

Wood's The Way of the Strangers Part II: Imperial Blowback and Bad Theology

Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□

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Last month, I wrote [Review of 'The Way of Strangers': Spiritual cancer or spiritual diabetes ?](#) and also about the power that Islam has to help prisoners build a new life. ("[Natives finding Islam](#)"). Prison and Islam are closely linked in the West.

The world as prison

The only way the West knows to deal with the problem of radical Islam is to search out, arrest, and imprison suspects. John Walker Lindh, captured in Afghanistan in 1991, and Chaudary became icons of resistance in prison, though they did not carry out terrorism themselves. Similarly, Cerantonio and his four comrades are currently facing 10-year sentences for merely trying to go to Syria, though they never even launched their private motorboat, hoping somehow to miraculously arrive in Syria.

They represent the more famous, the tip of an iceberg of unsung hundreds imprisoned for just wanting something, be it mistaken. The underlying cause behind this ongoing tragedy, which Wood seems uninterested in pursuing, is of course the occupation of Muslim lands, the system of imperialism itself. Sending righteously angry young men to prison just confirms their belief in the injustice of the system.

To at least provide some value to their prison time, Michot told British prison authorities that the best way to deal with radicalization in its cellblocks was to make Arabic compulsory for all Muslim prisoners and provide balanced Islamic sources for study. "Islam has to be understood

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as a middle way between the spiritual cancer of ISIS and the spiritual diabetes of Hamza Yusuf."

Putting offenders in jail merely reinforces their belief, as John Walker Lindh's 20-year sentence shows. He has been immersed in Islamic and Arabic studies in prison, at taxpayers' expense. Georgelas also made good use of his three-year stint. No doubt Chaudary did the same. Prison is an appropriate place to find Islam, as history shows. You have nothing more to lose, lots of time, in need of solace and inspiration, humbled before all, equal to all. It only takes one articulate Muslim to reach out to his fellow inmates. Many Muslims have found Islam in prison, transforming their lives.

To underline the importance of US policies in creating converts committed to establishing a new world order, and turning idealists into convicted terrorists, it is worth considering that both Lindh and Hamza were born and grew up in Marin County, California, Lindh a kind of new generation to Hamza. Growing up in the 1960s made Hamza a Sufi, studying in Morocco with Abdullah bin Bayyah. Growing up in the 1980--90s made Lindh a jihadi, a good American, just taking Reagan's support for the Afghans fighting the Soviet Union at face value.

Love-hate of the enemy

Though Wood pokes fun at most of his characters, his own grudging attraction to much of Islam comes through. He genuinely likes and respects Hamza, Qadhi and Michot as sober intellectuals. He faults Qadhi for countering Hamza's concern for theological grounds by emphasizing political motives. Appearing 'objective', Wood prefers to stir up doctrinal disputes among Muslims, rather than emphasizing their common understanding, even for the 'diabetic' Muslims, that US imperialism is indeed the root of the problem.

He travelled several times to Australia to spend many hours with Cerantonio, attending his makeshift mosque (in the YMCA, as his group could not get permission for establishing a formal mosque), playing football with his collective. Wood was impressed to see they were not super-competitive, playing more for exercise and bonding. He saw them as harmless, and was more amused than worried when Musa and friends were arrested trying to leave northern Queensland by fishing boat, heading for Syria, prompting Wood to call him a dork, though Musa was a generous host, both with his thoughts and as a friendly guide. I met Musa in Cairo and remember him as warm, open, intelligent and a sincere Muslim, not at all a dork.

Wood's prestige in the US academic world gave him access to these prominent Muslims, Cerantonio -- Australian, Georgelas, Lindh and Hamza -- white American converts. Interestingly, there are no European figures who have gained such fame/ notoriety. Wood does not reflect on this, nor much on the real reasons for the spectacular success of the al-Qaeda brand-name, 25 years after the CIA and Pentagons' campaign against them began. Afghanistan barely gets a mention. The CIA boasts that Americans going to fight in Syria dropped to one a month from 10, but that more than 10,000 Europeans and others have flocked to Syria since 2014. I suspect that number is inflated, useful for 'fundraising' at Langley, Virginia.

Growing up in the 1980s, as the US starting promoting the Salafi-inspired jihad in Afghanistan,

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made Lindh a Salafi, who jumped at the opportunity of adventure and revolution in Afghanistan. Wood was only able to write to Lindh in prison (Lindh could be out in 2019), and received understandably guarded replies, telling Wood to read the Palestinian American Ahmad Musa Jibil, and to go to Syria as a journalist to meet with ISIS and find out himself. Wood demurred, saying he feared execution. Lindh countering that a journalist who went there as the guest of ISIS would be treated well.

There have been dozens of intrepid journalists who have made it in and out of ISIS territory, especially Norwegian, a Swedish and Danish tv journalists. Some of the documentaries** included:

* *Dugma: The Button* (2016) by Norwegian journalist Paul Refsdal, who embedded with al-Nusra Front in Syria.

* *Nowhere to Hide* (2016) by director Zaradasht Ahmed, produced by Norway and Sweden, showing how a male nurse's daily life is scarred by war in Iraq .

* There are several documentaries at ahlulbayt tv

* *Heaven* (2014) by BBC, showing life behind the lines.

Bad theology

The theological weaknesses of ISIS are clear. There is no outstanding scholar among them, and by erasing virtually all Islamic legal thought and theology since the age of the Righteous Caliphs, relying almost entirely on the Quran, ignoring its historical context, its calls for compassion and forgiveness, and many instances of Allah's own compassion as examples to emulate. ISIS condones slavery simply because it is not forbidden in the Quran. But neither is it supported. Humane treatment of them is part of sharia, and there are many instances of freeing slaves.

The chief mistake of ISIS is the same one that the Zionists have made. They both see themselves as speeding up God's work, achieving a state on their own, something that in both Islam and Judaism should happen when God wills it. Creating a man-made caliphate through violence is perverting the will of God.

Another cross-religious comparison is the schisms within the Jewish and Christian religions, each torn apart "roughly 1,500 years after their foundings."

* The Jewish religion was split apart with the failed Maccabean revolt in the first and second centuries BC, the destruction of the second temple in 70AD, the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135, and the founding of Christianity, dwarfing Judaism.

* Christianity was torn apart by the Reformation, 1,500 years after Jesus. Christianity arose in the Roman empire, the first global world order, rejecting Jewish tribalism. Protestantism arose with the new technology of the printing press, giving the masses access to the scripture, democratizing freedom to interpret the religion, going back to its origins 1,500 years ago, with the good and bad that that entails.

* 1,500 years after the rise of Islam, it too is going through a period of upheaval, rethinking, with al-Qaeda and Wahhabism the movements of rejectionism within Islam that stand isolated. As with the Protestant reformation, literacy and technology are now allowing Muslims to know much more about Islam and debate how it relates to the crises they face in the world of

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imperialism. Both schisms weakened the religions. But then Judaism and Christianity are also in upheaval today, Judaism split sharply over secular Zionism, and Christianity looking for the "historical Jesus".

Yet another strange theological twist, to do with the apocalypse, explains ISIS's lack of interest in Israel. In Islam, the return of Jesus and his triumph in Jerusalem is necessary before the Day of Judgment will begin, much as the Evangelicals believe. So for apocalyptics like ISIS and Christian Evangelicals, there's no point in fighting Israel before Jesus comes back. The only difference, really one of semantics, is that for Muslims, Jesus will return as a Muslim. Thus for ISIS, Hamas is misguided in fighting Israel and demanding a Palestinian state. ISIS argues that they must 'clean up' the Muslim world first.

Will Islam's divisions lead to further splits and continued upheaval?

Islam has a firmer foundation than Judaism and Christianity -- the Quran. Issues of interpretation and adaptation to the needs of the real world involve qiya (example), urf (tradition), maslahah (social needs), and ijihad (reasoning). There are limits to this; the sharia (hadd, bay'a) is the foundation, the Quran the ultimate arbiter. The Kharijites did not destroy Islam, and neither will ISIS, but we have a responsibility to keep the faith alive.

Review by Eric Walberg

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** <https://www.journeyman.tv/film/6585/dugma-the-button>

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