prophecy, ISIS believed that Dabiq was where this final battle would take place, despite the fact that it is a small town located amid largely uncontested farmland.¹¹ Every bomb that fell on Dabiq or on surrounding ISIS territory fed the narrative that the final battle was brewing. Just as David Koresh pointed to the FBI's tanks and helicopters amassing outside his compound's walls as the final fulfillment of his prophecy, ISIS points to every violent effort to suppress it as the fulfillment of Qur'anic prophecy, to which it must respond in kind.



William Miller



David Koresh



Abu Omar al-Baghdadi

Absolutism and Inerrancy

David Koresh displayed an amazing depth of knowledge about New Testament scripture and Adventist ideology. He would memorize large portions of scripture verbatim and recite them with remarkable charisma. His followers described an almost hypnotic quality to his sermons.¹² Psychologists Robert Robins and Jerrold Post observed, “Using a unique interpretation of scripture to justify his leadership actions, Koresh systematically developed a closed and controlled social system that required total devotion to his divine personage and enshrined himself as ‘the chosen one.’”¹³

In some of his most controversial teachings, Koresh presented a corrupted interpretation of scripture to justify the taking of many wives, some of whom were children.¹⁴ To question Koresh’s actions, including his sexual misconduct, would be to question the very foundation of Branch Davidian ideology. His teachings were inerrant and absolute, and as such could justify anything that served his church. When critics challenged Koresh, the Davidians dismissed their ideas as a symptom of the secular world, a contagion requiring removal. As Koresh’s teachings increasingly came into conflict with social convention and secular laws, the Davidians withdrew from society, isolating themselves further within the compound near Waco.

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While ISIS is operating on a much larger scale than the Davidians, its fundamentalism is not unique in regard to absolutist and inerrant teachings. ISIS has shown the world a degree of cruelty not seen since the Middle Ages: weaponized rape, child brides, mass beheadings, punitive amputations, legalized slavery, and systematic genocide are some of ISIS’s more atrocious practices. At first glance, it seems impossible for a rational person to reconcile these actions with any conventional notions of Islamic or Western jurisprudence. Given ISIS’s extreme nature, it is easy to point to these atrocities and declare ISIS to be un-Islamic, a fraud, a religious façade meant to conceal self-serving attempts to expand power at enormous human cost. While certainly ISIS has attracted its share of self-serving adventurers, its leaders have carefully selected Qur’anic scriptures to justify their actions.¹⁵ ISIS members not only claim that slavery and rape are acceptable, for example, they go so far as to claim that rape is pleasing to God. According to a report in the New York Times, ISIS rapists pray before raping, rape, and then pray after raping. They are not praying for forgiveness; rather, the rape is part of the religious ritual that is supposed to please God.¹⁶ Something as universally condemned as rape is consistent with Salafi interpretations within the realm of ISIS’s absolutist inerrancy. To label ISIS as an un-Islamic movement motivated only by egregious rapacity is to completely misunderstand both its motivation and capacity for malevolence.

Sharp Boundaries

The extraordinary characteristics of millennialism, absolutism, and inerrancy inevitably lead to both an ideological and a geographic separation of fundamentalist movements from their mainstream religious roots. The desire to produce the apocalypse, proclaim extremist ideologies, and decree absolutist theological law is simply incompatible with the conventional world. Fundamentalist movements tend to develop well-defined boundaries between the saved and sinful as one of their critical characteristics. David Koresh found geographic isolation a necessity to cultivate his teachings without outside scrutiny, which led the sect

to relocate to a secure compound near Waco. As the group's theology became increasingly extremist, the enforcement of these physical and psychological boundaries became increasingly militant in nature. To allow the FBI to walk through the front door and violate these boundaries was not acceptable, and the Davidians met the officers with extraordinary violence.

ISIS, on the other hand, does not confine itself to a compound; its territory is vast and until recently was expanding. The boundaries it wishes to erect, however, are not any less absolute or important, just on a much larger scale. On 29 June 2014, Baghdadi declared the Caliphate, a strategic maneuver that not only gave ISIS de jure legitimacy to wage jihad according to Baghdadi's interpretation of the Qur'an, but also promulgated physical boundaries between itself and the rest of the world.¹⁷ ISIS laid claim to its own territory to rally true believers the world over and insulate its fundamentalist ideologies from any moderate Muslim influences.

Recommendations

In the case of the Branch Davidians, the US government descended on the Waco compound with force and began a highly publicized 52-day siege. Koresh explained to his flock that the federal assault was merely the opening volley in Armageddon, the fulfillment of his prophecies, the "opening of the fifth seal," as he called it. The FBI's aggressive response galvanized Koresh's followers by playing directly into his apocalyptic narrative. Fundamentally misunderstanding the Branch Davidians' motivations, the FBI treated Koresh as a hostage taker: they negotiated for the release of his "hostages" while refusing to engage or acknowledge Koresh's fundamentalist ideologies in any way.¹⁸

His followers, however, were true believers, not hostages, and did not want "rescue." Highly respected Adventist scholars offered to speak with Koresh and offered him an alternative interpretation to the Book of Revelation. Koresh responded positively, but the FBI refused to support the effort.¹⁹ Koresh explained to the leaders that he needed more time to finish writing his interpretations of scripture, but again this was something that the FBI would not oblige. Historian Malcolm Gladwell argues that, had the federal forces tactically paused and allowed Koresh to engage other Adventists and further contemplate his situation, his apocalyptic narrative would have unraveled.²⁰ Koresh believed that the armies of Armageddon in the coming apocalypse would not pause for debate or contemplation—they would attack without warning, and the FBI fulfilled his vision. In launching their attack, the FBI could not have more perfectly galvanized the Branch Davidians' fundamentalist beliefs in a fight to the death. To this day, "Waco" is the rallying cry for domestic terror groups in the United States, an illustration of federal overreach, and a case study in law enforcement ineptitude.

The Islamic State has been enjoying a similar kind of ideological galvanization through US policy in the Middle East. The United States and its allies have proclaimed that ISIS is not Islamic, and the coalition's military forces have applied hard power solutions with little effect and varying intensity. Some politicians have called for carpet-bombing, torture, and even nuclear war to combat the fundamentalist group. Like the FBI's attack on the extremist Christians, nothing could more perfectly feed ISIS's fundamentalist Islamic narrative.

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As the FBI learned at Waco, however, there are alternative courses of action to consider. If the United States focused on containing ISIS, while moderate Muslim leadership (particularly Salafi leaders in Saudi Arabia) engaged them ideologically, their apocalyptic narrative would soon unravel. Without an enemy storming into Dabiq and bringing the end times, the extremist notions ISIS harnesses to brutalize its constituents will appear desperate and unwarranted. It may be the long game, but burning down the Middle East with ISIS inside it will only further engender anti-Western extremist ideologies the world over, presenting new threats and inciting further fundamentalist extremism. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

- 1 Malcom Gladwell, "Sacred and Profane: Where the Waco Siege Went Wrong," *New Yorker*, 31 March 2014: 22–28: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/31/sacred-and-profane-4>
- 2 "Jonestown" refers to a cult called the People's Temple, founded by a charismatic preacher named Jim Jones in 1956. Jones began a settlement, Jonestown, in Guyana in the 1970s, and went there with about 1,000 followers to escape increasingly hostile public scrutiny of Jones's behavior. When US Representative Leo Ryan arrived at Jonestown to investigate reports of abuse, he was murdered, and Jones induced 900 of his followers to drink poison-laced fruit punch, in what became known in the media as the "Jonestown Massacre." See Jennifer Rosenberg, "The Jonestown Massacre," ThoughtCo., updated 6 February 2017: <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1970s/p/jonestown.htm>. Heaven's Gate was a millennialist Christian cult that preached that aliens would lead them to spiritual rebirth. In March 1997, as Comet Hale-Bopp approached Earth, cult leader Marshall Applewhite and 38 followers committed suicide in the apparent belief that the comet hid a spaceship that was coming to take them to their next existence. See "1997: Heaven's Gate Cult Members Found Dead," History.com, n.d.: <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/heavens-gate-cult-members-found-dead>
- 3 Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 96.
- 4 Ibid., 93.
- 5 Ibid., 95.
- 6 "Branch Davidians: History, Beliefs, and Practices," ReligiousTolerance.org, updated 19 April 2003: http://www.religioustolerance.org/dc_branc1.htm
- 7 See "The Branch Davidians," Christian Research Institute, n.d.: <http://www.equip.org/article/the-branch-davidians/>
- 8 "Branch Davidians: History, Beliefs, and Practices."
- 9 William McCants, "'The Believer': How an Introvert with a Passion for Religion and Soccer Became Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Leader of the Islamic State," Brookings, 1 September 2015: <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/thebeliever.html>
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *Atlantic Monthly*, 15 March 2015: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>. Dabiq was retaken from ISIS by Syrian rebels in October 2016.
- 12 Gladwell, "Sacred and Profane," 23.
- 13 Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 127.
- 14 "Branch Davidians: History, Beliefs, and Practices."
- 15 Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."
- 16 Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *New York Times*, 13 August 2015: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>
- 17 Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."
- 18 Gladwell, "Sacred and Profane," 26.
- 19 Ibid., 28.
- 20 Ibid.