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Theology Matters . . . It Always Matters

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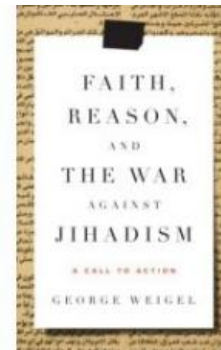
Ideas drive history. Any significant conflict comes down, however eventually, to ideas, beliefs, and convictions. Take that analysis to the next level and it becomes clear that the most significant human conflicts we encounter are the most significantly tied to ideas — and to beliefs about God. In other words, theology matters.

This is especially clear when the conflict between Islam and the West comes into view. The deeply and inescapably theological character of this collision should be apparent to all. Those most ardently determined to ignore this dimension are those who are convinced that the West has now entered a secular and post-theological age in which basic convictions and belief about God no longer matter.

This conveniently, but dangerously, ignores the obvious — that the West is based upon a certain understanding of order, rationality, human dignity, and human responsibility that emerged out of the Christian worldview, informed by both the Old and New Testaments. Rival civilizations are based in different belief systems that produce very different understandings and moral actions. Students in most American high schools study the stories of those understood to be champions of freedom. Students in far too many madrassas throughout much of the Islamic world are taught to celebrate martyrs to Islam — even teenage suicide bombers.

In his new book, *Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism*, George Weigel takes theology seriously as he considers the threat of jihadism. A Distinguished Fellow of Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center, Weigel is a prominent Catholic intellectual and commentator. Here is the central thrust of his analysis:

How men and women think about God—or don't think about God—has a great deal to do with how they envision the just society, and how they determine the appropriate means by which to build that society. This means taking theology seriously—which includes taking seriously others' concepts of God's nature and purposes, and their commitments to the beliefs arising from those concepts—as well as the theologies that have shaped the civilization of the West. If we have not learned this over the past five years, one wonders if we have learned anything.



Well, one does wonder if we have learned anything. This quality of analysis is virtually missing from most public conversation — which is why *Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism* is so important.

Weigel also notices the different way Muslims and Westerners view history. He sees theology at work there as well:

Despite the supersessionist claims that some Christians have made throughout history vis-à-vis Judaism, no orthodox Christian holds that God's self-revelation in Christ negates God's self-revelation in the history of the People of Israel. Islam, by contrast, takes a radically supersessionist view of both Judaism and Christianity, claiming that the final revelation to Muhammad de facto trumps, by way of supersession, any prior revelatory value (so to speak) that might be found in the Hebrew Bible or the Christian New Testament.

But Islam and the Christianity-formed West also produced very different theological anthropologies:

Islamic theological anthropology also helps explain Islam's traditional division of the human world into the "House of Islam," the "God-hallowed realm" that embodies God's purposes on earth, and the "House of War," which is composed of all those who have not yet submitted to Allah and his Prophet. From there, it is but a short step to the Muslim conviction that, as Bernard Lewis writes, "The Islamic state [is] the only truly legitimate power on earth and the Islamic community the sole repository of truth and enlightenment, surrounded on all sides by an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief."

Weigel also gives the jihadists their due; they are acting in ways that, given their own belief system, make sense. Calling them crazy or irrational does not help. Their actions — including suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism — make sense to them:

It is thus a great folly to think that jihadism and the terrorism it underwrites can be understood in terms drawn primarily from the patois of the therapeutic society, as if jihadist terrorism were some Levantine form of psychiatric aberration. Within their own theological frame of reference and the reading of history it warrants, jihadists are not crazy. They make, to themselves, a terrible kind of sense.

Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism clarifies what so many observers confuse. Theology matters . . . it always matters.

FOOTNOTES: [1] George Weigel was my guest on Thursday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)]. I enjoyed the conversation with him. [2] Theology does matter, of course, and I would look forward to an opportunity to consider how evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics might look at certain aspects of this dynamic quite differently. I appreciate the fact that George Weigel believes that the "trope" of referring to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as "Abrahamic" religions is "ultimately misleading." Nevertheless, I must ask whether certain strains of Roman Catholic teaching (including crucial texts of Vatican II) strongly suggest this same misunderstanding. I believe that they do, but I will have to leave that for another day and another argument. [3] George Weigel's previous book, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* also offered a penetrating critique of Western secularism and the crisis of Europe. I wrote about it [here](#). The book is now available at a significantly discounted price [here](#).

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