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“Cleansing the Earth of the Stench of *Shirk*”: The Islamic State’s Violence as Acts of Purification

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Abstract: Current research on jihadism is dominated by the policy and security perspectives that characterize terrorism studies, leaving jihadist culture underexplored. As a result, jihadist violence is typically studied as instrumental actions related to the organizers’ strategic objectives. This paper, however, argues the violence should also be studied as a cultural practice, focusing on its symbolic aspects and cultural meanings for the actors involved. For this purpose, the paper focuses on the case of the Islamic State and, particularly, on the theme of purification in relation to the group’s violence. The relationship between violence and conceptions of purity/pollution is a longstanding theme in research on fundamentalism and mass violence, but these studies have hardly been integrated in the study of jihadism. This paper does so by relating insights from these fields to the case of the Islamic State. Drawing from the author’s extensive archive of Islamic State media releases, it identifies three types of violence to which conceptions of purity/pollution are central: the destruction of cultural heritage, the targeting of non-Muslim minorities, and the punishment of alleged sinners and spies. These acts of violence, the paper argues, are deemed to purify space, society, and the Muslim community, respectively. Perceiving the Islamic State’s violence from this perspective, provides insights into the cultural meanings of the Islamic State’s violence for the perpetrators and their supporters, and thus for grasping the appeal of the group that has become infamous for its bloodshed.

Keywords: cultural heritage, cultural meanings, Islamic State, public punishments, purity and pollution, violence

Introduction

The Islamic State established its brand through countless acts of brutal violence and the blatant display thereof in thousands of media releases. The group has a long history in Iraq already, finding its roots in Jama'at Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (1999–2004), al-Qaeda in Iraq (2004–2006), the Islamic State of Iraq (2006–2013), and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (2013–2014). Nevertheless, for many people the group appeared out of nowhere when it conquered large swathes of territory, attracted thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world, and announced the establishment of the caliphate on June 29, 2014. Yet even more than its apparently sudden rise in the region, it was the beheadings, crucifixions, immolations, suicide attacks, mass killings, and sexual violence that shocked the world and put the Islamic State on the map.

Why has the Islamic State committed these acts of violence and why have thousands of people across the world supported this group, which has become infamous for its bloodshed? The motivations for committing these acts of violence are evidently complex. Researchers have emphasized the role of strategic and tactical considerations for the organization, pointing at issues such as terrorizing enemies and the local population, drawing media attention, and causing shock and chaos, which, according to a 2004 treatise of Abu Bakr Naji, would ultimately lead to victory and the establishment of a caliphate.¹ Others have examined the backgrounds and profiles of individual participants and sympathizers of the group, the diversity of whom suggests divergent and multifaceted motivations that need to be carefully studied in their particular contexts.²

These issues are significant to understand the Islamic State's bloodshed. However, they do not provide a full explanation. To understand why people participate in or support these acts, we also need to address the meanings of the violence for the actors involved.³ This involves examining the ideological and religious backgrounds of the violence, which has been done extensively over the last decade.⁴ Yet the meanings attributed to the violence are broader than ideological and religious issues alone. They also involve, for instance, socially established perceptions of shame and honor, conceptions of right and wrong, and feelings of identity and belonging. Hence, as noted in the introduction to this journal issue, what is needed are in-depth examinations of the

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¹See, for example, Stern and Berger (2015); Weiss and Hassan (2015); Fishman (2016).

²On the diverse background of the Islamic State's members, see, for example, Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler (2016); Boutin et al. (2016); Dawson and Amarasingam (2017).

³Hafez 2006.

⁴See, for example, McCants (2015); Maher (2016).

cultural dimension of jihadi violence. This paper therefore focuses on an issue that is very prominent in jihadi discourse and practice, yet has been largely neglected in research so far: the issue of purity. It will argue that several kinds of violence committed by the Islamic State are strongly related to conceptions of purity and pollution and can be conceived of as acts of purification that are deemed to cleanse society. By exploring the relationship between conceptions of purity/pollution and different types of violence, it aims to provide a new perspective on the group's actions and deepen our understanding of the cultural meanings of violence for jihadists and their supporters.

For this purpose, the paper will, first, present relevant insights on the relationship between violence and conceptions of purity/pollution from fields such as fundamentalism studies and genocide studies. Many acts of violence involve ideas on purity and pollution, as is illustrated by cases varying from Jewish and Christian extremism to the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, and former Yugoslavia. In contrast to jihadi violence, these cases have been extensively examined by anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of religion, and others. After identifying key issues from these studies, the paper will apply them to the case of the Islamic State. Drawing from the author's extensive archive of Islamic State media releases, the paper will illustrate the central role of purification in the Islamic States discourse and practices, including its violent actions. It will identify three types of violence to which conceptions of purity/pollution are central: the destruction of cultural heritage, the targeting of non-Muslim minorities, and the punishment of alleged sinners and spies. These acts of violence, the paper argues, are deemed to purify space, society and the Muslim community, respectively. Along these lines, the paper aims to illustrate the value of studying the cultural dimension of jihadi violence by arguing that culturally inherited conceptions of purity and pollution are significant to understand the meanings of the Islamic State's violence for the perpetrators and their supporters, and thus for grasping the appeal of the group that has become infamous for its bloodshed.

Purity and Violence

Conceptions of dirt and pollution and their counterparts cleanliness and purity are found virtually all over the world, yet they vary strongly across cultures.⁵ Since Mary Douglas's seminal work *Purity and Danger* (1966), these conceptions are typically interpreted as being related to social classifications as developed by humans in different circumstances. The state of impurity, according to Douglas, is usually attributed to issues that are considered "out

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⁵Preston 2005; Kazen 2016.

of place," i.e., anomalies that fall "betwixt and between" the social categories that people uphold or that cross the boundaries between these categories.⁶ In many cultures, transgenderism, for example, falls betwixt and between socially established categories of male and female and is therefore surrounded by taboos. The same is true for bloodshed, which is associated with crossing the boundaries between life and death, and therefore frequently regarded as evil and impure.⁷ Ambiguous issues like these are believed to require purification by means of separation, punishment, or purification rituals, which cleanse the contaminated and restore the boundaries between pure and impure, good and evil. Along these lines, Douglas argues that conceptions of purity and impurity may serve to naturalize a particular social or moral order, making such an order appear intrinsic to the nature of the world and human life. She asserts that "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."⁸ Purification norms and rituals thus serve sociological and psychological purposes by redefining and reinforcing the boundaries of the community and its social and moral system.⁹

Given these basic ideas about purity and pollution, the question emerges why these conceptions are so often related to violence. In many—if not virtually all—cases of religious violence, ideas about purity and pollution are involved: the examples vary from religious riots in sixteenth-century France to the 1994 Hebron massacre by the Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein, and from the 1995 subway gassing attack by the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo to the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰ Yet cases of violence in which religion has not played a prominent role, too, are often associated with ideas about contamination and purification, as is illustrated by the mass violence and genocides in Armenia, Germany, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda.¹¹ How have researchers interpreted this relationship between conceptions of purity/impurity and acts of violence?

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⁶Douglas 2003.

⁷Blok 2001.

⁸Douglas 2003, 4.

⁹Preston 2005, 7510.

¹⁰Davis 1975; Juergensmeyer 2003; Kippenberg 2006; J. Jones 2008.

¹¹Bell-Fialkoff 1993; Straus 2001, 47–62; Semelin 2007.

Fundamentalism and Religious Extremism

In the footsteps of Mary Douglas, research focusing on cases of fundamentalism and religious violence emphasizes the significance of socially constructed boundaries to understand the connection between purity and violence.¹² Fundamentalist and extremist groups typically uphold a dualistic worldview, which is characterized by a strong dichotomy between “us” and “them,” good and evil, pure and impure. Such a dichotomized view implies the construction and maintenance of strict boundaries between the own group and the outside world. These boundaries may be physical, but are often of a symbolic nature, meaning that they are both expressed and (re)produced by means of boundary markers, such as a particular dress code, vocabulary, and body language, as well as by a strict observance of group norms and moral prescripts. The result is what has been labelled “enclave cultures,” which have a high threshold for entering (and leaving) the group, but provide a strong sense of belonging to its members.¹³

The dichotomized worldview characterizing these communities typically involves the perception of a conflict between the group and the outside world. For some groups this conflict has cosmic proportions. It is imagined as an ahistorical, all-encompassing struggle between good and evil that goes back to the formative period of the religious tradition and will only be concluded at the end of times.¹⁴ As part of this eternal struggle, fundamentalists and religious extremists often distinguish a particular period in history as a “golden era,” in which their religious tradition and community were still uncorrupted and pure. After that period, however, the tradition and community got corrupted and contaminated, as a result of which the glory from the past has vanished. Accordingly, groups engaging in religious violence often perceive their own era as an era of crisis and moral decay. There is an (imagined) danger to the group—a crisis of identity by people who fear extinction of their tradition and community. Perceptions of such a crisis may emerge in situations of armed conflict, but for many fundamentalists and religious extremists the imagined conflict has a more abstract nature. Fundamentalists, for instance, often perceive modernization and related processes such as secularization, individualization, and immigration as threatening the identity of the group and the authenticity of their religious tradition. This perception may result in a desire to return to the “fundamentals of faith,” i.e., the (imagined) practices of their forefathers, in order to safeguard the pure religion. The phenomenon

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¹²Marty and Appleby 1991; Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; J. Jones 2008: 135–137.

¹³Almond and Appleby 1991: 23–89.

¹⁴Juergensmeyer 2003: 148–166.

of fundamentalism should therefore be seen as both a reaction against and a product of modernization.¹⁵

Perceptions of crisis and threat and the desire to return to the pure tradition from the past can lead to a quest for purification among these groups. The (alleged) crisis is believed to be caused by the corruption and contamination of the community and the religious tradition, and thus by the blurring of boundaries between good and evil. Consequently, the solution may be found in the removal of impure elements, which will repel the threat and restore the glory from the past. Such a quest for purification may express itself in various forms. First of all, it typically leads to an emphasis on correct, pure creed and behavior. Group members have to stick to clear rules and guidelines, and deviations from the correct path—i.e., crossing the boundaries between good and evil—is considered taboo. Hence, deviations such as (alleged) sins or incorrect beliefs need purification in the form of repentance, punishment, or exclusion from the group. Along these lines, the community is purified from impure elements, including people who do not meet the desired criteria and may accordingly be perceived as “hypocrites,” “heretics,” or “traitors.” Furthermore, purification often concerns space. Religious fundamentalists and extremists may strive to create a community with strict territorial boundaries: an enclave that is established by withdrawing from the world and establishing a purified territory. Examples of such territorial “enclaves” include several fundamentalist groups and cults in the West, such as the Amish, the Branch Davidians, and Jonestown. In addition to this “world-fleeing” activism, one finds another type, which is typically more extreme: a “world-conquering” activism, i.e., the attempt to ward off the perceived threat to the community and tradition by actively fighting pollution outside the group. It is especially the latter form of purification that lies at the roots of much religiously-inspired terrorism.¹⁶

Mass Violence and Genocide

Acts of religiously inspired extremism are evidently of a different nature than the acts of mass violence and genocide in Armenia, Germany, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. Nevertheless, the rationales behind these cases of violence show striking resemblances, especially when it comes to the issue of purification. One of the explanations for these resemblances is that nationalism served as the “foundational tier” of the most prominent cases of mass violence and genocide.¹⁷ Nationalism, according to Bell Fialkoff, involves

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¹⁵Marty and Appleby 1995.

¹⁶Juergensmeyer 2003; Selengut 2008.

¹⁷Murray 2015: 175–179.

many “quasi-spiritual aspects,” which “lends to its most extreme manifestation a desire to ‘purify’ the nation of ‘alien’ groups.”¹⁸

Just as in cases of religious violence aimed at purification, human classifications and the boundaries between them are considered crucial in understanding mass violence and genocide. In contexts of mass violence and genocide, conceptions of the nation or the ethnic group are typically based on a “myth of homogeneity” and evolve around the notion of “organic purity”: the idea that the community consists of an “organic whole” that is clean, natural, and grounded in a mythic past.¹⁹ As such, the nation is often perceived as a cultural bearer, meaning that it is considered responsible for preserving and re-establishing the (allegedly) pure tradition of the group. So as with fundamentalism and religious extremism, nationalist imaginaries involve strong group boundaries and the notion of a past era in which the community was still pure. Now, however, the community and its tradition are perceived as being under threat. There often is a sense of victimization and disgrace among perpetrators of mass violence and genocide, which leads to a profound fear of the enemy—a perception that inspires the idea that losses and disgrace are punishments for a perceived lack of purity of the community. Accordingly, as with fundamentalists and religious extremists, the perception might emerge that the security of the nation can only be assured through purification. Pollution needs to be removed from the social body in order to ensure or revive national strength.²⁰

In this case too, the urge for purification can be expressed in various ways. An often seen type concerns the purification of space by means of what has been called “cultural cleansing” and “cultural genocide”: the destruction of cultural heritage such as images, sacred places, and libraries that symbolizes the identity and belonging of impure “others.”²¹ Yet purification also concerns the social body and can thus be aimed at enemies. We can distinguish between two kinds of enemies here, which are related to two different types of purity as described by Jacques Semelin.²² The first type is what he labels as “identity-based purity.” This type involves a strong opposition between the own group and a separate enemy figure, which is fundamentally different from the group. Hence, it concerns an enemy “outside” the group, which is perceived as threatening the community and should therefore be fought. This perception

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¹⁸Bell-Fialkoff 1993: 111.

¹⁹Williams 1989; Straus 2001.

²⁰Murray 2015: 146–150.

²¹Bevan 2006; Knuth 2006.

²²Semelin 2007: 33–41.

may result in the killing or deporting of minorities, as many cases of ethnic cleansing illustrate. Yet it may also result in other forms of violence, such as sexual violence. In Turkey, Cambodia, Rwanda, and former Yugoslavia, for instance, systematic rape and other forms of sexual violence have been used as a strategy to destroy the targeted population.²³ The second type of purity is what Semelin describes as "political purity" and concerns an "enemy within." It involves the perception that one's own group has become contaminated by an enemy that is "among us" and is betraying the group. This idea can also be perceived as threatening the survival of the group and, accordingly, can lead to the urge to eliminate the opponent, as was the case in, for example, Stalinist Russia. Hence, the two types of purity provide different rationales for killing, yet in both cases involve an enemy that is perceived as threatening the survival of the community and therefore needs to be eliminated.

Taking together insights on religious fundamentalism and cases of mass violence and genocide, we can identify several characteristics of the social imaginaries underlying violence aimed at purification. These imaginaries are typically characterized by a dichotomized worldview and strong boundaries between the in-group and the out-group; a sense of conflict that includes the idea of a glorious past that has vanished due to the blurring of boundaries between good and evil; the perception that one's own community and tradition are under severe threat; and a quest for purification based on the idea that pollution needs to be removed in order to secure the survival of the tradition and community and revive past glory. In addition, we can identify three types of violence that might result from such a quest for purification:

1. Violence aimed at purifying space (e.g., destroying cultural heritage; creating a pure territorial enclave);
2. Violence aimed at destroying impure "others" (e.g., ethnic cleansing; terrorism);
3. Violence aimed at purifying the community (e.g., punishing sinners; expelling heretics; fighting an "enemy within").

These insights are helpful in providing a new perspective on the Islamic State's violence, as the remainder of this paper will argue.

"Purify the earth from the corruption that tainted it"

The ideology that has facilitated, motivated and justified the Islamic State's violence includes all of the main characteristics identified in the previous sec-

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²³Human Rights Watch 1996; Salzman 1998; Sharlach 2000.

tion. First of all, the Islamic State propagates a thoroughly dualistic worldview characterized by a total opposition between us and them, good and evil. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed in his first audio statement after the Islamic State had established its caliphate:

O *umma* of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufr* [disbelief] and hypocrisy—the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the Jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of *kufr*, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the Jews.²⁴

Hence, al-Baghdadi propagates a dichotomized worldview with the Muslims and their jihadist vanguard on the one hand, and a coalition of “unbelievers,” including West and East, Jews and Christians, Shiites and apostate Sunni Muslims, on the other. Moreover, there is a conflict waging between the two camps: a timeless struggle between “truth and falsehood” (*haqq wa-batil*) that was once waged by the prophet Muhammad and will continue until Judgment Day. The Islamic State claims that, in the current episode of this conflict, the glory from the past, and particularly from the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*, “the pious predecessors”), has vanished. Muslims have deviated from the pure creed (*‘aqida*) and method (*manhaj*). Corruption and contamination have penetrated the Muslim community (*umma*) and, as a result, Muslims have become subjected to oppression and humiliation by their enemies all over the world. As al-Baghdadi claimed in July 2014:

[T]he disbelievers were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights. They accomplished this by attacking and occupying their lands, placing their treacherous agents in power to rule the Muslims with an iron fist, and spreading dazzling and deceptive slogans such as: civilization, peace, co-existence, freedom, democracy, secularism, Ba’athism, nationalism, and patriotism. Those rulers continue striving to enslave the Muslims, pulling them away from their religion with those slogans.²⁵

Now, however, the tide is turning, according to the Islamic State. The group claims to restore the pure Islam of *al-salaf al-salih* by uncompromisingly adhering to God’s oneness (*tawhid*), re-establishing the caliphate (*khilafa*), implementing God’s law (*shari’a*), and waging jihad against God’s enemies. By thus restoring the pure Islam of the first generations of Muslims, it will

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²⁴Al-Furqan Foundation 2014b.

²⁵Al-Furqan Foundation 2014b.

revive the glorious times of the past, the group asserts. "Raise your head high, for today you have a state and a caliphate, which will return your dignity, might, rights and leadership," al-Baghdadi instructed his audience, adding that "soon, by God's permission, a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master, having honor, being revered, with his head raised high and his dignity preserved."²⁶ The Islamic State's spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani summarized the group's message as follows in the audio message in which he announced the establishment of the caliphate:

The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the *umma* of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared.²⁷

As becomes apparent from these statements, the establishment of the caliphate "on the Prophetic methodology" is considered crucial in undoing the humiliation and disgrace of Muslims. More precisely, it is the restoration of the authentic, pure Islam and the purification of the *umma* and its lands that is considered crucial in reviving the glory of Islam in the world.

The central role of purification comes to the fore in the group's discourse and practices. In its media releases, the group frequently refers to its creed, methodology, fighters, and lands as "pure" and "clean," whereas the outside world, and especially the enemies, are often described as "polluted" and "filthy."²⁸ The contrast between the (alleged) pure "enclave" that the group is establishing and the polluted outside world is vividly illustrated by a *Dabiq* article attributed to a Finnish woman who joined the group:

Also, unless you're living here you don't realize what kind of life you had before. The life here is so much more pure. When you're in Dar al-Kufr (the lands of disbelief) you're exposing yourself and your children to so much

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²⁶Al-Furqan Foundation 2014b.

²⁷Al-Furqan Foundation 2014a.

²⁸In addition, there are several specific issues that are often related to conceptions of purity/pollution, such as the concept of martyrdom (*istishhad*) and the setbacks the group suffered in recent years, which are often described as the "cleansing of the ranks." On martyrdom, see, for example Wilayat al-Raqqa Media Office (2017). On the "cleansing of the ranks," see, for example, Al-Furqan Foundation (2015).

filth and corruption. You make it easy for Satan to lead you astray. Here you're living a pure life, and your children are being raised with plenty of good influence around them.²⁹

In addition to its discourse, many of the group's activities are related to purification, meaning that they are considered to cleanse the world from pollution caused by sinners and unbelievers. For example, the Islamic State has put much effort in *da'wa* ("invitation"; "proselytizing"), religious education, and several forms of offline and online propaganda. These activities aim to guide people to the "pure" Islam of the predecessors and thus to remove defilement caused by *kufr* ["unbelief"] and *shirk* ["idolatry," "polytheism"]. But also violent actions are connected to purification. In an August 2014 video, for example, the Islamic State indicates that its way is "shaped by truthfulness, unshakable resolve and an unyielding harshness towards the *kuffar* ["unbelievers"] to purify the earth from the corruption that tainted it after it had been set in order."³⁰ Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir, who succeeded al-'Adnani as the group's spokesperson after the latter's death in 2016, indicated that God "made it obligatory on us to cleanse the earth of the stench of their *shirk*."³¹ Statements like these illustrate that the Islamic State's violence, too, is conceived as acts of purification.

In short, whereas the Islamic State differs from other groups engaging in religiously-inspired or genocidal violence in many respects, its ideology shares some of the main characteristics with these groups. In the case of the Islamic State too, a dichotomized worldview, a perceived cosmic conflict, and a perception of a pure tradition that has become corrupted and needs to be restored have resulted in a quest for purification. Islamic State expresses this quest in both the aim to establish a pure society or "enclave" (i.e., the territorial caliphate), as well as the world conquering type of activism that aims to purify the world at large.

The final sections of this paper will focus on the group's attempts to purify its "enclave." It will thus leave the terrorist attacks outside its territories out of consideration, as the relationship between acts of terrorism and purification have been extensively dealt with elsewhere.³² Based on an exploration of the Islamic State's media releases in the period 2013–2019, the remainder of this paper will argue that the group's attempts to purify society manifested itself in three types of violence that closely resemble the violence performed by fundamentalist and genocidal groups: violence to purify space, violence

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²⁹Al-Hayat Media Center 2016.

³⁰Al-Hayat Media Center 2015b.

³¹Al-Furqan Foundation 2018.

³²See, for example, Nanninga (2019b: 48–53); Kitts (2010).

to purify society from impure "others," and violence to purify the Muslim community itself.

Purifying Space

The first type of purification through violence concerns purification on the material level, the most prominent example of which is the destruction of cultural heritage sites in the territories under the Islamic State's control between 2013 and 2019. Since the group's rise in Iraq and Syria, it unleashed a campaign of destruction of buildings, statues, graves, and other material artifacts. Part of these destruction concerned (non-Islamic) ancient sites, such as those in the cities of Hatra, Nimrud, Nineveh, and Palmyra, as well as artifacts in, for instance, the Mosul Museum. Yet, whereas these sites gained much attention across the world, most of the destructions concerned sites associated with local communities in the region, such as places of religious worship.

Several studies have suggested that these activities were not about the destructions per se, but that they were designed as public performances and media spectacles aimed at publicizing the group's message for a global audience.³³ It is indeed important to acknowledge that the Islamic State devoted considerable attention to its destructions in media releases. It produced numerous photo reports, articles, and videos that visualized the destruction of ancient sites and statues,³⁴ churches,³⁵ monasteries,³⁶ shrines,³⁷ and sacred trees,³⁸ as well as the demolition of mosques belonging to alleged deviant currents in Islam such as Shiites and Sufis.³⁹ In addition, the Islamic State not only demolished the sites and artifacts in the most efficient way possible, but they often did so in a theatrical, choreographed manner, including sledgehammers, bulldozers and carefully placed explosive devices. The destructions were highly staged and, moreover, typically accompanied by statements of Islamic State operatives narrating the symbolic significance of the places and objects, usually framed in religious language and including Qur'an quotations and supplications. By giving them a staged, formalized, repetitive, and public nature, the Islamic State not merely dramatized its destructions for media purposes. They also ritualized their actions, thus distinguishing them

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³³Harmanşah 2015; Cunliffe and Curini 2018.

³⁴See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office (2016b).

³⁵See, for example, Wilayat Dimashq Media Office (2015b).

³⁶See, for example, Wilayat Dimashq Media Office (2015a).

³⁷See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office (2015).

³⁸See, for example, Wilayat al-Khayr Media Office (2015).

³⁹See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office (2016a).

from and privileging them above mere acts of (mediatized) violence. Put more precisely, the destructions can be interpreted as rites of purification that cleansed the caliphate from defilement, as becomes apparent from examining the ways in which the Islamic State has presented the nature of the targeted sites and artifacts.

In its media releases, the Islamic State foremost frames the destructions in religious terms. The concerning buildings and artifacts are almost exclusively presented as symbols of *kufr* and *shirk*, and, as such, as opposed to *tawhid*.⁴⁰ This legitimizes their destruction, the group indicates, for example by pointing at the examples of prophets such as Ibrahim (Abraham) and Muhammad. According to the Islamic State, these prophets were also strict monotheists (*muwahhidun*, a term the Islamic State also uses for its own fighters) who took a “bold stance against *shirk*” and destroyed the idols of disbelief in their surroundings.⁴¹ The sites and artifacts are thus presented as markers of unbelief and idolatry or, in other words, as symbols of impurity that penetrated Muslim lands. By means of the ritualized removal of these symbols, the Islamic State re-establishes the boundaries between *tawhid* and *shirk*, while presenting itself as the rightful successor of the pure Islamic tradition from the past.

The destroyed sites and artifacts signify more than symbols of *shirk* only, however. As several studies have indicated, most of the destructions concerned places and objects that were highly important to contemporary local communities in the region.⁴² They were markers signifying the collective identities of these communities, creating a sense of belonging and a collective memory to the people involved. Hence, demolishing these sites “destroy not just the site itself but the site as symbol of the given community—its history, customs, and identity.”⁴³ The destruction of cultural heritage is therefore closely intertwined with attempts to erase the communities themselves and has therefore been referred to as “cultural genocide.”

Whereas the Islamic State particularly emphasizes the religious dimension of its destructions, it was well aware of their social value, too. In a *Dabiq* article from March 2015, for example, the Islamic State reflects on its recent destructions in the Mosul Museum. It presents the Assyrian artifacts in the museum as “the legacy of a ruined nation,” indicating that nations following *shirk* are doomed to fall.⁴⁴ After claiming that its destructions follow Qur’anic

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⁴⁰See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office (2015).

⁴¹Al-Hayat Media Center 2015a. See also Wilayat Ninawa 2016b.

⁴²Harmanşah 2015: 181–194.

⁴³Isakhan, Zarandona, and Al-Deen 2019: 184.

⁴⁴Al-Hayat Media Center 2015b.

prescripts and emulate the practices of the prophets Ibrahim and Muhammad, it stated:

The kuffār had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of. Yet this opposes the guidance of Allah and His Messenger and only serves a nationalist agenda.⁴⁵

What can be noticed here is that the Islamic State not only frames the artifacts as being against God's law, but also that they, as "cultural heritage," have become symbols of the Iraqi nation. Nationalism is condemned and presented as the opposite of the ways of the prophets.⁴⁶ The "idols" thus represent a boundary marker that distinguishes pure Muslims from people adhering to Iraqi nationalism. Accordingly, the destruction of these objects re-affirm the boundaries between (genuine) Muslims and disbelievers. It not only signifies the removal of impure symbols of *shirk*, but also contributes to the fight against the idolatrous communities they represent.

The last sentence of the *Dabiq* article on the Mosul Museum contains a supplication to God: "May Allah cleanse all Muslims' lands of the idols of both the past and the present."⁴⁷ This phrase underlines the interpretation of perceiving the destruction of cultural heritage as rites of purification. The destructions contribute to the purification of society, and thus to the creation of a clean space on which the Islamic State can establish its truly Islamic society.

Purifying Society from Impure "Others"

Related to the destruction of material representations of *kufr* and *shirk* is the cleansing of the caliphate from allegedly impure non-Muslims. In its policies, the Islamic State distinguishes between Muslims and different types of unbelievers, including idolaters (*mushrikun*), "apostate" Muslims (*murtaddun*), Shia "rejecters" (*rawafid*), and "people of the book" (*ahl al-kitab*). In accordance with Islamic jurisprudence, Christians, for instance, were formally allowed to live under the authority of the Islamic State as long as they paid the *jizya* (a special per capita tax).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, we have also seen systematic attempts to cleanse society from (alleged) non-Muslim communities. The Yazidis are the most prominent case in point. Not only the killing of Yazidi men, but

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⁴⁵ Al-Hayat Media Center 2015a: 22.

⁴⁶ See also Christopher Jones (2018).

⁴⁷ Al-Hayat Media Center 2015a: 24.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the so-called *dhimmi*-pact for Christians living in Raqqa (Al-Tamimi 2014).

also the sexual violence against Yazidi women illustrates the Islamic State's attempt to purify the caliphate from human manifestations of *kufr* and *shirk*.

The Yazidis became world news when the Islamic State conquered the Sinjar region in August 2014. Soon after the conquest, fighters of the Islamic State systematically separated the captured men and women, reportedly killing hundreds of men while transporting thousands of Yazidi women and girls to other places under the group's control. These women were being given as gifts to the Islamic State fighters or they were being sold as slaves, often becoming victim to forced marriage and rape. Due to the widespread, pre-planned, and systematic nature of these practices, they have been labelled as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide by the United Nations and leading human rights organizations.⁴⁹ Just like several other cases of genocide, the case of the Yazidis is related to conceptions of purification, as can be illustrated by looking at the sexual violence against Yazidi women.⁵⁰

The motivations for the Islamic State's crimes against Yazidi women were evidently multifaceted and probably included economic gain (e.g., the slave markets), the recruitment of new fighters, and the attempt to meet the sexual needs of its—predominantly male—operatives.⁵¹ However, the group itself has primarily framed its sexual violence in religious terms. In a four-page *Dabiq* article entitled “The revival of slavery before the Hour,” for example, the Islamic State reflects on the status of Yazidi women according to Islam. Linking up with earlier made accusations of Yazidis being “devil worshippers,” it presents Yazidism as a clear example of *kufr*.⁵² More precisely, the Yazidis should be regarded as *mushrikun* (practitioners of *shirk*), the Islamic State indicates, which, according to its interpretation of Islamic law, legitimizes their enslavement. Hence, the *Dabiq* piece claims that the enslavement of Yazidi female prisoners of war (*sabaya*) is a “firmly established aspect” of the *shari'a* and fully in line with the practices of the prophet Muhammad and his companions. The reintroduction of slavery is even regarded as a prerequisite for the final victory of the Muslims at the end of times, as Islamic traditions describe the revival of slavery as one of the “signs of the Hour” and one of the causes behind *al-Malhama al-Kubra* (the great battle, Armageddon). Thus, just like the destruction of cultural heritage, the sexual violence against Yazidi women is presented as part of the group's struggle against *kufr* and *shirk*.

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⁴⁹See, for example, Amnesty International (2014) and Human Rights Watch (2015).

⁵⁰See Nanninga (2019c).

⁵¹See, for example, Callimachi (2015); AFP (2015).

⁵²Al-Hayat Media Center 2014b. About Yazidi beliefs and accusations of Devil-worshipping, see, for example, Arkelova (2010).

within its caliphate. As such, the violence becomes a boundary marker in this case, too, expressing and reaffirming the distinction between the Islamic State, as (alleged) followers of the pure Islam, and others, including Muslims who compromised on their religion.

The crimes against Yezidi women should not only be viewed through the prism of religion. Sexual violence has often been used as a means to destroy the targeted population in cases of genocide. Several studies have argued that sexual violence in these contexts not only constitutes an attack on the women themselves, but also on their communities.⁵³ In many cultures, women are seen as the guardians of the purity of their community, protecting its boundaries and pure lineage. Their sexuality and honor are therefore a matter of the entire community, which makes rape and sexual assaults particularly humiliating: it violates the honor and purity of the targeted community as a whole. Moreover, in several cases, the targeted women are intentionally impregnated, which can be understood as purifying the blood of the targeted community by creating "pure" children who belong to the invading group.

These insights are relevant to the case of the Islamic State, as can be illustrated by a pamphlet published by the Islamic State's Fatwa Issuing and Research Department.⁵⁴ This pamphlet lists several "benefits" of the enslavement of women, three of which are related to the issue of purification. First, it claims that the enslavement of unbelievers spreads *tawhid* among the enslaved women, and thus contributes to the Islamization of the caliphate's inhabitants. The aforementioned *Dabiq* article writes, "Many of the *mushrik* women and children have willingly accepted Islam and now race to practice it with evident sincerity after their exit from the darkness of *shirk*."⁵⁵ Second, enslavement is thought to Islamize, and thus purify, the caliphate because it contributes to increasing the offspring of the Muslims. According to Islamic law, the children of unbelieving female slaves acquire the status of their fathers, i.e., free persons. Because these children can be raised as genuine Muslims, enslaving Yazidis contributes to the spread of Islam. Finally, the enslavement of unbelieving women is presented as a "disgrace" and a "source of sorrow and enragement" for the community of these women, while demonstrating the honor of Islam and Muslims. Hence, enslavement underlines the superiority of Islam, which further facilitates the Islamization of the caliphate.

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⁵³Card 1996; Farwell 2004.

⁵⁴Photocopies of the original pamphlet as well as an English translation are available at Al-Tamimi (2015).

⁵⁵Al-Hayat Media Center 2014b: 15.

These three arguments together demonstrate that, from the Islamic State's perspective, its assaults against the Yazidis directly and indirectly contribute to the spread of Islam and the removal *shirk*, and therefore to the purification of the caliphate. Moreover, the emphasis on issues such as "pure offspring" and "humiliation through rape" show that the Islamic State's cleansing of its territories closely resembles other cases of genocidal violence. Erasing (non-Muslim) communities and their cultures, including the Yazidis, contributes to the establishment of a new, pure society.

Purifying the Muslim Community

Whereas the first two types of purification through violence concerned the removal of manifestations of *kufr* and *shirk* from society, the third type concerns the purification of the (Sunni) Muslim community itself.

As noted in the first part of this paper, the quest for purification among fundamentalists is frequently expressed by emphasizing correct creed and behavior among the members of the group, while transgressions are purified through repentance, separation, or punishment. The Islamic State fits this pattern. It is well-known that the group enforced a strict application of (its interpretation of) the *shari'a* within the territories under its control. The Hisba had a prominent role in this respect.⁵⁶ The Hisba is often referred to as the Islamic State's "religious police," yet the term originally refers to the doctrine that stipulates Muslims to "enjoin what is right and forbid wrong" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar*). Accordingly, the Hisba has become well-known for enforcing public morality, for example by enforcing the group's dress code and by punishing "transgressors" for issues such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and listening to music, as well as for more serious "crimes" such as theft, homosexuality, and adultery. In doing so, the Islamic State followed a strict interpretation of the scriptures, which also resulted in corporal punishments. The Islamic State applied the *hudud*, which comprise a set of fixed punishments specified in the Qur'an and hadith for particular offenses, including, for example, lashes for drinking alcohol, amputation of hands for theft, and crucifixion for *hiraba* ("war against God," "robbery"). Interestingly, *hudud* literally means "boundaries" or "limits" and the term thus refers to actions that cross the boundaries set by God. In other words, the Hisba had a significant task in upholding boundaries between right and wrong

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⁵⁶Al-Tamimi 2018.

and thus in safeguarding and promoting a purely Islamic society. Punishing transgressions through violence was part of this task.⁵⁷

Related to the corporal punishment of "sinners" is the punishment of people who pretend to be Muslim, but who, according to the Islamic State, are actually hypocrites, traitors, or spies. Since its rise in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has executed hundreds of people who were accused of being spies for enemies such as the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, Kurdish forces, the West, and Russia. These punishments are usually presented as reprisals for the actions of the victims, often by referring to the legal concept of *qisas* ("retaliation in kind"). Accordingly, the executions often have a symbolic nature, for example by killing alleged spies for the anti-Islamic State coalition or for Kurdish forces at sites ruined by airstrikes. These punishments are regularly explained as means to deter the enemies, demonstrate power, provoke Western governments to react, and recruit new members.⁵⁸ However, just like the punishment of sinners, the executions of these "enemies within" can be interpreted as the removal of impure elements that penetrated society.

Just like the destruction of cultural heritage, the Islamic State's punishments were strongly ritualized.⁵⁹ They were typically being performed in public places, often a specially designated central square in a town or city. The public nature of the events was further increased by frequently publicizing them through videos and photo reports.⁶⁰ Besides, the form of the punishments was standardized throughout the caliphate, typically including symbolic dress, humiliating postures, and a rather uniform structure that included a short statement by the punisher on the nature of the committed crimes and a (religiously framed) legitimization of the punishment. Hence, the punishments provide another case of ritualized violence. Put more precisely, they can be seen as rites of sacrifice that purify society.

As other researchers have noted, violence aimed at purification often has a sacrificial nature.⁶¹ Sacrifice, from the Latin "*sacrificium*," literally means "to make holy." Accordingly, by sacrificing something, it is not only expelled or destroyed, but sacrifice also ennobles and "makes holy" or, in other words, purifies. Rites of sacrifice, which are found in virtually all religious traditions,

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⁵⁷It is interesting to note in this respect that the destruction of material signs of *shirk* (i.e., what this paper defines as the first type of purification through violence) was also part of the activities of the Hisba. See, for example, Al-Hayat Media Center (2014a: 16–17).

⁵⁸See, for example, Tinnes (2016).

⁵⁹See also Nanninga (2017).

⁶⁰See Nanninga (2019a).

⁶¹Edwards 2017: 84–93; J. Jones 2008: 57–55; Juergensmeyer 2003: 170–174; Selengut 2008: 45–55.

thus transform violence into something positive. According to René Girard, sacrifice can be perceived as a response to situations of disorder and cycles of “mimetic violence.”⁶² He argues that public acts of sacrifice may end such cycles of revenge killings by projecting aggression on a surrogate victim. This scapegoating mechanism involves the idea that the source of contamination is being removed by punishing the victim. As a result, the violence is experienced as removing pollution, cleansing the community, and restoring the boundaries between good and evil. In the context of conflicts, in which sacrificial rites frequently occur, these rites may therefore be experienced as providing a sense of control over chaos. They enable members of a community to re-establish boundaries between “us” and “them” and thus to achieve greater social cohesion. Moreover, in fusing cognition, emotion, and the body, rituals are deemed an effective means of establishing authority and inscribing power on their participants. As has been frequently noted since Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, public punishments express and reinforce power of the authorities executing the penalties.⁶³ They send a message to the audience that transgressions are not being tolerated, which may be amplified by displaying mutilated bodies after the penalty has been executed.⁶⁴ By providing a sense of control over chaos and establishing authority among the participants, sacrificial rites may be helpful in ending periods of violence, Girard indicates. They typically consist of the collective, ritualized killing a symbolic victim whose death will provoke no reprisals.

David Edwards has argued that Girard’s ideas provide a useful perspective on the public punishments executed by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ Along the same lines, they can be applied to the Islamic State’s punishments of (alleged) sinners and spies. First of all, Edwards suggests that the Taliban’s public punishments provided a sense of law and order in Afghanistan in the 1990s, after it had been ravaged by wars and internal strife for more than a decade.⁶⁶ The same could be argued for the Islamic State. When the Islamic State emerged, Iraq had been plagued by war and civil strife for about one decade, while the Syrian civil war had caused chaos and lawlessness in the areas that the group conquered in 2013 and 2014. Moreover, both Iraq and Syria had a long history of autocratic rule, in which law was often applied arbitrarily depending on the whims of authorities, political connections, and

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⁶²Girard 1977.

⁶³Foucault 1979.

⁶⁴See Asad 2007: 76–79.

⁶⁵Edwards 2017: 72–93.

⁶⁶Edwards 2017: 72–81.

options for bribery.⁶⁷ In this context, the Islamic State's public enforcement of public morality based on (relatively) well-defined and consistently applied rules and regulations could provide a sense of law and order. The punishments signal the end of arbitrariness, demonstrate the power of the authorities, and express the idea that law is being applied now—not mere law, but God's law, rooted in scriptures and the practices of authoritative predecessors. This perspective is supported by several reports from areas previously under the group's control. Records found in the Iraqi town of Tall Kayf, for instance, indicate that "justice was swift and efficient." Even residents who suffered abuses at the hands of the group gave them points for their policing, Rukmini Callimachi from *The New York Times* writes, quoting a resident who stated that "as far as justice was concerned, ISIS was better than the government."⁶⁸ In the Syrian town of Manbij, to provide another example, crime rates are reported to have been very low under the Islamic State's rule. "Manbijis agree that IS has provided badly needed security and stability to the city." Whereas they generally disagreed with the Islamic State's ideology, they were reportedly rather positive about the consistency and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. "[T]he Manbijis feel confident that if you just follow IS's rules, then you will be ok."⁶⁹

The public, ritualized punishments of the Islamic State thus provided a sense of order over chaos. They did so not just in a way that deterred the local population, but also by setting and expressing clear boundaries between right and wrong. It is interesting to note that, just like sacrificial animals, the victims of the Islamic State's punishments can be viewed as anomalies: people who are "betwixt and between" Islam and unbelief, or who crossed these boundaries between the two. Sinners crossed the boundaries of permissible behavior, whereas hypocrites and spies occupy an ambiguous position by pretending to be "good" but actually being "evil." Punishing these transgressions thus (re-)establish the boundaries between right and wrong. In addition, following Douglas's ideas on pollution, it comes as no surprise that the Islamic State frequently relates these transgressions to contamination, for instance by labelling sinners and spies as "impure."⁷⁰ Yet it is not just these individuals and their actions that are considered impure: they are also seen as sources of contamination, and thus as the cause of underlying issues facing society. In the Islamic State's own words, the task of the Hisba, which carried out

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⁶⁷Hamid 2016: 224–228.

⁶⁸Callimachi 2018.

⁶⁹Gohasnil 2014.

⁷⁰See, for example, Wilayat Tarabulus Media Office (2015).

the punishments, was to “dry up sources of evil” in society.⁷¹ These sources not only included the temples, churches, and statues they demolished, but also the sinners and spies they punished. Sinners were deemed responsible for spreading vice and deprivation in society, while traitors and spies are frequently being blamed for causing death and chaos in the caliphate, for instance by providing coordinates of targets that were bombed by the anti-Islamic State coalition. Punishing these individuals thus eliminates a source of problems in society. It is here that we see the scapegoating mechanism at work. Violence is channeled to selected victims who represent issues such as lawlessness, chaos, death, and destruction. According to psychologist James W. Jones, this process has deep psychological roots, involving the idea that feelings of shame and humiliation are projected onto a surrogate victim and that the punishment thereof can contribute to expelling these feelings.⁷² In this respect, it is interesting to note that the individuals who are being punished are often portrayed as representing the enemies that humiliated Muslims for decades. Feelings of humiliation are projected onto the selected victims, and the punishment of these victims contributes to the “healing of the souls” of the Muslims, as the Islamic State itself repeatedly expresses this idea.⁷³

An example of this perspective is provided by one of the most horrifying videos released by the Islamic State, *The Making of an Illusion*.⁷⁴ Repeatedly, the Islamic State uses the term *dhabiha* (“slaughter”) to denote its executions, which is the same term used for the ritual slaughter of an animal. This video, however, is exceptional for the fact that it explicitly presents the execution of alleged spies as an act of sacrifice. The video, purposefully released on the day of the Feast of Sacrifice (*‘Id al-adha*), features the killing of nineteen Syrian men in a slaughterhouse. They are killed like sacrificial animals by slitting their throats and then hanging them upside down on meat hooks. Quoting Khalid al-Qasri (d. 738), the governor of Iraq who sacrificed a man called Ja’d ibn Dirham instead of an animal on *‘Id al-adha*, the Islamic State executioner states, “O people of sacrifice, God accepts your sacrifices, for we are sacrificing crusader agents.” As this quote illustrates, this particular “sacrifice” is not primarily made to thank God or to respond to God’s orders, as sacrifices in Islam are generally meant for. Rather, video presents the men as representatives of the destruction and bloodshed brought upon the Muslims by the

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⁷¹Caris and Reynolds 2014: 15.

⁷²J. Jones 2008: 150–152.

⁷³See for example, the series Wilayat Khurasan Media Office, *Shifa’ al-nufus bi-dhabh al-jasus* [“Healing of the Souls with the Slaughtering of a Spy”], 2015–2017.

⁷⁴Wilayat al-Khayr Media Office 2016.

"crusaders." The video thus implies that the sacrifice is not only an act out of revenge, but also an act that washes away the humiliation and defilement of the *umma* through the blood of the victims.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that conceptions of purity/pollution are significant to understand the meanings of the Islamic State's violence for the participants and their supporters. It has identified three types of violence that can be perceived as acts of purification: the destruction of cultural heritage, the targeting of non-Muslim minorities, and the punishment of alleged sinners and spies. These acts of violence target anomalies; issues that are in between or crossing the boundaries between socially established categories, such as Muslim and non-Muslim, right and wrong, *tawhid* and *shirk*. These issues are attributed a status of impurity, and are therefore in need of purification. Violence can accomplish this purpose. By destroying material manifestations of *shirk*, targeting non-Muslim communities and punishing alleged sinners and spies, the Islamic State is purifying space, society, and the community, respectively. Along these lines, violence contributes to the establishment of a pure caliphate that will undo the humiliation of Muslims and restore the glory of Islam in the world.

Perceiving these three types of violence as acts that "cleanse the earth of the stench of *shirk*" provides additional insight into the appeal of the violence for its participants and their supporters. It illustrates that the violence is not merely committed for strategic and tactical reasons, nor is it just to obey to God's (alleged) commands as laid down in the scriptures and as practiced by authoritative predecessors. Rather, it suggests that the violence has multiple, culturally informed meanings for the participants and their supporters. Grasping these meanings contributes to our understanding of the appeal of violence for the actors involved, as the remainder of this conclusion will argue.

We have noted that destroying, battling, or punishing issues and persons that cross the boundaries between good and evil in a public, ritualized manner might contribute to the power and authority of the perpetrators. More importantly, it can provide a sense of order in contexts of conflict and chaos. Acts of purification express and (re)establish boundaries between "us" and "them," right and wrong, and good and evil. Hence, following Mary Douglas, we could argue that by emphasizing the difference between within and without, purification through violence serves to naturalize the social and moral order as propagated by the Islamic State. This order can be appealing to people, as can be illustrated by having another look at the group's strict enforcement of the *shari'a*. Whereas the violence that accompanied

the group's application of law has caused much resentment among the local population, we also noted that it had some appeal for people living in the conflict-ravaged areas ruled by the group. Moreover, the clear rules and guidelines offered by the Islamic State can be appealing in the increasingly confusing world of today. Olivier Roy has argued that the "globalized Islam" is less and less socially embedded and therefore increasingly deculturized. Traditional patterns and structures of practicing Islam are under pressure, as a result of which individual practitioners are increasingly responsible for shaping their own beliefs and practices.⁷⁵ The feelings of confusion and insecurity that might come with those processes, can make jihadism, including its well-defined rules and guidelines, an attractive option for, particularly, youngsters in search for meaning and purpose in their lives. Almond, Appleby and Sivan write on fundamentalist groups in general: "At the root of it all, strictness is the product of the need for clarity in an age of ambiguity and confusion."⁷⁶ The Islamic State's message might answer this need for clarity, for example through its propaganda, but also through its "propaganda by the deed." The violence indicates what is right and wrong, expresses the idea that that the Islamic State is following the (alleged) authentic rules and guidelines of *al-salaf al-salih*, and thus provides (apparently) clear answers that can be attractive for youngsters in an age of ambiguity.

Relatedly, we have noted that all three types of violence discussed in this paper express and reconfirm the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group; between the genuine, pure Muslims who follow the example of *al-salaf al-salih* and those who do not. Hence, in a sense, the violence publicly performs the dichotomized social imaginary upheld by the group. The imaginary expressed through the violence can also be appealing to some, as is illustrated by the thousands of youngsters who have rallied around the Islamic State's banner over the last five years. The black-and-white worldview can provide a strong identity on both the collective and individual level. It can create a sense of solidarity and brotherhood by emphasizing the contrast between the "faithful few" and the contaminated outside world, an idea we frequently encounter in statements of the Islamic State's supporters. Additionally, the social imaginary expressed through the violence can facilitate a sense of empowerment: the idea that they, as genuine followers of the Prophet and his companions, are contributing to the restoration of the glory of Islam in the world. This can be appealing. As Charles Selengut writes on Christian militia in the United States, "In an era of rapid social change, where many feel

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⁷⁵Roy 2004.

⁷⁶Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003: 48.

threatened by shifts in the economy, social demography, and moral order, the militias are an attractive option for finding meaning, a sense of purpose, and a social way to vent anger and frustration to a sympathetic audience."⁷⁷ "The engagement in violence," writes Olivier Roy in relation to the Islamic State itself, "thus has to do with making the connection between personal revolt, rooted in a feeling of humiliation due to one's attachment to a virtual 'community' of believers, and a metanarrative of returning to the golden age of Islam, a narrative [...] that turns the youth into a hero and master of terror."⁷⁸

In short, focusing on the issue of purification illustrates that the Islamic State's violence is more than just barbaric acts performed for opportunistic reasons. The acts carry deep cultural meanings for the participants and their sympathizers—meanings that fit well in their complex and sometimes confusing lives. It is only by studying these meaning that we can begin to understand why so many young people have committed their lives to a group that established its name by countless acts of brutal bloodshed.

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⁷⁷Selengut 2008: 79.

⁷⁸Roy 2017: 73–74.

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