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11-2-2016

Apocalypse, But Not Now

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Recommended Citation

Herzfeld N. 2016 Nov 2. Noreen Herzfeld on "Apocalypse, But Not Now" [blog]. Avon Hills Salon. <https://avonhillssalon.com/2016/11/02/noreen-herzfeld-on-apocalypse-but-not-now/>.

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Noreen Herzfeld on “Apocalypse, But Not Now”

NOVEMBER 2, 2016

Noreen Herzfeld

The Syrian town of Dabiq is neither populous (having fewer than 3500 inhabitants) nor strategically located. On October 16, after a short battle, it fell to Syrian rebel forces.

A short battle for a small town should hardly have been noticed. But Dabiq matters, for it represents the Islamic State’s version of Armageddon. A hadith, or saying of the prophet Muhammad to his companion Abu Hurayrah, describes a future apocalyptic battle between Muslims and an infidel coalition led by Rome to take place on a plain outside the town. According to the prophecy, one third of the Muslim forces will flee and another third be killed, but the remaining third is destined to prevail and go on to conquer Constantinople (called Rome, for at that time it was the seat of the Roman empire, thus representing the West and Christendom). Jesus will then return to earth to lead the Muslims in the final battle with Satan that will usher in a new era of God’s rule.

ISIS named its English-language magazine Dabiq in reference to this final victory. In 2014, after executing American hostage Peter Kassig as a symbolic prelude, they taunted: “Come! We are waiting for you. For more than 1400 years, we are waiting for you. And the

promise of Allah is true!” Last May, in the face of a rapid loss of territory, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assured his followers that the prophecy predicted losses before the great victory of Dabiq. When the US and allies began bombing northern Syria this August, ISIS propagandists took to Facebook and Twitter to proclaim excitedly that this was surely the prelude to the expected final battle (#Dabiq).

ISIS’s leaders have been scrambling in the last two weeks to reassure their followers that this was not the battle of Dabiq, that the real battle is yet to come. Their explanations vary: there were not yet the required 80 nations in the coalition against them, other prophecies had to be fulfilled first, neither Jesus nor the messianic figure of the Madhi had come down to lead the battle. A recent editorial reminded readers that God is known for “trying believers with misfortune and hardship . . . before God’s victory will descend upon them” and noted that the first Muslims lost several battles to the Meccans before eventually prevailing. Yet the loss of Dabiq is a significant blow to both ISIS’s propaganda machine and their fighter’s esprit de corps. Their triumphalist slogan “Remaining and Expanding” (baqiya wa-tatamaddad) no longer seems to apply.

ISIS is not unusual in counting on, and exploiting, prophecy. There is a long history of apocalyptic thinking within Western monotheism—think the Essenes, Jim Jones, the Sudanese Madhi cult of the 19th century, and the recent, and very popular, “Left Behind” books. The first Christians, including the apostle Paul, expected Jesus to return in their lifetime and this shaped much of the advice one finds in the Epistles and early doctrine.

They have all been disappointed. Given this history of failure, why would any group today put so many eggs in the apocalyptic basket?

The first reason is political. Dabiq became a central part of ISIS’s ideological self-justification after the capture of the town in 2014. The prophecy gives a religious imprimatur to their claim to have reestablished the caliphate of old, the necessary first step in the unfolding of the end times. (This same train of thought is used by some evangelical Christians to justify their support of the state of Israel, since their version of the final battle necessitates the prior return of the Jews to the Holy Land.)

Second, apocalyptic promises are an excellent recruiting tool. For impressionable young men living with the broken hopes and failed dreams of the various Arab spring uprisings, a promised Muslim victory provides a utopian dream and a new cause. The Middle East and North Africa are currently experiencing a youth bulge with up to 40% of the current population between the ages of 15 and 29, the highest percentage of youth to adults this region has ever known. Unemployment rates among youth average around 25% in most of the region but are as high as 45% in Algeria.

The situation is no better among those whose families have relocated to Europe. In the Brussels suburb of Molenbeek, headquarters of the Paris bombers, 27% of youth are unemployed. Andrew Hussey, of the University of London School of Advanced Study in Paris, notes: “The kids in the banlieues live in this perpetual present of weed, girls, gangsters, Islam. They have no sense of history, no sense of where they come from . . . [They know] bits of Islam

that don't really make sense." An apocalyptic vision makes sense of those bits and provides a heroic story about the future to fill in for a past they do not know and a present they do not understand.

Third, apocalyptic visions paint the world in black and white. They present a simple scenario where the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are easy to distinguish and victory is assured for the "good guys." We need only look at our current election to see how tempting it is for politicians to fire up their base by vilifying the other side. Apocalyptic language has been used by both the Republicans and the Democrats with Clinton quoted as saying "I'm the last thing standing between you and the apocalypse" while Trump claims that Rome will be "ISIS's ultimate trophy" and only he can keep Christendom safe in the coming religious war.

The fall of Dabiq should serve as a warning that, as tempting as apocalyptic thinking is, it is ultimately a dead end. The West can take heart from the fact that apocalyptic cults have generally been short lived. As ISIS loses territory its claims of prophesied victory ring increasingly hollow, even to its own supporters.

The end times have never come as predicted, and that is not likely to change. Jesus himself warned of this, noting that "no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows" (Matthew 24:36).