

ISIS IS THE ISLAMIC “REFORMATION”



On August 10th 1566 an enraged crowd of Huguenots burst into the Chapel of St. Lawrence in Steenvorde France and proceeded to destroy with hammers and picks any ecclesiastical art that they came across. They toppled statues of Mary and the saints, destroyed crucifixes, smashed stain glassed windows, and defaced tombs. It was not an isolated incident, indeed it triggered a wave of iconoclastic fury that radiated north from France into the Low Countries, with cathedrals, churches, monasteries, and hospitals all targeted for destruction.

One witness [wrote](#): “They tore the curtains, dashed in pieces the carved work of brass and stone, brake the altars, ... [they] burned and rent not only all kind of Church books, but, moreover, destroyed whole libraries of books...”

Inspired by the theology of Calvin and Zwingli who taught a literal interpretation of the Decalogue’s prohibition on graven images, the enraged crowd targeted all art which they

saw as blasphemous and contrary to their new order. In short they wished to erase all vestiges of the past.

For one versed in early modern European history the events of this past week in Mosul seem eerily familiar. On February 26th the *Guardian* reported that “Islamic State militants ransacked Mosul’s central museum, destroying priceless artefacts that are thousands of years old, in the group’s latest rampage...”

As is the case in the *Guardian*’s coverage, the story is often accompanied by Islamic State video showing black-clad, bearded extremists taking power tools to ancient Assyrian and Akkadian statues. We watch in horror as ancient statues of massive winged bulls have their faces erased by jack-hammers and we see statues being toppled over. According to the *Guardian*, an ISIS representative declares that, “These statues and idols, these artifacts, if God has ordered its removal, they became worthless to us even if they are worth billions of dollars.” Another article in the *Guardian* reported that the Islamic State has bragged about the burning of over 100,000 books – some going back thousands of years – in Mosul’s central library.

Which is why there’s such irony in articles like Raza Rumi’s “Islam Needs Reformation from Within” in the Huffington Post, or books like Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*. These are far from isolated examples; indeed it has become a truism in our political discourse that Islam “needs a reformation.” But if historical parallels are at all useful, it indeed seems that a reformation is precisely what we are getting right now. Our political pundits, as inheritors of a triumphalist Anglo-American Protestant historiography, often embrace a fallacy that conflates the tremendously complicated reformation (and I am using this word to mean both the various Protestant reformations as well as the Catholic Counter-Reformation) with the likewise tremendously complicated Enlightenment.

But while reformation may signal modernity – and this is important in the context of any discussion about the Islamic State – it doesn’t always signal progress, liberalism, or democracy. It’s often presented as a given that the existence of modern democracy, capitalism, and science grow purely out of the reformation, but John Calvin was not

Thomas Jefferson (arguably Thomas Jefferson wasn't even Thomas Jefferson). It's a reductionist understanding of history, and it becomes dangerous when misapplied to current events.

Our educations have tended to gloss over the brutal violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries that was perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestants. Millions of Europeans were killed on a scale unimaginable during the medieval era (even though our common parlance has us believe that that the Middle Ages were a particularly brutal period). From the French wars of religion, to the English civil wars, to the Thirty Years' War (where possibly 30% of German civilians perished) the arrival of modernity signaled terror and horror in many corners.

How we use words like "medieval," "reformation," and "modern" must be exact if we're to make any sense out of what the Islamic State is, and how we are to defeat it. Graeme Wood's controversial *Atlantic* cover essay "What ISIS Really Wants" has opened discussion in the press about what language we use to describe the Islamic State. It may be politically expedient to deny that the Islamic State is Islamic (and of course the majority of the world's Muslims find it reprehensible) but it's also to commit the "No True Scotsmen Fallacy."

Where Wood's analysis falters is when he claims that there is a "dishonest campaign to deny the Islamic State's medieval religious nature." The fact is that when other pundits declare a need for an Islamic reformation that is exactly what the Islamic State is delivering. Far from medieval they're eminently modern, they are simply an example of the worst grotesqueries that modernity has to offer.

And they're not early modern as my previous historical examples have it, they're as modern as we are. They may wish to return to their own fantasy version of an ancient past (and Wood even notes that ISIS recruitment videos utilize scenes of medieval warfare skillfully edited from contemporary movies) but no group, liberal or reactionary, can escape their own time period. To designate them as "medieval" is to merely engage in an outmoded school of historical critique that has more to do with our own constructed pasts and our own prejudices than it does reality.

The modern world has never been devoid of religion and the presence of religion does not mean we are in the medieval. We are not fighting a medieval army for the simple reason that it is not the middle ages. It is to buy into that old “war of civilizations” idea that eliminates complex historical contingencies in favor of a narrative every bit as mythic as what the Islamic State believes about itself. Indeed it is a formidable and evil army, but it is a modern army. The Islamic State, as Haroon Moghul [notes](#) in Salon, was born out of the catastrophic US invasion of Iraq. From the debris of that incredible mistake they have taken the technology of modernity and the rhetoric of the Hollywood action film to claim they’re building a caliphate.

The crowd at Steenvorde and the subsequent fury of destruction they unleashed was not an isolated incident. Explosions of image destruction started in the 1530s and included cities like Basel, Augsburg, Copenhagen, Munster, Geneva, and Zurich.

In Britain it was state policy under Henry VIII with his dissolution of the monasteries. The Worcester Priory which had a respectable library of 600 books was reduced to only six, while an abbey in Yorkshire with 646 books was reduced to three. The Henrician Reformation resulted in an unfathomable destruction of England’s medieval culture every bit comparable to what may have been lost this week in Mosul.

And this isn’t just an issue of cultural vandalism. Indeed, the religious wars of early modern Europe were marked by barbarity as fervent as that occurring now in the Iraqi and Syrian deserts. We associate the Islamic State with decapitation and defenestration, but this sort of violence marked the sixteenth and seventeenth century every bit as much.

Historian Marc Lilla has argued in his book *The Stillborn God* that contemporary secularism emerged not out of the reformation but rather in response to the new and horrific violence that modern religion had unleashed on Europe. He claims that the modern western political order, far from being an intellectually inevitable result of ideological currents of the time, was actually a pragmatic necessity when religious violence had made Europe ungovernable.

In other words, reformation didn’t produce liberalism, liberalism was the cure for

reformation. Once you familiarize yourself with the brutality on all denominational sides, from the Peasant's Rebellion, to the Siege at Munster, to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, to the Thirty Years' War, to the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands, to Cromwell's brutal invasion of Ireland, it becomes hard to see the word "reformation" as a simple and positive force.

If Lilla's thesis is correct, then the reformation led to political liberalism and the Enlightenment only because the ground was so bloody and the populace so exhausted they had expended their lust for war – a peace built on a pile of bones. So, when wishing for a reformation in Islam it behooves us to understand what it is that we are wishing for.