

Some Moral Reflections on the Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

I will leave it to others to reflect on the political and strategic implications of the killing of the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)). And enough has been said to ridicule the disastrous “austere scholar” headline of *The Washington Post* (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)). Allow me instead to offer some moral reflections on America putting this monstrous terrorist to death.

First, there really is such a thing as good and evil. ISIS is and was evil. Al-Baghdadi was evil, just as Hitler was evil.

Terrorism is evil. Murder and rape are evil. Selling human beings into sex slavery is evil. Merchandizing aborted baby parts is evil.

Conversely, it is good to confront evil and to judge evil. And it was good to take out al-Baghdadi.

To be sure, there is more than enough moral ambiguity in our society, and many “good” causes become compromised by ulterior motives and human corruption.

As for life on earth, none of us is perfectly good (outside of Jesus; see Luke 18:19), and even the most evil person has some good quality, having been created in God’s image.

Yet there is no denying that some people are downright wicked, and either in this world or the world to come, they will certainly pay for their sins.

Second, God has given authority to governments and rulers to punish evil with the sword. In the words of Paul, “For he is the servant of God for your good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is

the servant of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him who practices evil. So it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience" (Rom. 13:4-5).

Yes, governments, by the will of God, "bear the sword," but for good, not for evil. It is therefore a terrible abuse of God-given authority when a government or king or president or leader uses the sword to promote evil and to suppress good. What a serious offense.

But, to repeat, God does give the sword to governments and leaders. And without that "sword"—which includes both the local police and the national army—there will be chaos in the streets. And so, just as a mother or father uses "force" on a certain level (such as grounding a rebellious teenager or spanking a rebellious toddler), the government uses force on another level.

That's how the Allies defeated the murderous designs of Adolf Hitler. It was by a united show of force.

Tragically, innocent people will die in the process, which is why much care must be used in the exercise of such force. But without the force of a righteous "sword," many more innocent people will die.

Third, while it is easy to identify the evil of al-Baghdadi and ISIS, we must always remember that evil lurks near all of us.

Put another way, the Islamic terrorists of ISIS were fellow human beings, not beings from another planet. Some of them were husbands who loved their wives and fathers who loved children. Yet these same men committed acts of unspeakable savagery, seemingly with glee.

It's the same with people who have been guilty of horrific acts of human cruelty through the millennia. They, too, were

fellow human beings.

They were cut out of the same cloth you and I were. They had to make moral choices just as we do. And, over time, they chose to suppress the voice of conscience and harden their hearts until they could murder little children and slice open pregnant women without the slightest feeling of guilt.

Obviously, most of us will never commit such grotesquely evil acts. Yet all of us, on one level or another, are capable of doing evil. And all of us, in one way or another, are guilty of thinking ugly and sinful thoughts.

If you're reading this saying, "Not me! I'm really a very good person," let me ask you this: How would you feel if we posted in real time for the world to see all your secret thoughts? How much pride is there? Lust? Greed? Hatred? Anger? Violence? Bitterness? Judgment?

Recognizing this does not minimize our recognition of unrepentant, bold-faced evil, as in the actions of al-Baghdadi. Nor does it minimize the rightness of doing our best to eradicate such evil, thereby saving many lives.

But it does mean that we always do well to search our own hearts, recognizing that every day, we are either hardening or softening our hearts. Why let evil of any kind infiltrate your mind and soul? Why allow any pollution to stain and defile you?

Finally, there's a fourth reflection, but one that is too late for al-Baghdadi. Simply stated, redemption is possible. Serial killers can be saved. Terrorists can be transformed. I know such people personally.

Some are in jail, paying for their crimes. Others are now paying back the society they once ravaged.

But in Jesus, through the gospel, dramatic and radical change

can come.

And so, while the government goes about its work of carrying the sword, let us go about our work of carrying the message of redemption.

Better a redeemed, forgiven, repentant and transformed terrorist than a dead terrorist.