

University of Groningen

Meanings of Savagery

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Published in:
The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Nanninga, P. (2017). Meanings of Savagery: Terror, Religion and the Islamic State. In J. R. Lewis (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (pp. 172-190). (Cambridge companions to religion). Cambridge University Press.

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12 Meanings of Savagery: Terror, Religion and the Islamic State

PIETER NANNINGA

In 2004, the jihadist ideologue Abu Bakr Naji wrote a treatise titled *Management of Savagery* in which he outlined a long-term strategy to defeat the mujahidin's enemies. Through a lengthy campaign of constant violence; through causing terror and chaos, territories could be gained where, eventually, the caliphate could be re-established.¹

The Islamic State is often seen as having followed Naji's blueprint. Founded in 2006 as the Islamic State of Iraq, the group rose to prominence after the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. In the spring of 2013, it announced its expansion into Syria and, under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, it conquered large territories in the Sunni-dominated areas of both countries. Prompted by its successes and determined to rebuild the early-Islamic empire and fulfil apocalyptic prophecies, it announced the reestablishment of the caliphate on 29 June 2014, proclaiming its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new caliph. One decade after the publication of Naji's tract, the 'promise of God' had been fulfilled.² The Islamic State had established itself after countless acts of brutal violence, many more of which would follow in subsequent years.³

In most literature on the topic, the Islamic State's violence has been perceived along the lines of Naji's strategy: as a means of terror. Accordingly, the group's violence has been mainly interpreted as a means to spread fear and chaos among the target audience, be it the enemies' forces, the local population in the self-proclaimed caliphate or people in other targeted societies.⁴ This perspective is significant, but insufficient. As research on violence has shown, violence is not only a means to an end. Acts of violence are also expressive actions that embody cultural meanings for the participants and 'say' something to the audience.⁵ Accordingly, the Islamic State's violence should also be studied in its cultural context and by examining its meanings for the actors involved.

In this chapter, I will examine the cultural meanings of the Islamic State's violence for its participants. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to the role of religion, which, according to some authors, is especially relevant in cases of theatrical, symbolic violence.⁶ For this purpose, I will focus on two cases of symbolic violence by the Islamic State against Western targets: the videotaped beheadings of four American and British journalists and aid workers in 2014 and the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015. Based on these two cases, I will argue that Muslim traditions provide one of the sources that the Islamic State draws from to create spectacular acts of symbolic violence that are not just a means of terror, but also performances in which the actors display for others the meaning of their social situation.⁷

'STRIKING THE NECKS OF THE ENEMIES'

Between 19 August and 3 October 2014, the Islamic State's most important media outlet, al-Furqān Media, released four videos that showed the executions of the American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and the British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning, respectively.⁸ Each video shows a captive kneeling in the sand somewhere in the hills near Raqqa, dressed in an orange jumpsuit with his hands tied behind his back. Behind him stands a masked, black-dressed executioner, who would become known as 'Jihadi John' and was later identified as the Londoner Mohammed Emwazi. After both the captive and 'Jihadi John' have delivered a short statement on the reasons for the killing, 'Jihadi John' pushes the hostage to the ground, puts his knife to the victim's throat and starts to saw. The camera cuts away and then the decapitated body of the victim is shown, lying on his stomach, his severed head placed on the middle of his back.

What motivated the Islamic State to commit these killings? According to its media publications on the events, the primary motivation for the executions were the US-led airstrikes against the group, which had started exactly eleven days before the release of the first video. The Islamic State frames the executions as retaliation for these actions, for example by starting each of the beheading videos with a short clip of US President Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron or a news reporter commenting on the bombings. The airstrikes are also the main theme of the statements delivered by both the captives and their executioner, the latter of whom states: 'Just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people'.⁹ The same is argued in the third issue of the Islamic

State's online magazine *Dabiq*, which offers eight arguments for the beheading of James Foley, all of which have to do with US policies in the region.¹⁰

Thus, the beheadings could be perceived as statements about the Western airstrikes against the group, aimed at producing shock and horror in the West to retaliate against the 'shock and awe' campaign of the United States and its allies. The killings followed the blueprint of Naji's *Management of Savagery*, which states: 'hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and its supporters'.¹¹ Along these lines, the executions emphasised that more bloodshed would follow as long as the airstrikes continued. The last scenes of the four videos functioned as horrifying cliff-hangers in this respect, showing the executioner together with the next hostage who would be executed if the West would not 'back off and leave our people alone', as Emwazi phrases it.¹²

Yet, whereas the main context of the executions could be labelled as 'political', factors that could be designated as 'religious' also play a role. From the Islamic State's perspective, the beheadings, as well as the airstrikes they allegedly retaliated against, are part of a worldwide religious conflict. Since the Islamic State announced the reestablishment of the caliphate, it has presented itself as the defender of Muslims worldwide. The 'caliphate upon the Prophetic methodology', as it is often called, is portrayed as a sanctuary for Muslims who are humiliated all over the world. It is a state where the *sharī'a* rules and justice prevails for 'the oppressed, the orphans, the widows and the impoverished', as the Islamic State's spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani phrased it. Yet, the caliphate's just rule also has another side, the group emphasises: The adversaries who have disgraced the Muslims over the last decades will be revenged. The Islamic State 'humbles the necks of the enemy', al-'Adnani stated about seven weeks before the Foley video was released.¹³ From this perspective, the beheadings were not just a political means of terror; they should also be seen in the context of the Islamic State's perceived religious struggle in defence of the worldwide Muslim community, something Emwazi indirectly points out several times in his statements.¹⁴

This shows that so-called political and religious factors are strongly entangled in the Islamic State's perspective. As I have argued in my contribution on al-Qaeda in this volume, conceptions of politics and religion have differed across time and place and are the product of particular cultural contexts. For that reason, it is not very useful to ask whether the violence is (primarily) political or religious. Instead, it

is more fruitful to examine how Muslim beliefs, texts, symbols and practices are being used to shape and give meaning to violence, as I will do in the remainder of this section.

To grasp the meanings of violence for the actors involved, it is crucial to examine its symbolic form.¹⁵ In the case of the Islamic State's executions, it is important to note that the organisers have selected a means of execution that is established in Muslim tradition.¹⁶ Decapitation can be legitimised by Qur'an verses such as *sūra* 47:4, which states: 'When you meet those who disbelieve, strike [their] necks (*ḍarb al-riqāb*)'.¹⁷ In addition, several traditions narrate that the prophet Muhammad and his companions, as well as his successors, the 'rightly-guided caliphs' (*al-rāshidūn*), ordered or executed the beheading of opponents, as was the case with 700 members of the Jewish Banu Qurayza tribe in Medina.¹⁸

These authoritative early-Islamic traditions provide important sources for the Islamic State to attribute meaning to its actions. Emwazi repeatedly alludes to the (alleged) Qur'anic sanctioning of beheading by phrasing the executions as 'striking the necks' of enemies.¹⁹ In addition, one day after the release of the first beheading video, the Islamic State-supporting ideologue Hussayn bin Mahmud released a statement entitled 'The issue of beheading' in which he argued that the beheading of hostages is thoroughly Islamic. Bin Mahmud supports his claim by extensively commenting on *sūra* 47:4 and its interpretations, as well as on traditions about Muhammad and the first caliphs decapitating their enemies. He concludes: 'So striking the necks was something well-known, famous and in practice without ambiguity in the time of the Prophet and the rightly-guided caliphs'.²⁰ Thus, both Emwazi and Bin Mahmud attempt to legitimise the beheadings by claiming continuity with the past. Moreover, in doing so, they present the killings as another example that the Islamic State is based on the 'Prophetic methodology'.

As a related point, through the executions, the Islamic State not only portrays itself as the defender of Islam in the footsteps of Muhammad, but also as a state or, to be more precise, a caliphate that claims authority over all Muslims. Decapitation has a long history as a means of capital punishment and has been used by states to display and authorise their power throughout history.²¹ This is also the context in which the Islamic State's executions are presented. Emwazi says to the American government in the first beheading video: 'You are no longer fighting an insurgency; we are an Islamic army and a state that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide'. Therefore, the Londoner claims, 'any aggression towards the Islamic State is an

aggression towards Muslims', and any attempt by Obama to deny Muslims a safe life under the Islamic caliphate will be retaliated against.²² Through its public executions, the Islamic State signals that it is a legitimate state; a caliphate that is responsible for the Muslims worldwide and has the right to defend itself against outside aggression in accordance with the Prophetic methodology.

This shows that the beheading of captives can be perceived as symbolic acts of violence that express some of the central themes of its message. In addition, the violence expresses and authorises the boundaries between the Islamic State and its opponents. The precise way in which the beheadings are carried out is crucial in this respect, as the next two examples illustrate.

First, through its videotaped beheadings, the Islamic State distinguished itself from its jihadist competitors. Over the last two decades, several jihadist groups in countries such as Chechnya, Egypt, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq have executed opponents by means of beheading. The form of these beheadings often diverged, for example regarding the staging, clothing, weapons and statements, as well as the exhibition of the decapitated bodies.²³ It is striking to note that the beheadings of the four Westerners by the Islamic State strongly resemble the executions by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq. In 2004 and 2005, al-Qaeda in Iraq had beheaded several hostages, including some Westerners, which it had publicised by means of video recordings that were distributed online. Just like the Islamic State's beheadings, these executions involved hostages in orange jumpsuits sitting or kneeling on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs, masked executioners dressed in black standing behind them, statements by both the executioners and the victims on the motivations for the killings, beheadings by cutting the throat of the victims and exhibitions of the decapitated bodies with the heads placed on the middle of the backs.²⁴ Hence, the Islamic State has appropriated the structure of its beheadings from the 'sheikh of the slaughterers', as al-Zarqawi is sometimes called, which had proven to be a successful way to attract worldwide media attention and therefore to bring the message of resistance against American policies in Iraq to the fore.

That the Islamic State largely copied the 'signature' of al-Qaeda in Iraq might not seem very remarkable due to historical and ideological bonds between both groups.²⁵ Yet this observation becomes more interesting against the background of an intra-jihadist argument about videotaped beheadings. In June 2005, namely, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's then-deputy, had written a letter to al-Zarqawi in which he

strongly criticised the latter's videotaped beheadings. These 'scenes of slaughter' harm the jihadist cause, al-Zawahiri claimed, since the general audience disapproves of them. 'We do not need this', he wrote, since 'we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *umma*'.²⁶ By distributing beheading videos that resemble those of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State positions itself in this debate, aligning itself with al-Zarqawi against al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's current leader. This is a particularly significant in the context of the Islamic State's present conflict with al-Qaeda and its representative in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (currently known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), which have fought each other both on the battlefield and in the media since the spring of 2013.²⁷ By releasing al-Zarqawi-style beheadings of Western hostages, the Islamic State reaffirmed its jihadist genealogy and (re)constructed the boundaries between itself and its jihadist competitors.

Second, the form of the Islamic State's beheadings resembles a prominent Muslim ritual: the sacrificial slaughter of animals. Sacrificial animals are killed by cutting the throat from behind with a knife while the animal is lying on the ground, which is precisely the way in which the Western hostages are executed by the Islamic State.²⁸ Whereas some authors have described beheadings by other jihadist groups as 'sacred actions' because of their resemblance to sacrifices, there are no indications that the Islamic State actually perceived the violence as such.²⁹ Ritualisation of social practices is not necessarily related to sacredness.³⁰ Yet research has shown that ritualisation can be seen as a strategy to distinguish certain actions from other ways of acting. By means of characteristics such as formality, fixity and repetition, ritualisation establishes a privileged contrast that differentiates actions as more powerful and significant than other, more quotidian activities.³¹ Accordingly, by standardising, formalising and repeating the executions, the Islamic State distinguishes the actions from other acts of violence. The beheadings are highlighted as more important than, for instance, 'ordinary' beheadings of enemies on the battlefield. More importantly, the ritualised nature of the beheadings highlights the contrast between the Islamic State and its Western foes.

As we have noticed, the main reason provided for the executions are the American and British airstrikes against Muslims. From a Western perspective, the US-led airstrikes in Iraq and Syria are usually seen as precise and clean. Their ultimate representation is satellite footage showing high-tech bombs precisely striking their intended targets, an example of which is included in the Foley video.³² However, according to the Islamic State the bombings are actually indiscriminate acts of

'aggression towards Muslims'.³³ They do not differentiate between armed and unarmed people, as a *Dabiq* article that is attributed to Sotloff himself suggests.³⁴ The West has murdered 'numerous Muslims in Iraq', the magazine claims, which it illustrates by narrating and depicting the killing of nine women and five children by 'crusader jets' near Sinjar on 15 September 2015.³⁵ Accordingly, in the eyes of the Islamic State the current campaign of the West fits the war against Islam that it is waging for decades already. 'Millions of Muslims have been killed, punished and expelled', Bin Mahmud writes in his statement on beheading, and 'the honour of thousands of Muslim women has been violated by Americans'.³⁶

The contrast between the Islamic State's perception of the US-led airstrikes and its own executions is striking. Instead of high-tech, impersonal bombings, the beheadings involve physical closeness and intimacy between the executioner and the victim.³⁷ A simple knife and physical force are used to retaliate the advanced airstrikes in a way that is deliberately bloody and shocking. Moreover, in contrast to the alleged indiscriminate killing of Muslims in airstrikes, the victims of the Islamic State are not perceived as random. Rather, they are seen as symbolic representatives of Western societies, as is indicated in the beheading videos.³⁸ Moreover, these symbolic victims are killed in a highly structured, ritualised manner, which implies a sense of control over chaos.³⁹ Accordingly, the beheadings represent the caliphate's controlled retaliation for the unjust shedding of Muslim blood. It is the killing 'of a single man with a knife' versus the 'killing of thousands of Muslim families all over the world by pressing missile fire buttons', *Dabiq* summarises the Islamic State's perspective.⁴⁰

The violence thus expresses the contrast between the Islamic State and its Western foes; between manliness and cowardice, justice and hypocrisy, faith in God and reliance on technology, and the guardians of the *umma* and the killers of Muslims. Moreover, it shows that it is now the West that is being humiliated, as is visually illustrated by the orange jumpsuits – an evident reference to the humiliation of Muslim prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Besides, the four Westerners are killed in a humiliating way; not only because of their humble postures during the ritualised executions, but also because mutilation of the body is often seen as humiliating for the enemy, and therefore experienced as redeeming the honour of the perpetrator. As al-Zarqawi addressed the US government just before he personally beheaded the American Nicholas Berg – dressed in an orange jumpsuit – in 2004: 'We tell you that the dignity of the Muslim men and women in Abu Ghraib and others is not redeemed except by blood and souls'.⁴¹

In short, by drawing from several sources, including traditions perceived as authentically Islamic, the Islamic State has shaped powerful performances through which they, in Geertzian terms, tell a story about themselves.⁴² The beheadings of four Westerners express some of the central themes of the Islamic State's message and (re)construct the boundaries between the Islamic State and its adversaries. Hence, they can be seen as performances of the Islamic State itself: powerful messages that express what the Islamic State is about. About one year later, nine men would improvise on the same story in Paris.

'A RAID IN THE WAY OF THE PROPHET'

On Friday evening 13 November 2015, a series of coordinated attacks rocked the French capital, killing 130 people and injuring over 350. According to the French President, François Hollande, the objectives behind the attacks were quite clear: 'to sow fear in order to divide us and to keep us from fighting terrorism in the Middle East'.⁴³

Terrorising the enemy was definitely important for the Islamic State, as the statement in which it claimed the attacks on the next day indicates. The statement explains that 'a group of soldiers of the caliphate' set out to target the 'lead carrier of the cross in Europe – Paris'. And they succeeded, it claims: 'Allah granted victory upon their hands and cast terror into the heart of the crusaders in their very own homeland'.⁴⁴ A similar view on the attacks becomes apparent from a video of the Islamic State's media group al-Hayat, which includes the farewell statements of several of the perpetrators of the attacks. In these farewell statements, which were mostly recorded in Syria, the attackers all indicate their intent to sow fear and terror in France. Each of them underlines this threat by executing an alleged 'apostate' (*murtadd*) in front of the camera, after which the fate of the beheaded victims is presented as a chilling warning for Europe's future. 'This will be your fate, God willing', one of the perpetrators states while holding the severed head of the man he just beheaded in his hand.⁴⁵ The rationale behind these scenes is obvious: to cause further shock among the enemy population.

However, just like the beheadings of Westerners discussed in the previous section, the Paris attacks comprised more than a means of terror. These attacks, too, can be seen as performances through which the Islamic State shows what it is about. This becomes evident from taking a closer look the group's media representations about the events.

In accordance with the beheading videos discussed in the previous section, the central theme in the group's publications about the Paris attacks is that the violence should be seen as retaliation for France's

bombings in Syria and Iraq. Several articles in the Islamic State's online magazines *Dabiq* and *Dār al-Islām* and twelve videos about the attacks that were released by the Islamic State's 'provinces' (*wilayāt*) all frame the attacks along these lines. The same is true for the perpetrators themselves. 'This is the result of your policy', Abdelhamid Abaaoud (a.k.a. 'Abu 'Umar al-Belgiki') states in his farewell message, while Foued Muhamed al-Aggad ('Abu Fu'ad al-Firansi') claims that 'we will shed blood as you did in the caliphate'.⁴⁶ The Islamic State's French-language magazine *Dār al-Islām* summarises: 'I think we cannot be much clearer. It is the bombings of the blind French that are the cause of this threat'.⁴⁷

Whereas the Islamic State particularly emphasises France's airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, it frames the airstrikes as part of the country's general 'war against Islam'. France's military campaigns in Afghanistan and Mali, the 'cursing of the Prophet' by Charlie Hebdo and the humiliation of Muslims in France are repeatedly mentioned as other grievances.⁴⁸ The Paris attacks are seen as revenge for France's anti-Islam policies in general. 'Your history is bloodstained', an Algerian fighter in Libya comments on the attacks, so now 'it's our turn to retaliate'.⁴⁹ The French perpetrator Ismaël Omar Mostefai ('Abu Rayyan al-Firansi') states: 'We will repay the suffering of our sisters and brothers (. . .) You will experience the same suffering as we are going through'.⁵⁰ The Paris attacks thus express the perception that the Islamic State defends itself against outside aggression. Moreover, they signal that it not only defends the Muslims living inside its caliphate, but that it should be seen as the protector of the entire *umma*.

Relatedly, the attacks are perceived as evidence that the Islamic State fulfils this role successfully. France is represented as one of the most militarily advanced nations on earth, yet the Islamic State emphasises that it was capable of executing several 'simultaneous attacks' against 'precisely chosen targets in the centre of the capital'. As a result Paris was 'shaken beneath the crusaders' feet', the statement of 14 November claims.⁵¹ 'Paris was shocked and awed', a *Dabiq* article states in an evident reference to the airstrikes. 'The eight [*sic*] knights brought Paris down to its knees, after years of French conceit in the face of Islam. A nationwide emergency was declared as a result of the actions of eight men armed only with knives and explosive belts'.⁵² Hence, whereas the Islamic State might have experienced some setbacks on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq in the previous period, the attacks represent the group's enduring power by showing its capability of striking the enemy in its heart.

In the meantime, according to the Islamic State's media publications, the attacks showed the West's inherent weakness. The perpetrators acknowledge France's military and technological superiority, but, as Ismaël Omar Mostefaï expresses in his farewell message: 'Your equipment will not help you before Allah'.⁵³ The mujahidin have God on their side, they believe, as they repeatedly emphasise by quoting part of *sūra* 59:2: 'They thought that their fortresses would protect them from God; but God came upon them from where they had not expected, and He cast terror into their hearts'.⁵⁴ Therefore, in the eyes of the Islamic State, the Paris attacks not only signalled resistance to France's policies, but they also showed its vulnerability and undermined the government's authority, as it had not been able to protect its very own capital against assaults on multiple places.⁵⁵ The violence not only retaliated for the airstrikes, but also symbolised the Islamic State's successful struggle against the world's superpowers.

The above already indicates that, in this case too, the Islamic State perceives its violence as part of an all-encompassing religious struggle. Moreover, particular beliefs, values and practices derived from Muslim tradition provide significant 'tools' to construct the meanings of the attacks. A prominent example in this case is the concept of martyrdom (*istishhād*), which features frequently in the group's publications about the events. The Arabic term for 'martyr', *shahīd* (pl. *shuhadā'*), literally means 'witness', but both meanings of the term are closely related.⁵⁶ By their actions, martyrs deliver a testimony about their cause: they draw attention to their belief system and publicly show their preparedness to suffer or even die for it, which adds to its credibility. This makes martyrs powerful advertisers of their cause.⁵⁷ This is also the case in the Paris attacks, as I will argue in the remainder of this section. Four points are particularly noteworthy.

First, through their attacks, the 'martyrs' bear witness to the Islamic State's central message that it stands up for the Muslims and retaliates against their enemies in the footsteps of the Prophet. For instance, the attacks are repeatedly labelled as a 'raid' (*ghazwa*), which is the same term that is used for the military campaigns of the prophet Muhammad. By employing this term, the Islamic State emphasises the continuity between both struggles.⁵⁸ Likewise, a lengthy article in *Dār al-Islām* explains that the Paris attacks should be seen as 'attacks in the way of the Prophet' (*attentats sur la voie prophétique*). The attacks are fully in line with Islamic jurisprudence, the piece argues, and therefore profoundly Islamic.⁵⁹ 'Nine lions of the caliphate (...) raised the word of *tawhīd*',⁶⁰ the al-Hayat video on the Paris incident further underlines

that the Paris attackers testified to their belief: 'they lived the verses of the Qur'an by killing the unbelievers wherever they found them'.⁶¹ As these quotes illustrate, the 'martyrs' acted as witnesses to the Islamic State's message through their attacks.

Second, this testimony is particularly powerful because the men showed their willingness to die for it. This is repeated numerous times in the Islamic State's messages about the attacks, for instance by stating that they are 'soldiers who are willing to offer themselves as sacrifices to Allah'.⁶² The men 'advanced towards the enemy hoping to be killed for Allah's sake, doing so in support of His religion, His Prophet and His allies', the 14 November statement claims.⁶³ By showing their willingness to die for their cause, the men demonstrated that they care more about their religion and their fellow Muslims than about worldly affairs. They do not 'cling heavily to earth', as *sūra* 9:38 describes it in a phrase that repeatedly recurs in the Islamic State's media productions.⁶⁴ The perpetrators of the Paris attacks even downplay earthly life. In a written testament that is included in *Dār al-Islām*, Abdelhamid Abaaoud advises Muslims: 'Work in the way of Allah, persevere in the construction and development of the caliphate. Give your time, your knowledge, your strength to this and not to the futile affairs of the world down here'.⁶⁵ This shows that, through their attacks, the 'martyrs' express that the Islamic State is fully dedicated to its struggle. 'Either victory on earth, or martyrdom in the way of Allah', Abaaoud states.⁶⁶

Third, by emphasising their distancing from worldly affairs, the perpetrators of the Paris attacks underline the difference between the mujahidin and Muslims who have not joined the battle. In the view of the Paris attackers, 'those who claim to be Muslims' are too attached to their earthly lives to make sacrifices for their religion and fellow believers. One of the perpetrators asks the Muslims who have not joined battle: 'What is the matter with you that you cling to earth while the blood of Muslims is being shed?' Another one states: 'You see brothers and sisters being killed and slaughtered, while you live a normal life making wages and receiving financial support'. The cause of their passivity is 'the weakness' (*al-wahn*), Abaaoud indicates: 'love of this life and fear of death'.⁶⁷ Hence, the nine men emphasise, Muslims should awaken from their slumber and rise up for their brothers and sisters in need.⁶⁸ More than being just a call for mobilisation, these statements indicate that the Paris attacks highlight and reinforce the opposition between the perpetrators' supreme sacrifice and the attachment to earthly life of others. Just as we have noted that the beheadings of the four Westerners established boundaries between the Islamic State and

its adversaries, the Paris attacks distinguish the group from the Muslims who have not yet joined the fight.

Fourth, and relatedly, the 'martyrs' personify the honourable nature of the Islamic State's struggle. Whereas the West 'cowardly bombarded' Muslims from their jets and whereas the Muslims are 'sitting there idly' while their brothers and sisters are being killed, the mujahidin are 'brave knights' retaliating for the humiliation of the *umma*.⁶⁹ They do not let their religion being disgraced, but restore the honour of Islam by humiliating the unbelievers in return. 'Mujahidin are masters, not slaves', Abaaoud emphasises in his farewell message. 'They live with their heads raised. They fight for the cause of Allah and die with a radiant smile on their faces'.⁷⁰ The Paris attackers represent honour and dignity, thus underlining the Islamic State's message that the era of humiliation has ended. The twelfth issue of *Dabiq* emphasises this point by quoting Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:

By Allah, we will take revenge! (...) Soon, by Allah'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 (...) So let the world know that we are living today in a new era. Whoever was heedless must now be alert. Whoever was sleeping must now awaken. Whoever was shocked and awed must comprehend. The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism.

The 'brave knights' of the Paris attacks took revenge, *Dabiq's* editors subsequently emphasise, as they spilled enemy blood 'in revenge for the religion and the Ummah'.⁷¹ The Paris attacks were not just about the death and destruction they caused. From the Islamic State's perspective, they were also honourable acts in themselves, representing the dawn of a new era in which Muslims rise up against injustice and the honour of Islam is restored.

In short, the Paris attacks reconfirmed the message of the Islamic State and re-established boundaries between the group and its opponents. Like the beheadings of four Westerners about a year before, the Paris attacks can be seen as performances of the Islamic State itself. Yet the attacks not only showed what the Islamic State is about. Like other performances, the attacks also had a performative impact on people directly or indirectly witnessing the actions.⁷² They not only represented the group to a worldwide audience, but also contributed to its

construction. They defined and authorised the group's identity, created a bonding among its supporters and provided them with a sense of empowerment.⁷³

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this contribution, the Islamic State's dramatic acts of violence comprise more than acts of terror. By focusing on their theatrical, expressive aspects and cultural meanings, we have seen that they can also be approached as performances through which the actors display for others what their caliphate is about.

Just as Clifford Geertz has argued in the case of public rituals, the Islamic State's violence can be seen as both a model *of* and a model *for* reality.⁷⁴ On the one hand, the violence is a model *of* reality by providing the audience insights into the Islamic State and its struggle. Rather consistently, the beheadings and the Paris attacks express some of the main themes of the Islamic State's message. They tell the story of a group that successfully retaliates against the Western-led war against Islam, that makes sacrifices to defend oppressed Muslims and that restores the honour and dignity of the first generations of Muslims. In addition, the story told through the actions reconstructs and empowers the boundaries between the Islamic State and others, be it its Western adversaries, its jihadist competitors or the Muslims who have not yet joined its struggle. Thus, the violent performances define and authorise the Islamic State itself, showing to the audience what the Islamic State is about. On the other hand, the violence also offers a model *for* reality. It provides the audience with a way to take action and stand up against the perceived humiliation of Muslims. It offers them an empowering role as members of the caliphate upon the Prophetic methodology and it shows them role models who were willing to sacrifice earthly affairs to revenge injustice and gain victory, either in this world or in the hereafter.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that asking about the role of religion, as an abstract category, does not facilitate the analysis of the Islamic State's violence. Factors that could be labelled as historical, political, social, cultural and religious are strongly entangled and cannot be consistently separated. Instead, this exploration has shown that particular, contextually determined interpretations of, for instance, state and caliphate, slaughtering and raids, humiliation and honour, justice and retaliation, and martyrdom and sacrifice have contributed to countless dramatic acts of violence over the last few years. These acts

of violence have been framed as ‘religious’ actions by specific actors, including the perpetrators in certain contexts. Yet, rather than taking this perspective at face value, we could better ask why they have done so. In the case of the Islamic State, we have seen that the group has benefited from framing the conflict as a religious conflict in certain circumstances. Particularly when addressing its supporters, the Islamic State’s message of the worldwide war against Islam and the faithful few defending it has been a powerful message. This message has enabled the Islamic State to legitimate its – sometimes quite innovative – practices by invoking authorities from the past. It has facilitated the group to authorise its struggle and define itself against its opponents, and it has empowered thousands of people from over the world to find purpose and meaning under the banner of the caliphate.

Endnotes

- 1 Abū Bakr Nājī, ‘Idāra al-tawahḥush: akḥṭar marḥala satamurru biḥā al-umma’ [‘The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through which the Umma Will Pass’], n.p., n.d. Original version and English transl. by Will MCants (2006) available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/category/idarat-at-tawahhush>, accessed March 2016.
- 2 Cf. al-Furqān Media, audio statement by Abu Muḥammad al-‘Adnānī, *Hadha wa’d Allah* [‘This is the Promise of Allah’], 29 June 2014, available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/06/29/the-islamic-state-restores-the-caliphate>, accessed March 2015.
- 3 On the history and ideology of the Islamic State, see Cole Bunzel, ‘From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State’, The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World: Analysis Paper No. 19., 2015, at www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf, accessed March 2016; Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).
- 4 Cf. Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), 153–164; Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 199–218.
- 5 Cf. Anton Blok, ‘The Meaning of “Senseless” Violence’, In Idem (ed.) *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) 103–114; Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina E. Schmidt. 2001. ‘Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices’, In Idem (eds.) *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, (London: Routledge, 2001) 1–24.

- 6 Mark Juergensmeyer, for example, claims that religious violence is 'almost exclusively symbolic, performed in remarkable dramatic ways'. This is understandable, he explains, since public ritual 'has traditionally been the province of religion', which means that performance violence comes 'naturally for activists with a religious background'. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003²) 127–128 and 220.
- 7 Cf. Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy', *Sociological Theory* 22:4 (2004), 527–573, at 529.
- 8 Al-Furqān Media, *A Message to America*, 19 August 2014, downloaded from <http://clashdaily.com/2014/08/beheaded-isis-beheads-us-journalist-james-foley-graphic-video>; Idem, *A Second Message to America*, 2 September 2014, downloaded from <https://leaksource.info/2014/09/02/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-american-journalist-steven-sotloff>; Idem, *A Message to the Allies of America*, 13 September 2014, downloaded from <https://leaksource.info/2014/09/13/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-british-aid-worker-david-haines/>; Idem, *Another Message to America and its Allies*, 3 October 2014, downloaded from www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCzDa2WBPAA.
- 9 Al-Furqān Media, *A Second Message to America*, 2:09–2:17.
- 10 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, 'Foreword', *Dabiq* 3, 30 August 2014, 3–4, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-322.pdf>, accessed March 2016.
- 11 Nāji, 'Idāra al-tawaḥḥush', 3.
- 12 In the fourth video, which shows the beheading of Alan Henning, the next hostage that is being presented is the American Peter (Abdul Rahman) Kassig. However, his execution was not featured in a comparable fifth video. Rather, the video *Although the Disbelievers Dislike It*, which was released on 16 November 2014 and shows the execution of 22 Syrian regime soldiers, including a final scene featuring 'Jihadi John' standing above Kassig's severed head. Why Kassig's death was announced in this particular way is still unknown. For a detailed analysis of this video, see Quilliam Foundation and Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, 'Detailed Analysis of Islamic State Video: *Although the Disbelievers Dislike It*', n.d., available at www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/detailed-analysis-of-islamic-state-propaganda-video.pdf, accessed February 2016.
- 13 Al-Furqān, *Hadha wa'd Allah*.
- 14 For example, Emwazi phrases the airstrikes against the Islamic States as attacks against 'Muslims', which he also calls 'our people'. Cf. Al-Furqān Media, *A Message to America*, 4:02'; Idem, *A Second Message to America*, 2:12'.
- 15 Blok, 'The Meaning of "Senseless" Violence', 108; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 124–128.
- 16 For an overview of decapitation in Islamic scripture and history, see Timothy R. Furnish, 'Beheading in the Name of Islam', *Middle East Quarterly* 12:2 (2005), 51–57.

- 17 Whereas this passage can be translated differently, leading Muslim scholars have interpreted it as justifying decapitation. See also Q. 8:12, which states: 'I will cast terror into the hearts of those who have disbelieved, so strike [them] upon their necks [*aḍrabū fawq al-a'nāq*].'
- 18 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Iṣḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes by A. Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1955]), 461–469.
- 19 Cf. al-Furqān Media, *A Second Message to America*, 2:13'; Idem, *Another Message to America and Its Allies*, 1:08'.
- 20 Ḥussayn bin Maḥmūd, *Mas'ala qaṭ'a al-ru'ūs* ['On the Issue of Beheading'], 20 August 2014, <https://justpaste.it/gran>, accessed March 2016. Transl. available at <https://justpaste.it/decap3170>, accessed March 2016.
- 21 On the history of beheadings, see Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014). On the relationship between power and public torture and executions, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. from French by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977 [1975]).
- 22 Al-Furqān Media, *A Message to America*, 3:47–4:18'.
- 23 Cf. Pete Lentini and Muhammad Bakashmar, 'Jihadist Beheading: A Convergence of Technology, Theology, and Teleology?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:4 (2007) 303–325; Dawn Perlmutter, 'Mujahideen Blood Rituals: The Religious and Forensic Symbolism of Al Qaeda Beheading', *Anthropoetics* 11:2 (2005–2006) available at www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1102/muja.htm, accessed March 2016.
- 24 The beheadings by al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State also show some differences, the most important of which are that the al-Qaeda in Iraq videos feature several executioners and show the entire beheading.
- 25 On the relationship between both groups, see Bunzel, 'From Paper State to Caliphate'; Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*; Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.
- 26 Untitled Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, 9 July 2005, available at www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Original.pdf, March February 2016.
- 27 The conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda broke out publicly after the Islamic State of Iraq expanded into Syria and announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013. While ISIS claimed to incorporate Jabhat al-Nusra, the latter renounced this claim, in which it was eventually supported by al-Zawahiri. Since that moment, ISIS, which would rename itself the Islamic State in June 2014, has remained in conflict with al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra, both in the media and on the Syrian battlefield. For a detailed account of the establishment and rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and its conflict with ISIS, see Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 51–218.
- 28 The term '*dhabīḥa*', which is used to denote the ritual slaughter of animals, is also used by the Islamic State to denote the beheading of its enemies.

- 29 Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs*, transl. from French by David Macey (London: Pluto Press, 2005) 68–69; Perlmutter, 'Mujahideen Blood Rituals', 2. Noteworthy in this respect is Talal Assad's remarks on suicide attacks as sacrificial violence: *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 42–45.
- 30 Cf. Barry Stephenson, 'Ritual', in Robert A. Segal and Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* 3, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 243–249
- 31 Cf. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 88–93; Idem, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138–169.
- 32 Al-Furqān Media, *A Message to America*, 1:39–1:49. For an interesting illustration of the coalition's representations of its violence, see the website of the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve at www.inherentresolve.mil, last accessed March 2016.
- 33 Al-Furqān Media, *A Message to America*, 4:02.
- 34 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, 'A Message from Sotloff to His Mother Days Before His Execution', *Dabiq* 4, 12 October 2014, 47–51, at 48, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-422.pdf>, accessed March 2016.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 49–51.
- 36 Bin Maḥmūd, *Mas'ala qaṭ'a al-ru'ūs*.
- 37 Cf. Ellis Goldberg, 'Sacrificing Humans', *Jadaliyya*, 23 February 2015, at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20934/sacrificing-humans, accessed March 2016.
- 38 It is striking that the statements of all four captives include phrases such as 'I as a member of the British public' or 'Am I not an American citizen?' Cf. Al-Furqān Media, *A Second Message to America*, 1:09–1:11; Idem, *Another Message to America and its Allies*, 0:34–0:36'.
- 39 Cf. Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 174.
- 40 Al-Ḥayāt, *Dabiq* 3, 3.
- 41 Quoted in Ronald H. Jones, 'Terrorist Beheadings: Cultural and Strategic Implications', Strategic Studies Institute, June 2005, at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB608.pdf, accessed March 2016.
- 42 Geertz, 'Deep Play', 448.
- 43 François Hollande, 'Speech by the President of the Republic Before a Joint Session of Parliament', 16 November 2015, available at www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/defence-security/paris-at-tacks-paris-terror-attacks-november-2015/article/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-before-a-joint-session-of-parliament, accessed March 2016.
- 44 'A Statement on the blessed Paris raid against the crusader nation of France', 14 November 2015, downloaded from <https://justpaste.it/attaqueParis> on 14 November 2015.
- 45 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, *Et Tuez-Les Oú Que Vous Les Rencontrez* ['And kill them wherever you find them'], 23 January 2016, 16:55–17:02, downloaded from <https://ia601502.us.archive.org/27/items/KillThemArabic/kill%20them-arabic.mp4> on 23 January 2016.

- 46 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 3:47–3:51 and 7:17–7:21.
- 47 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, ‘Introduction’, *Dār al-Islām* 7, 30 November 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/11/30/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dar-al-islam-7/>, last accessed March 2015, 3–4, at 4.
- 48 See, for example, ‘A Statement on the blessed Paris raid’; Al-Maktab al-I’lāmī li-wilāya Ḥimṣ, *Wa-l-qādim adhā wa-‘amr* [‘The Coming Is Worse and Commanded’], 18 November 2015, 8:18–8:24, downloaded on 18 November 2015 from https://ia801501.us.archive.org/25/items/limaerit_tmail_135/135.mp4
- 49 Al-Maktab al-I’lāmī li-wilāya al-Barqa, *Min Barqa ila Bārīs* [‘From Barqa to Paris’], 2 December 2015, downloaded on 2 December 2015 from <https://ia801503.us.archive.org/3/items/FROMBARQAHTOBARIS>.
- 50 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 14:53–14:55.
- 51 ‘A Statement on the blessed Paris raid’.
- 52 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, ‘Foreword’, *Dabiq* 12, 18 November 2014, 2, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/11/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-12%E2%80%B3>, last accessed March 2016.
- 53 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 13:30–13:36.
- 54 Cf. ‘A Statement on the blessed Paris raid’; Al-Ḥayāt, *Dabiq* 12, 2; Idem, *Dār al-Islām* 7, 3.
- 55 Cf. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 128–135.
- 56 The Arabic term is probably derived from the Greek *martys* via the Syriac *ṣahda*, which also means ‘witness’, but was used by Christians to refer to their martyrs as well since the second century. In the Quran the term is primarily used to refer to ‘witnesses’ (e.g. Q. 2:143, 2:282, 22:78, 24:4), although there are also some verses in which it seems designate martyrs (e.g. Q. 3:140, 4:69). Cf. E. Kohlberg, ‘Shahīd’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2010²) at www.referenceworks.brillonline.com, last accessed March 2016.
- 57 David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–2.
- 58 See, for example, ‘A Statement on the blessed Paris raid’.
- 59 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, ‘Attentats sur la voie prophétique’, *Dār al-Islām* 8, , 6–38, available at <http://jihadology.net/2016/02/06/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dar-al-islam-8>, last accessed March 2016.
- 60 *Tawḥīd* refers to the oneness and absolute unity of God. For the Islamic State, *tawḥīd* not only implies that no one may be worshipped besides God, but also that the upholding of man-made laws is idolatry (*shirk*). Due to their strict interpretation of the doctrine, they consider many Muslims as *mushrikūn* (those committing *shirk*).
- 61 This text is shown together with the pictures of the nine Paris attackers in Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 2:05–2:23. The phrase ‘kill them wherever you find them’, which is also the title of the video, is a quote from Q. 2:191.
- 62 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 14:42–14:46’.
- 63 ‘A Statement on the blessed Paris raid’.
- 64 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 7:34–7:37.

- 65 Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, 'Le Testament de Notre Frère Abū 'Umar al-Baljīkī', *Dār al-Islām* 8, 41.
- 66 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 3:06–3:10.
- 67 Al-Ḥayāt, *Dār al-Islām* 8, 41.
- 68 Al-Ḥayāt, *Dabīq* 12, 2–3; Idem, *Dār al-Islām* 7, 3–4.
- 69 Al-Ḥayāt, *Dabīq* 12, 2–3; Idem, *Et Tuez-Les*, 6:33–6:52.
- 70 Al-Ḥayāt, *Et Tuez-Les*, 3:27–3:37.
- 71 Al-Ḥayāt, *Dabīq* 7, 2–3.
- 72 On 'performance violence' and its impact, see Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 124–128.
- 73 Cf. Pieter Nanninga, 'Paris through the Eyes of IS Supporters', *The Religion Factor*, 24 November 2015, at <http://religionfactor.net/2015/11/24/paris-through-the-eyes-of-is-supporters>, accessed March 2016.
- 74 Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System' (1966), in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973) 87–125.