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12-1-2015

December 1, 2015: What Really Fuels ISIS?

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2015). December 1, 2015: What Really Fuels ISIS?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/981>

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Title: What Really Fuels ISIS?

Date: 2015-12-01T05:44:00.002-05:00

12/1/2015—One week off for a Thanksgiving family break. Thanksgiving is now the only healthy American holiday. The answer to the above question is actually nothing. ISIS is, after all, weak and small. It is not as if vast numbers of Muslims have flocked to it. Muslims living in the West are overwhelmingly peaceful people trying to make a living like everyone else. And yet. Radical Islam does seem to have an attraction for some young people. Why is that? Larry Hoffner, an occasional letter-to-the-editor writer in the New York Times, offers an insight in a Sunday letter in the 11/22/2015 edition of the New York Times Book Review. The context is the prior week's review of Michael Houellebecq's novel *Submission*—here is the Wikipedia entry: The novel, a political satire, imagines a situation in which a Muslim party upholding traditionalist and patriarchal values leads the 2022 vote in France and is able to form a government with the support of France's Islamo-Leftist Socialist Party. The book drew an unusual amount of attention because, by a macabre coincidence, it was released on the day of the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Hoffner draws attention to the reviewer's assertion (Karl Ove Knausgaard) that the novel's theme is the narrator's overall sense of living in a meaningless void. The rise of Islam in France is merely a consequence of this meaninglessness. The way Hoffner sees it, the Islamization of France in the book is a symbol of how intolerant ideology will fill a cultural void left by the ennui and disillusionment of contemporary European culture. In other words, the intolerance and uniformity of a certain form of Islam become attractive because of loss of meaning in secular life. So, now we have a question—where are we headed? Unless secularism becomes a domain of flourishing life, other forms of meaning must prevail. We have been here before. Democratic life in Europe waned in the 1930's and Fascism and Communism came to the fore. The point is to see ourselves as engaged in a task. Our task is to take our heritage—humanism, the Enlightenment, Christian culture—and adapt it to modern life. To do this, we must let go of post-modernism, which teaches the surrender of all vantage points. I admit we have nothing yet to replace post-modernism. But the first task is to stop taking in more poison. We can stop insisting that life is meaningless. We can at least say that we do not know what all the possibilities of life are. We can stop snarling at religion, which still provides a place to stand for billions of people. We can stop insisting that commitment is the problem and that if only everyone were as free-floating as we are, there would be no suicide bombers. According to Hoffner, we are the problem.