

Sept. 1, 2020

To the Habilitation Committee of Bronislav Ostransky:

I have been asked to evaluate the work of Dr. Bronislav Ostransky preparatory for his habilitation at Charles University, Prague. In order to accomplish this task, I was asked to review Dr. Ostransky's book, *The Jihadist Preachers of the End Times: ISIS Apocalyptic Propaganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), in the series Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Apocalypticism and Eschatology.

It with great pleasure that I submit my report that this work more than qualifies Dr. Bronislav Ostransky for his habilitation procedure.

*Jihadist Preachers* is a work covering the first in-depth analysis of the apocalyptic literature produced in such great quantities by the Salafi-jihadi group the Islamic State (ca. 2013-18). This group, which briefly dominated both eastern Syria and western Iraq, as well as having significant outpost support in a range of Muslim countries—as well as some support among immigrant Muslim populations in non-Muslim countries—is of the highest interest for scholars.

Although a range of publications, most popular in nature, some scholarly, had analyzed IS propaganda prior to that of *Jihadist Preachers*, none had done so with a deep knowledge of the Arabic original sources and the roots of Sunni Muslim apocalyptic expectations. Ostransky's work is completely groundbreaking in this regard.

Probably the most unique feature of *Jihadist Preachers* is the teleological approach—taking the deep classical Muslim material, noting its first usage, how it has been traditionally understood and then finally how IS manipulated it for its own purposes.

Ostransky's work, then, is both a research breakthrough in the sense that it brought to the broader audience a huge number of sources that had not previously been noted, but also a methodological breakthrough. In his methodological introduction (chap. 1) Ostransky proposes a whole series of new definitions concerning Muslim apocalypse: how it should be studied, what its affinities are within the study of political Islam as well as placing it within the larger realm of religious studies.

However, Ostransky is also very sensitive to the fact that most of the scholarly literature on IS either downplays or even sometimes dismisses its religious facet. The group's apocalyptic focus opens such a dismissal into question, as this material is both political and religious in nature, and is central to the group's self-definition as well as recruitment. Ostransky dissects and analyzes the reasons why this apocalyptic material needs to be taken seriously, both by scholars as well as by leaders.

*Jihadist Preachers* is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 goes over the background for the appearance of contemporary Sunni Muslim apocalyptic scenarios, and the relationship between the mainstream writers and the Salafis.

Chapter 3 on the topography of the end times is completely unique. Prior to Ostransky's work no one had ever really examined the connections between the place-names listed in the classical sources and their use by contemporary groups (other than Dābiq in the most superficial manner). Because the typographical names, even if their precise location is problematic, have such incredible resonance among the wider Muslim audience, analysis of their use by contemporary groups is absolutely crucial. And yet, no one had really ever done that before.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of the book, taking the reader through the apocalyptic world of IS as it developed, especially during 2014 and 2015, and then as the group transitioned to some extent away from blatant apocalypticism during 2016-7 (especially after it lost control over the site of Dābiq).

Chapter 6 is another completely unique work, which brings out the polemics against IS and its apocalyptic scenarios. This chapter is essentially contemporary Sunni Islam in action, as it is forced to confront an issue—beliefs in the end of the world—that most of its religious leadership do not want to do. Ostransky details how both Sufis and Shi'ites reacted to the Islamic State's apocalyptic narrative.

*Jihadist Preachers* is in my opinion an excellent example of what a scholarly book on contemporary Islam should be: methodologically sound, based upon a wide range of sources, placing contemporary Islam with relation to classical materials, as well as carefully placing the entire study in relation to the broader field of religious studies.

Because apocalypse is a challenging field in which to work, probably the most useful element of Ostransky's work over the long haul will be his careful definitions of apocalypse, and phenomena connected with it. This methodological work, brought out in the introduction and chapter one, is particularly useful because the Muslim conception of apocalypse is not precisely the same as that originating from the biblical or classical tradition. Ostransky is very painstaking in making sure that his readers know exactly what he means by each term, and discusses their field of applicability.

In summary, I laud the publication of *Jihadist Preachers*, and believe that it demonstrates a very high level of scholarship, mastery of Arabic, and both contemporary and classical sources, as well the ability to fit this problematic material into a monograph—and even on a controversial topic.

Thank you,

Sincerely,



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