

What ISIS and Advent have in common

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The humanitarian plight of Syrian refugees and the terrorist threat of ISIS seem likely to dominate the cable news channels for weeks to come. But it's unclear whether Christian preachers will continue to discuss these issues now that the season of Advent has arrived.

On the surface there is little connection between ISIS's campaign of terror and a season that invites us to prepare for the return of Christ. But dig a little deeper, and one finds that both the ISIS phenomenon and the Christian season of Advent deal with the same fundamental problem—one that is the central conundrum of all monotheist faiths.

To see this more clearly, rewind a few weeks to Reign of Christ Sunday. At the church I attended, we sang a hymn about marching out into the fields of conquest behind our eternal king—just minutes after hearing a sermon condemning ISIS.

The irony was lost on most of the people in the pews—probably because the festival's political overtones faded away long ago. Our theological language has not kept pace with our political language: the monikers "Reign of Christ" and "Christ the King" have outlived their usefulness. Those terms once primed humans to think of Christ in relation to political power, but in our current milieu, they make us think of the fantasy worlds of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*.

To capture the original meaning of the festival, churches would have to label their bulletins, "Christ the President," "Christ the Sovereign," or "Christ the Supreme Leader." That would bring into sharper focus the problem of the festival, what H. Richard Niebuhr called "the enduring problem": How does one live out a life of ultimate allegiance to the power that was present in Jesus, given that our lives are governed by a political power that also demands our ultimate allegiance?

This problem is written into the DNA of any monotheist religion. The essence of monotheism is the belief that everything has its source in a single, unified power—thus all persons and things owe to that single power *all* of their worship, gratitude, obedience, and so forth. Christianity has its own internal rules for how to think about this problem, as does Islam.

Further complicating our efforts to participate in and understand these discourses is a set of American rules that require us to think in terms of separation of church and state. But while the rules may change depending on one's religion or nationality, the problem, at its core, remains the same. The “enduring problem” of Christianity turns out to be the enduring problem of all monotheist religions. Once adherents open themselves to the possibility of obeying and honoring a *second* power, the result—at least potentially—is a crack in the religion's monotheist foundation.

For Christians, the arrival of Advent ups the theological ante. We hear that the domain of God's rule is not a make-believe land of kings and queens and dragons, but something quite real. We face the eschatological prospect of a merger between God's domain and the current order, with the inevitable result that Christ's power will displace all rival powers. “Who can endure the day of the Lord's coming, and who can stand when the Lord appears? For the Lord is like a refiner's fire. . . .”

Advent is full of images like this one that are as terrifying as any video produced by ISIS. Yet it is important to live with these images for a season, because they help us to think about the tension between God's sovereign rule and the imperfect powers that rule our imperfect world. They can also help us to understand why ISIS's terrifying logic—demand that everyone obey the single, unified power, and kill anyone who refuses—can become so seductive.

But ISIS's depraved solution to the problem of monotheism is not the only possible solution. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have generated a number of solutions to the problem, some of them violent, some not. When we take this problem seriously, we march dangerously close to chasm into which ISIS has fallen. But it is possible to do so without falling in.