Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 September 2017

Islamic Millennialism

Podcast with **Rob Gleave** (18 September 2017).

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Audio and transcript available at: http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/islamic-millennialism/

David Robertson (**DR**): *I'm here in Bedford at the CenSAMM Conference on Millennialism and Violence and I'm joined by Rob Gleave, who is the Director for the Study of Islam at Exeter University.*

Rob Gleave (**RG**): Yes.

DR: *First of all, welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

RG: Thanks very much.

DR: *Today we're going to talk about millennialism and violence in Islam, in the Islamic world. Maybe a good place to start is to tell us a little bit about the whole idea of millennialism and messianism in Islam. Is this something that comes from the Qur'an, or what's the. . . ?*

RG: Yes, there are clear indications in the Qur'an about an end time. There's a shortage on detail as to what's going to happen and a time as to when things are going to happen, but there's a discussion – an extensive discussion – of something called the the Hour. And this Hour – the Hour that will come – is the time when the world will be brought to a an end and a judgement will happen and a resurrection of people who have died will occur: people from the graves. And there's some indication in the Qur'an itself about some of the violent , catastrophic events that will happen, in terms of the sky and mountains being torn asunder and those sort of things. But there's not a great detail and there's not a description of a series of events that will eventually lead up to this event. So there's a strong notion in the Qur'an that the world will come to an end, but, like many things in the Qur'an, it's indicative. Or rather, it indicates something but it doesn't always spell it out in detail. And that was left to Muslim theologians to try and discover what it was that the scriptures were referring to.

DR: *OK.*

RG: And for that they used some sayings of the Prophet Muhammad – and there were sayings of the

Prophet Muhammad. Of course, there's huge debates about the authenticity of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. But, nonetheless, there was a sort of residue of statements by the Prophet Muhammad which described various things that were going to happen at the end of the world. And from these sources a number of different versions, if you like, of the end times were developed in Muslim theology. And the crucial point is that whilst belief in the eventual day of judgement is an essential element of Islamic belief, precisely what will happen at the those end times – the details, the sequence of events, if you like – this is not an essential element of Muslim belief. It's not something which determines whether someone is a believer or not a believer. So, it was left open for the Muslim theologians to interpret this material in ways which was highly imaginative. There are some stock elements that always reoccur. The first one was with the return of Jesus. So this was an important element. The return of Jesus was seen as a crucial element of the end times.

DR: *Which might come as quite a surprise to some of our listeners, I think.*

RG: Well, yes. Jesus, of course, is highly regarded in Muslim theology as one of the Prophets sent by God. But the Qur'an itself indicates that Jesus will return, or that the return of Jesus is one of the signs of the end times. And it's linked . . . often it's linked, by theologians, to the Qur'anic ambiguity about whether or not Jesus died on the cross. The Qur'anic phrase seems to indicate that he appeared to die, but didn't die, and therefore it left the way open for a return of Jesus at the end times. And it's very likely, historically, that this was incorporated into the Muslim theological framework from Christian roots about the return of Jesus. But it was a crucial element of the end time narrative for Muslims, the belief that Jesus will come. Another crucial element was also the return of another figure, known as the Mahdi. And the Sunni and Shi'i branches of Islam have slightly different notions of what this Mahdi will do and what his role is, theologically as well as physically, in the end times. **(5:00)** So they have slightly different notions of that. But these two elements are always conjoined: that the Mahdi and the return of Jesus together will bring about the ushering in, if you like, of the end of the world.

DR: *And a lot of the imagery, as you say, is very reminiscent of the Christian story and the imagery of . . . well, imagery which carries on into some of the new religious kind of millenialisms we've been talking about this week.*

RG: I think apocalyptic imagery is something which . . . well, it's a discourse which is shared across the Jewish, Christian and Muslim milieux, and used across these different religious traditions, and re-used again and again. You find it reinvented in new religious movements within Islam as well, which emphasised the coming of the end times. So, it's a stock of imagery which is not exclusive to an

individual tradition. And quite often, the ability for apocalyptic imagery to cross-fertilise between religious traditions . . . there's sometimes more potential for that than in other areas of theology, or in ethics or in law. In apocalyptics, somehow a shared stock of images about the Beast, the Antichrist, the notion of the return of Jesus: all of these things together can be shared across traditions.

DR: *Absolutely.*

RG: And you also find, with a lot of apocalyptic movements, that they're quite willing to borrow from different traditions and they don't feel any reticence about the sources of their religious imagery. Muslim religious movements, they will take something which we find in the Jewish or Christian traditions which have made their way into Islam, in one way or another through the history of Islam. And they're not worried about the sources of these things when they're constructing their end of time narrative.

DR: *Of course not.*

RG: So it makes for an enormously creative image of the end of the world, when apocalyptic writers are able to draw on a great wealth of writings and sources in their creative imagination about what the end of the world will look like.

DR: *The theology – and ideas about the Mahdi in particular – is quite important in the history of the schism between the Sunni and Shi'i traditions, am I right?*

RG: Absolutely. For the Sunni traditions, the Mahdi is a figure sent by God who will lead a battle and bring about the preparations, if you like, for the day of judgement. In the Shiite tradition, the Mahdi is the return of someone – or the reappearance of someone – who disappeared in the ninth century and who will return and re-establish their rightful, legitimate, political rule at some time in the future. So, the Sunni and Shiite traditions didn't divide over the question of the end times: at the beginning, it was a question of who should lead the community and what the role of that leader should be. The way in which the Shiite tradition developed was that following the Prophet Muhammad’s death, in 632, there was a series of leaders coming from amongst his family, his descendents, who were seen as blessed with special religious knowledge. And for one particular branch of that Shiite tradition there were twelve such leaders, and the last of these has gone into hiding. And this is the promised Mahdi, the promised messianic figure that will reappear at some point in the end of time – no one knows when. But Twelver Shiites, as they're called – because they believe in twelve leaders after the Prophet Muhammad – Twelver Shiites have a very strong notion of the patience that's required in expectation of the return of the Mahdi, and the internal striving to be a perfect servant. So the internal striving to

be a perfect servant becomes a crucial element of Shiite identity, in the expectation of the return of the Mahdi at some point in time in the future. (**10:00**) And, when the Mahdi returns, it's not simply that this person will be a military leader and bring about the end of days. This is the return of the person who should have been the leader of the Muslim community for all of these centuries. It's the reappearance, if you like, of the Mahdi who is present in the community but unknown, suddenly making himself known again. So this is quite a different dynamic for Shiites about the end times, compared to Sunnis. And since the Mahdi is someone who's seen as having perfect knowledge of divine matters, including the law, this means that he's looked to, by Shiites , as a guide for daily living. And the Mahdi doesn't fulfil such a role in Sunni theology.

DR: *It's a really fascinating, and – I think – kind-of unique situation: this idea of the Mahdi being this occulted figure who has gone into hiding but is still in the world, but hidden. And they're waiting on his . . . it's not like a physical reincarnation or anything like that, it's a re-emergence of this hidden figure. It's really interesting.*

RG: It was a belief which emerged in early Islam, through a series of descendents of the Prophet Muhammad who went into hiding in order to protect themselves, and the community, from oppression from a majority Sunni community. And the theme of a hidden Imam who will make themselves known again when the conditions are right became incorporated into Twelver Shiite doctrine and became an official element of Twelver Shiite belief. And so that's something which is unusual, since most apocalyptic movements which have a messianic element think of the Messiah as returning to earth from somewhere else. Whereas, for the Shiites, the presence of the hidden Imam – the Mahdi – in the community means that at certain points they can find out what his opinion is.

DR: *Yes.*

RG: Which is the crucial element for Shiites: how do you know what the Imam's opinion might be on this or that? So, for example, if all the community agree on something – on a particular doctrine – then Shiites have imagined that, well, one of the people who agree must be the hidden Imam.

DR: *Yes.*

RG: So the agreement suddenly becomes authoritative because the Imam's opinion must be amongst the people who are agreeing. We don't know which opinion it is, we don't know the identity of the individual. But, because everyone's agreed, the Imam must be within that agreement. And the result is that certain new doctrines might be validated by a community agreement. The theoretical possibility, if you like, of communication from the hidden Imam through community agreement, becomes possible.

DR: *And I can see that being a very powerful narrative. Because in other traditions, where you want to have the prophetic figure – who is no longer with you – refer to present events, you either have to create a new revelation through a new prophet, or you discover or reveal some previously unknown writings – in the way that has happened in Buddhism quite a lot, for instance. But this . . . you can actually, quite legitimately have this figure referring to events of the day quite contemporaneously. Because he's still around, we just don't know where.*

RG: He's present, yes. And that creates a notion of immanence within the community which has become very important for Shiite devotional practice, in the sense that the Twelver Shiites will often pray to hasten the appearance of the Mahdi as part of their personal devotional prayers. They believe that through devotional acts one is contributing to the situation where the Imam ,who is present, can make themselves known. And it creates an internal – what you might call – piety within the religious tradition, which is a dynamic you can't find in Sunni Islam. Because of the imagined presence of the Imam in the community, it means that there's a emphasis on the importance, if you like, of ensuring community cohesion.(**15:00**)

DR: *And does that spill out, then, into how millenarian ideas and prophetic ideas affect the community, then? Would we see a difference between the way that Shiites and Sunnis relate to how messianism plays into their actions in the political sphere?*

RG: Well certainly within Shi'ism, the fact that the Imam is present and needs to be revealed has enabled certain claimants at different point in time to be "the man". When, without them claiming this from the very beginning . . . . Because the *revealing* notion – of them being present but then revealing that they're the Mahdi – is, in a sense, an extension of the basic theological doctrine.

DR: *Absolutely.*

RG: So you often find that, within the Shiite tradition, when an individual has claimed to be the Mahdi they haven't needed to claim it straight away. Because their presence in the community, without being the Mahdi, isn't a source of scandal – if you see what I mean – to their claim.

DR: *Yes.*

RG: Because the Imam decides when the time is right to appear. And the claimant can reliably or legitimately claim, "Well, it wasn't the right time for me to make to make my personality known." And it means that within the Twelver Shiite tradition, claiming the appearance of the Mahdi – or claiming to be the Mahdi through appearance – has a very strong potential. It's like a trigger which is always

loaded and ready to be fired at any point in time when the conditions are right, or the individual personality believes themselves to be fulfilling that particular role. And so there have been claims of people being the messianic figure throughout history of Islam, not just in Shi'i Islam. But when the claim happens in Shi'i Islam the individual is claiming more than just being a military leader. They're claiming a special sort of knowledge which is, I suppose, akin to a form of prophecy. Although the Muslim theological doctrine means that prophecy ends with the Prophet Muhammad, even for Shiites. It's another form of divine knowledge communicated to an individual. But the potentiality within Shi'ism for a claimant to put themselves forward is always there, because of the notion of an Imam present within the community who is just waiting to be revealed.

DR: *You don't have to posit a new prophet or messiah or anything like that. The potential is already there as part of the actual theological position.*

RG: And, of course, there is a huge taboo in Islam around positing yourself as a new prophet.

DR: *Yes, exactly. Yes.*

RG: Because it contravenes one of the basic doctrines of Islam which is that Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets and that there is no prophet after Muhammad. And so Sunni groups, or groups which have emerged out of Sunnism such as the Ahmadi movement, for example, have been treated with such strong criticism by the rest of the Sunni Muslim community because they have contravened this notion of the end of prophecy with the Prophet Muhammad. They've claimed to have a leader who is a new prophet. In the view of Sunni Islam, you know, the Ahmadi community has claimed that its founder is a new prophet. In Shi'i Islam the messianic figure is the hidden Imam, rather than a new prophet. Which, in a sense is slightly less of a taboo element within the theological framework.

DR: *Really interesting. To move to the Sunni world, then, it would be remiss of me if I didn't ask you about Isis. And there seems to be some debate about the degree to which they should be seen as a millennial, even apocalyptic, kind of movement. I, myself, would like to hear something from you. Your take on this is the apocalyptic millennial aspects of it being overplayed by the West, because of fears and ignorance. (**20:00**) Or is this something that is theologically driving . . . ?*

RG: Well, my own view is that there has been a certain hyping up of the apocalyptic element, because it makes good journalism!

DR: *(Laughs) Yes!*

RG: Apocalypticism is always a sensationalist story for journalists in the contemporary period,

because it's seen as so "out there" and weird and bizarre. And, in a sense, accusations of being over-apocalyptic or . . . . The attraction, if you like, of the story of an apocalyptic movement, is a reflection of much of the state of – I'll say – "British" society, and the nature of secularism and so-called rationality, and these [movements] are seen as hyper -irrational and consequently extremely interesting. And that's certainly been, I think, an element in the attraction of journalists, and commentators as well, to the apocalyptic element of the Islamic State message. Having said that, there are strong elements within the Islamic State propaganda machine which indicate that they are quite willing to use apocalyptic imagery to describe and recruit for their military campaign. So, the most famous one being the small Syrian village of Dabiq, which is mentioned in a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad – a saying of the Prophet Muhammad – that this will be a place where the end times battle will take place. So it became very important that Islamic State captured this village and that they used it in their propaganda in particular their English language propaganda magazine, which they titled the Dabiq. And so they are quite happy to try and use that rhetoric within their propaganda. The big question is, how much of their activities are driven by apocalyptic beliefs? And, in that, I'm slightly less convinced of the primacy of apocalypticism within their military strategy and the ways in which they organise their state. Because most of the ways in which they argue for this policy or that policy, or this action or that action, you can trace back to traditional ways of thinking about the assessment of actions within the Islamic legal tradition. They argue using legal reasoning which you find in the traditional sources. And they themselves are always trying to demonstrate that their opinion is not an unusual opinion, compared to the traditional sources. So apocalypticism doesn't really figure, I don't think, in the internal organisation of Islamic State and the justification for some of their actions. It's extremely important in the way in which they project themselves to the outside world. And this notion that they can recruit through this rhetoric – the fear of missing out on the success and ultimate end times, which Islamic State play a role in – is an incredibly powerful tool for them to attract new recruits.

DR: *Absolutely. So that interest that comes from the media, they're doing exactly the same thing and using it to attract attention to what they're talking about. And, as you say as well, this is such a powerful set of imagery and deep-set, long-running narrative in human culture that it always seems to be there as a little reservoir that you can tap into.*

RG: And don't underestimate Islamic State's awareness of this.

DR: *Absolutely.*

RG: They know. . . . They have quite a sophisticated media machine, which produces quite sophisticated propaganda materials. And they know that apocalyptic fears are an element within Western society, and Muslims living outside of Muslim majority contexts are the prime targets for that propaganda and recruitment. And the result is that they know how to use that in order to gain recruits. (**25:00**) And so it's an element, it's certainly an element of their rhetoric and their propaganda. How instrumental it is – how much they instrumentally use it in order to do this and how much it's embedded within the movement – is a matter of some debate. Part of the problem is the actual internal workings of Islamic State are quite secretive, by necessity, or inevitably you might say. So precisely what the apocalyptic beliefs of their leader, Abu Bakr al-Bhagdadi, might be, outside of the propaganda element, is actually quite difficult to identify. But it's certainly a form of religiosity that they are very happy to project outside of the territory that they control.

DR: *That's an excellent comparative point to end on, I think. It's very important that we don't simply ascribe naive beliefs to any of these millennial apocalyptic discourses, be they in Islam, Christianity, new religions or popular culture. There are multiple levels of discourse going on all the time and they're being used sometimes for their media impact, or their interest, as much as they are themselves driving actions.*

RG: Yes, we make a mistake if we think that an organisation like Islamic State is a simple organisation with a single message that it's always churning out. It's actually quite a complicated, multi-tiered, multi-faceted organisation which knows – and which through experience has learnt – what works and what doesn't work in different contexts. And, like all organisations, it promotes itself in appropriate ways to appropriate audiences.

DR: *And, that people are driven naively by beliefs and ideologies: in fact it's much more complicated and they are mutually creating . . .*

RG: No, certainly. And we make a mistake if we think that all we need to do is really try and show these people what the truth is, and how mistaken they are, through forceful argumentation – that we're going to convince them in some way. No: people believe things and belief, as we know, is a really complex set of factors which lead to an individual settling upon a particular doctrine which they believe is right for them. And belief in the providential nature of Islamic State is one such belief. It's not simple. It's actually extremely complicated and complex as a process. Just as complicated as any process of religious commitment.

DR: *Rob Gleave thank you so much for taking part in our sophisticated media and propaganda*

machine at the Religious Studies Project.

RG: (Laughs) That's alright.

DR: *I'm afraid it's time for us to look to the future, and the next panel, here at the conference. So thanks very much for taking part.*

RG: Thanks very much for inviting me.

DR: *You're quite welcome.*

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