Dangerous ideas: the force of ideology and personality in driving radicalization

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Should we empathize with the members of the most ostentatiously brutal movement of modern human history? Graeme Wood's *The Way of the Strangers* makes a compelling case that we ought to. It is the most psychologically nuanced account yet of the 'Islamic State', based on a wide range of exchanges with recruiters and sympathizers of the organization. No other piece of research explains better how the deceptive clarity of IS' ideology drives what appear to be fairly normal young men and women into extreme, murderous opposition to not only Western society, but all human society outside of the IS territory.

Empathizing with would-be mass murderers and torturers is a big ask, but Wood has done most of the work for us. In the process, he addresses fundamental questions about the role of ideas and, implicitly, personality in processes of radicalization. He does so without the many political preconceptions that mar the debate about Islamist extremism. Wood refuses to reduce IS followers to pawns buffeted by economic deprivation or geopolitical forces. He instead takes them, their ideology and their arguments seriously, even if this means uncovering inconvenient facts about the religious roots of their extremism.

The importance of ideology

Wood's big argument is simple: ideas matter. This should be obvious in the debate about any radical movement, but it has received much pushback from sociologists, political scientists, journalists and public intellectuals who prefer to blame all political violence on structural forces, be they economic disadvantage, dictatorship or US imperialism. All of these do matter, but they are insufficient to explain the timing, social regime and sometimes bizarre strategic choices of the Islamic State. Structural factors also do no tell us why only a tiny fraction of the hundreds of millions of Muslims exposed to them decide to join the Islamic State.

Wood's meticulous fieldwork shows that some IS sympathizers might be oddballs, but they are no dupes, unthinking adventurers or nihilists as some accounts of IS or Al Qaeda suggest. They are, in his words, "often smart, at times even gentle and well-mannered". A few of the IS ideologues he describes are genuinely brilliant, however repulsive their ideas might be.

The book takes scholars, both secular and Muslim, to task for their wilful ignorance of IS' ideological claims. Wood demonstrates that IS followers care deeply about Islamic scripture and orthopraxy. While some have chequered histories of deviance and petty crime, they become meticulous about religious observance and Quranic knowledge once they join the movement. Many of them know a great deal of theology; instead of being ignorant of the Islamic canon, they follow a very particular reading of it. Few movements are as explicitly driven by ideas as IS, be they concepts of how public morality should be organized or prophecies of the end of days, during which true Muslims (i.e. IS members) are supposed to fight a number of final battles with the unbelievers.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam's history and founding texts contain inconvenient facts. The Islamic State has simply specialized in digging these out and interpreting them in an extreme (though often simply literalist) manner, allowing it to portray other schools of Islam as heretics and innovators. IS claims a scriptural base for its highly publicized brutality and abuse, including its widespread use of sex slavery.

Wood points out that there are indeed many pre-modern Islamic legal texts on the enslavement of women and children, and that the prophet himself had at least two enslaved concubines who were prisoners of war. There are still conservative Muslims scholars who maintain that wartime slavery is permissible for Islamic rulers, and not all of these scholars are jihadis. If we reject IS' sex slavery, we also reject a literal interpretation of religious texts.

Extreme literalism: IS' greatest strength and weakness

IS pushes the literal reading of religious texts further than other radical Islamist groups, many of which have a clearer political agenda, are less concerned with doctrinal purity and make allowance for scholarly interpretations (and innovations) that have accrued over centuries. IS ideologues, by contrast, discount precedent and prior exegesis. Only the Quran and the traditions of the prophet and his followers matter and need to be read as immediate instructions with no leeway for interpretation.

The beauty of this approach is its simplicity and the claim to follow the word of God directly. It creates a dissonance with modern moral sensibilities that IS exploits: When Muslims recognize that some of the corpus endorses slavery and brutal punishments, it tries to convince them that the problem is not the unfiltered reading of the religious text but rather the modern sensibilities – and enjoins them to let go of the latter.

Wood usefully points out that this recruitment strategy works better for Muslims that are not steeped in living Islamic traditions, most of which are rooted in centuries of interpretation and practice that have accrued after the time of the prophet, implicitly or explicitly making allowances for political and social change since then. It is easier to recruit Muslims who are not part of established Islam yet seek religious meaning.

The book powerfully illustrates how the IS' literalism, binary worldview and millenarianism fuel the movement and make its adherents such fierce fighters. IS' claim of following Islam to the letter also explains why it is so proud of its atrocities and builds so much of its publicity around them. This, one might add, makes the Islamic State different from most other violent political and religious movements, which try to downplay their brutality even if some of them have historically tortured and killed on a larger scale than IS.

What also follows from the rigidity of IS' beliefs, however, is an inability to adjust to a modern world of nation states and a refusal of any kind of diplomacy or compromise, a weakness that Wood does not explicitly highlight. While other religious movements – including Saudi Arabia's literalist Wahabism, which is theologically close to IS' ideology – have arranged themselves with modern politics, IS' boundless, otherworldly ambition has led to its failure as a state, even if it continues as a guerrilla and terror movement at the time of writing.

IS members revel in their minority status and in the quixotic nature of their fight, convinced that the prophecies that guide them predict their eventual victory on a cosmic scale. According to one saying of the prophet popular among IS followers, Muslims will split into 73 sects, all but one of which will go to hell. The Islamic State, of course, is the one rightly guided sect. Its leaders claim that key events like the seizure of Mosul fulfil ancient eschatological predictions, clearing the path for the end of times.

Such beliefs are hare-brained to us, but Wood reminds us that more than half of US evangelicals (themselves about a quarter of the US population) also believe in imminent doomsday. There are deeply weird beliefs in the corpus of most religions; IS just acts on them with particular determination. While many factors have contributed to IS' emergence, Wood proves that the

group's ideology has contributed to its vigour and decisively shaped its actions. More than most other movements, IS exactly means what it says, and follows it without compromise.

Psychological dimensions of the IS' ideology

There is another, rather implicit theme in the book: In addition to ideology, *personality* also matters. This becomes clear in Wood's subtle accounts of the motivations and choices of his interviewees. Without saying as much, he shows that some ideas resonate better with specific types of individuals. This claim might appear banal to psychologists, but it remains contested among researchers of extremism.

Diego Gambetta and I have made the case that there is an affinity between specific personality traits and radical ideologies in our 2016 book *Engineers of Jihad*. Wood's biographical accounts, with more detail and anecdotal flourish than our statistically oriented work, sheds new light on some of our own claims.

In our book, we identified three personality traits that increase one's attraction to radical Islam: first, high "need for closure", a trait that involves intolerance of ambiguity and a desire for clarity, certainty and control; second, a strong desire to draw boundaries between members of one's in-group and out-groups; and finally, a proneness to disgust that is linked to a desire for traditional morality and moral purification. Experimental psychology has linked all of them to conservative and right-wing attitudes and ideology. We argue that radical Islamist ideology fulfils an analogous function, as it contains very similar elements to that of right-wing movements. These include a strong desire for regularity, hierarchy and the re-establishment of a lost order, the rejection of out-group members, and the intention to morally purify society and purge deviance.

IS as analysed by Wood provides a particularly clean case of an ideology that caters to these three traits. The certainty that IS' literalist ideology and meticulous focus on ritual provide is central in his account of what makes the movement so attractive – especially, I would add, for individuals with a high need for closure. In IS' reading, religious scripture is no more complex than a "manual for a toaster". Any ambiguity is expunged as followers experience "purity, vindication, the bliss accompanying banishment of uncertainty and participation in righteous struggle". The depth of certainty among IS members is astounding: They regularly congratulate convicted sodomites before their killing as they are convinced that the punished will go to heaven. One salafi-jihadi sheikh in Wood's book praises Islam for the fact that it provides a rule for everything, including how to pick one's teeth with a miswak stick.

Wood's careful sleuthing leads him to discover the role of 'Dhahiri' thought in IS' interpretation of Islam. Dhahirism is the most extreme form of Islamic literalism in which only the Quran, the hadith and the consensus of the followers of the prophet count as source. Trying to avoid any human interpretation, its reading of the texts produces quirks like a permission for non-penetrative sex outside of marriage as the activity is not explicitly forbidden. Wood points out that "there is something in Dhahirism attractive to young people prone to binary, totalizing worldviews" – individuals, that is, who appear to have a high need for closure, a trait that is on average more pronounced among males, especially technically oriented ones. Like our own work, Wood points out that jihadists are "overwhelmingly left-brained, analytical types". Wood finds that John Georgelas, an American convert to Islam who has turned into an important IS ideologue, even reformulates some of his beliefs as computer code.

A craving to distinguish in-group and out-group – the second personality trait we link to Islamist radicalism – is served by the exclusivist ideology of many radical Islamist groups. But none pushes this further than IS. The obsession with takfir, the declaration of impure Muslims as infidels, leads IS

followers to declare Muslims living among infidels as apostates. Similarly, IS followers explain to Wood that any wayward imams deserve to be killed. One IS sympathizer tells Wood that “even if you [as a Christian] were to pay jiziyah [a poll tax for non-Muslims under Muslim rule] and live under the authority of Islam in humiliation, we would continue to hate you”. IS ideologues even declare fellow Muslims as apostates and hence fair game in jihad just for refusing to endorse IS’ own takfir declarations. IS not only rejects unbelievers; even believers who do not actively enforce the in-group’s tight boundaries cannot belong to it. IS ideologues cite medieval theologians who endorse the loneliness and social separation of true Muslims as a virtue in itself.

IS also has much to offer to individuals with a tendency to be easily disgusted, our third personality trait. Wood recounts how important rituals, including ablutions, are to IS followers. IS, in his reading, also preys on a constant feeling of self-incrimination, reminding Muslims that no life is sinless. Wood explores with great nuance how a desire for purification pushes radicalized Western Muslims into the arms of the Islamic State. He points out that purification requires being polluted in the first place, making the process particularly attractive for the deviants and petty criminals who are over-represented among Western IS recruits. For them, IS functions as a mission of cleansing and salvation.

Conclusion

Perhaps the book downplays its psychological dimensions because the ideological ones by themselves are (unfortunately) controversial enough. I am also not sure Wood would agree with my particular psychological interpretation of his work. But this is not the point. No matter what you make of our theory of three traits, *The Way of the Strangers* provides fantastic raw material for speculating about the broader links between ideas, personality, and radicalism.

Wood’s first person, journalistic approach is quite distant from social scientific writing on radical Islamism, but this is precisely its strength: In his focus on personal encounters, Wood comes as close to an ethnography of modern jihadism as is humanly possible. Behind the readable style lies an interpretive depth, both exegetic and psychological, from which scholars will benefit for many years to come.