Islam and Politics: Crash Course World History 216

Crash Course: World History
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John: Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about the Islamic state. A story ripped from the headlines!

Me From the Past: "Mr. Green. Wait. No no no. This is not history, this is news. And also for me, it's not even news. It's the future."

John: Yeah, Me From the Past, it turns out that history is like a continuous process, and that even current events have a history.

[Intro]

John: Alright, let's begin with the headlines. In 2014 ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIL and Islamic State, and many other things, anyway, they declared a caliphate in the territory that the group controls, prompting many Americans to wonder what a caliphate is. Well, if you've seen our episode on the emergence of Islam, you know a caliphate is an Islamic state modeled on the original Islamic community that was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Now Muhammad was not a caliph, because the word means 'successor', and they were the successors to Muhammad, but the first four political leaders who led the community and turned it into an empire have come to be known as the four rightly guided caliphs. And when groups like ISIS that are trying to re-establish this kind of government look back on it, they see it as being kind of the golden age. That this was the time of not just growth for the Islamic empire, but also of political stability and unity. Which, as it happens, it really wasn't. Like, even under the four rightly guided caliphs, the Islamic world was tremendously diverse and had huge disagreements. I mean, of the four rightly guided caliphs, three were assassinated. But anyway, the ideal version of that type of state is what ISIS and some other Islamists mean when they talk about reconstructing a caliphate, although what the boundaries of a modern-day caliphate might be are far from clear. I mean, are you going to try to include Indonesia? But anyway, according to historian Michael Cook, "the restoration of the caliphate is a political idea for many Islamists--and for some, a political project." But I want to be clear, that is not the case for the vast majority of Muslims.

So, when I use the term 'Islamism', I mean something very specific. For me, Islamism is the idea that Islam can be the basis of government, it's not the same as fundamentalism, although it's often related to it. And it's certainly not the same thing as Islam, which is a diverse and complicated and world-wide religious tradition. Now, Islamism is a potent political force, but it's a relatively recent one, and in many ways, it developed as a response to our old friend, Western-style nationalism. That said, the idea that Islam can guide nation-states or new kinds of state is much older than, you know, 2001. But it became much more relevant to Americans with the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Since then, there has been more and more attention paid to the argument that Islam and Western civilization were, at best, incompatible, and at worst, locked in a mortal clash of civilizations. That clash of civilizations idea has become so ingrained that even though I don't really agree with it, I think we need to at least acknowledge what we're talking about when we talk about 'us' and 'them'. 'Us' usually refers to European-style nation-states, such as those which became dominant in the 19th century. These states tend to value democracy, or at least pluralism, and, to varying degrees, they espouse political values such as egalitarianism and individualism. National identity in these states has, at least traditionally, been in a sense ethnic--based on some sense of shared language and culture, if not exactly kinship, and it's secular rather than religious. And then the argument goes that the Islamic world is the opposite of this, but I am not convinced that that's accurate. For instance, there are lots of religious connections in European-style nation-states, and there are lots of conversations about strengthening those religious connections or even making laws according to religious dictates. And in the Islamic world, there are lots and lots of nation-states. But let's start with the popular conception that Islamists are out of step with the modern political reality of the nation-state. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, Islam is a universal religion that is supposed to transcend ethnic identity. According to the Qur'an, "The believers indeed are brothers." The universal nature of Islam didn't mean that ethnicity didn't matter at all, of course, it did, early on and for a long time, Arab ethnicity was privileged in the Islamic world, and this was especially true during the period of conquest. This was despite Muhammad saying, "Truly the Arab has no superiority over the non-Arab, nor the non-Arab over the Arab, nor the black over the white, nor the white over the black, except in piety." But their amazingly rapid and far-reaching conquest granted the Arabs huge prestige that lasted until the 18th century.

Now, from the beginning, being a Muslim meant being part of a political community, because unlike Jesus or the Buddha, Muhammad was also a political leader, in addition to being a religious one. But at least to an extent, the tight connection between political and religious identity really ended with the assassination of the fourth rightly guided caliph, Ali. According to the writer Tamim Ansary, "After Ali's death, the caliphate was just an empire." But as the empire grew and became more diverse, it became impossible to hold it together as a political unit, so even though the idea of a caliphate doesn't square so well with Western notions of ethnically homogeneous nation-states, ethnicity has always mattered in the Islamic world, as we can see if we go to Turkey or Egypt or Pakistan. In each of those places, the experience of being a Muslim is affected by the experience of one's ethnicity.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So this idea that the Islamic empire wasn't always a caliphate for much of its history, it was just an empire, is really important. Because it gets to how not different ways of organizing people are when it comes to, like, 'us' and 'them'. Now, I'm not trying to make a false equivalence or say that all people are the same or whatever. But like let's look at a defining western political value, egalitarianism. In it's earliest incarnations, Islam was *unusually* egalitarian, especially for its time. The religion structurally avoids hierarchy, except perhaps based on piety. The Qur'an states:'The noblest among you in the sight of God is the most Godfearing of you,' And there's a quote from Muhammad that 'People are equals like the teeth of a comb.' To which I say, what's a comb?

Also, Islamic law, unlike, say, Hammurabi's code, doesn't make class distinctions among Muslims, only between Muslims and non-Muslims, and Muhammad is quoted as saying that the blood of believers is always of equal value. In fact, that Islam lacks caste and formal aristocracy was noted by Europeans who thought it was weird. Now, this canonical idea of egalitarianism is not the same thing as equality, at least the equality that we've come to think about in the present day.

Like in the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad called hadiths, women and men are alike in the performance of prayer and their obligations to pay the alms tax and their expectations of eternal life and paradise, and women did have some inheritance rights in the early Islamic community that they did not enjoy in pre-Islamic Arabic communities and that they would not have had in Byzantium or in, God forbid, Rome. And then there's the inequality between Muslims and "unbelievers," which is pretty well-known, like the other peoples of the book, Christians and Jews, could live and work in Muslim empires, provided they payed a special tax called the jizyah, which was far better than the life of a Muslim under Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain. And then there's the issue of slavery, which the Qu accepts. In general, Muslims have avoided enslaving other

Muslims, showing that there is a sense of brotherhood and solitary among believers, but overall, to quote a historian, "Islamic egalitarianism was limited to free Muslim males."
Of course, if you've watched our US History series, you may remember that early American egalitarianism was limited to, like, land-owning Christian males.

My point here is that if you look for historical precedents you can generally find them. That's true in the Islamic world and it's also true in the rest of the world.

Now today, in Europe and the United States, most citizens expect their states to be in, at least some degree, democratic and republic and constitutional. So when people in the West look at the early Islamic empire, we have a way of imagining caliphs as kings, because, like, you know, we had kings.

But caliphs were important in different ways. For starters, they were the successor to the prophet. Now maybe that's similar to what the Roman Catholic papacy became over time, but it's not like a king. Except for the king of England, King Henry the eighth, founder of my church, who was like, "I need to be the head of the church so I can get divorced."

But this combination of political and religious authority is important as is that at least initially there was no hereditary succession of caliphs. And then there's the concept of bay'ah which is a kind of political allegiance, like according to Michael Cook, "An agreement is made between the future caliph and the future subject whereby each party is to have specified rights and duties." A closely related theme is shura, the duty of the caliph to consult with others before making a decision. Like, according to tradition, when Abu Bakr accepted the role of the first caliph, he claimed that Muslims had no duty to obey him if he disobeyed God and the prophet. Now, that's not democracy, but it is limited rule and it gives people some participation in the government. And then there's another western value that is often bandied about as something that isn't part of the Islamic world: freedom. "Islam," as you may know, means submission and a "Muslim" is a person who submits to God, and to some Westerners that seems like the opposite of freedom. But the tradition within Islam is that by releasing people from domination by other people and making them servants of God, there is freedom. Freedom is a famously abstract concept, but if we think of it as the opposite of slavery, then being free from having to serve other people is freedom. That said, in contemporary Islamism, political freedom is not generally held in particularly high esteem, which is one of the reasons why Islamists were less relevant in the Arab spring uprisings of 2011 than people tend to think.

But in at least one way, the caliphate can be thought of as enshrining republican, with a little r, values: Islamism emphasized the rule of law and that even the caliph is subject to it, since ultimate sovereignty belongs only to God, men, to quote Michael Cook, "are not entitled to exercise lordship over each other." And the much talked about Sharia law, coming from a source outside the political process, whether that's God or religious scholars, acts as a huge check on rulers becoming dictators. Right, like Iran's government has many problems, but its president is not a dictator.

But that same complete sovereignty of God over the people makes it difficult for Islamists to embrace democracy because it's based on the idea that the people themselves are sovereign. And the most radical Islamists like Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda really do hate democracy. He called democracy "a new religion that deifies the masses," and the completely extreme and absolutely horrifying Boko Haram in Nigeria have exclaimed that they will "never accept any system of government except for one stipulated by Islam" and have stated that they will "keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism, socialism, and whatever." Yes, the "and whatever" is a quote. If you belong to a group that is fighting blank, blank, blank, and whatever, you need to leave that group.

So it's easy, and relatively common, for people in the West to say that Islam is inimical to political values like freedom and equality and democracy, and when we talk about certain groups of radical Islamists, that's true. But in the West, we also really, really struggle to see the other complexly and to understand the incredible diversity in response to the revelation of the Qur'an

In my opinion, the clash of civilization's models oversimplifies the world into this group and into that group and imagines that this group sees the world only that way and that groups sees the world only this way. In fact, it's complicated. For one thing, modern Islamism itself is a very recent phenomenon and in large part it's a reaction to western imperialism and nationalism and it doesn't always reflect the ideas of Islam or Islamic history. Humans have a a storied tradition of calling upon certain facets of our history to inspire us toward what we already kinda want, and those seeking to recreate the caliphate want a more powerful and unified Arab world, if not an Islamic world, and so they look toward history for inspiration, taking parts and leaving many others. What really happened is that for most part European-style nationalism took hold in the Islamic world at the same time it rose in Europe, as the creation of Turkey shows quite clearly. But in trying to understand the allure of the caliphate, it's important to understand that Islam is not just a religion--from the beginning, it was a civilization. As historian Tamim Ansary wrote, "Islam might just as validly be considered as one item in a class whose other items include communism, parliamentary democracy, fascism and the like, because Islam is a social project like those others, an idea for how politics and the economy ought to be managed, a complete system of civil and criminal law." But it's also a very diverse system that's shaped by everything around it and everything inside of it like any civilization.

So when we try to discuss a topic as complex and charged as contemporary Islamic though and practice and political world views, we don't just need to be sure that we have some sense of history, we also need to be sure that we're all talking about the same thing. There is nothing bright about the lines between politics and religion and history and nation. Thank you for watching. I'll see you next week.

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