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# Jihadism Is Not Nihilism



By Marty Kaplan



SAUL LOEB VIA GETTY IMAGES

In the partisan battle over describing the Islamic State, Democrats have fastened on a philosophical term from 19th century European intellectual history. They're being too clever by half.

"Extremist nihilism" is what Barack Obama has called ISIS's ideology. In the second Democratic debate, Hillary Clinton labeled it a "kind of barbarism and nihilism." John Kerry dismissed it as "nothing more than a form of criminal anarchy, nihilism which illegitimately claims an ideological and religious foundation."

This makes it sound like nihilism has nothing to do with religion. But it has everything to do with religion.

Nihilism is a consequence of losing faith. It's a trap door that opens when a divine sanction for morality loses authority. It's a repercussion of the Enlightenment, a cost of learning science, a risk of higher education. Whatever God you once believed in, whatever scripture you once obeyed, whatever story about a realm beyond this one that once bound you to your tribe, nihilism is the stomach-churning corollary of realizing — in the words of the philosopher most closely associated with it, Friedrich Nietzsche — "God is dead."

People find different ways to deal with that wound.

For some, nihilism turns out to be a way station on the human journey, a stage of moral development, a rite of passage to intellectual maturity. Eventually, and not without pain, you discover that secular values can provide a durable basis for human decency. You realize you can live by biblical bywords — "therefore choose life," "do unto others" — but without biblical theology. You can find in philosophy — in the categorical imperative of Kantian ethics, say, or in the "veil of ignorance" of John Rawls's theory of justice — a rationale for civilized behavior. You can find in nature an inspiration for reverence and awe; in love and art, an experience of transcendence; in evolutionary biology, an adaptive advantage for family and empathy. There may be no God on high, but immanence — the godliness within us and within everything — is no less spiritually authentic, and has a lot less blood on its hands, than official organized religion.

But what is a difficult passage for some can be a life sentence for others. With nihilism can come despair, a dark night of the soul that never turns to dawn. If there is no God, then life is pointless and absurd. Culture is just a desperate attempt to evade

our mortality. Values are all arbitrary; truths are all political; epiphanies are just meaningless squirts of feel-good molecules. Nothing matters, and everything sucks.

From here, there are two possible moves. One is decadence. If morality is a socially-constructed scam, then there is no sin in the deadly sins. Since the only god is Chance, you might as well make your one night in the casino a hedonic blowout. The other move is more sinister. As Dostoevsky's characters are prone to observe, if God is dead, then everything is permitted. Why not steal? Why not murder? Coveting your neighbor's wife won't send you to hell; neither will killing him if he catches you. Psychopaths don't know the difference between right and wrong. Nihilists know the difference, but they don't believe it makes any difference.

So nihilism is the wrong word for ISIS. Extremist jihadism is a consequence of faith, not a consequence of losing faith.

You can say the Islam of ISIS is a perversion of the teachings of Muhammad, just as you can say the Inquisition and the Crusades were a perversion of the teachings of Jesus, or that the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin was a perversion of the teachings of the Torah. You can say the Islam of ISIS is fundamentalist and extreme, just as you can say the Christianity that supports Israel to hasten the arrival of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ is fundamentalist and extreme, or that the Judaism that supports replacing the Al-Aqsa Mosque with the Third Temple to hasten the arrival of the Messiah is fundamentalist and extreme. But what you cannot say is that the jihadism of the butchers of Paris, Beirut and Sharm el-Sheikh is a consequence of their concluding that Allah is dead, which is what calling them nihilists would mean.

Ironically, in their minds, we're the nihilists. The sensual pleasure we take in life, they view as a sign of our decadence. Our modernity is a threat to moral order. We are infidels. It is bad enough that we do not believe in the One True God whose name is Allah. Our pluralism — our democratic refusal to embrace the notion that any God is the One True God — is to them evidence of our evil, proof we believe in no God, reason for holy warriors to have us in their sights.

Democrats may believe that calling ISIS's ideology nihilism — or criminal anarchy, or barbarism — decouples their religion from their terrorism. That's wishful thinking. "Nihilist" belongs to a Western narrative about a God that failed. ISIS isn't part of that story. It's discomfiting that ISIS's evil is rooted in the Koran — the most apocalyptic, ultra-conservative, literalist reading imaginable, yet the Koran nevertheless. But it's disingenuous of Democrats to root it in Nietzsche.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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