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ARGUMENT

The Salvation of Sinners and the Suicide Bomb

How the call to religion turns petty criminals into Islamic State terrorists.

BY **SIMON COTTEE**

AUGUST 11, 2016



The gulf between the terrorist and his atrocity is a wide one.

Terrorist deeds are often monstrous and defy all human comprehension. But, as over three decades of research on terrorism shows, terrorists, by and large, are **psychologically normal**: not crazy-eyed, furious fanatics, but ordinary killers, with lives and personalities lacking, as Hannah Arendt famously **said** of Adolf Eichmann, in any kind of “diabolical or demonic profundity.” The gulf between “homegrown” Western jihadis and their atrocities is seemingly wider still: Their profiles reveal not only lives of breathtaking **banality** but also lifestyles of fulsome secularity, often allied to a **criminal past or present**.



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This apparent gulf has now become a central argumentative theme in the ongoing “**Is the Islamic State Islamic?**” debate. For some observers, the outwardly secular lifestyles of many Western jihadis — from Salah Abdeslam’s **dope-smoking and drinking** to Omar Mateen’s reported **homosexuality** to Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel’s **pigging out**, so to speak — is proof positive that these men are not, and were never, “true” Muslims and that Islam cannot therefore explain their embrace of groups like the Islamic State. The journalist Mehdi Hasan, for example, rarely misses a chance to seize on the discovery of some **secular proclivity** in any given perpetrator, in a “gotcha” sort of way, as **evidence** for his **view** that “religion plays little, if any, role in the radicalisation process.” For Hasan, Islamic State recruitment in the West is better explained in terms of nonreligious motives, like adventure, secular hate, or outrage over Western foreign policy.

The problem with this view is not just that it comes close to adopting the same dark **takfiri** impulse as the Islamic State by declaring who is and who isn’t a “true”

Muslim; it also fails to acknowledge the complex and contradictory ways in which people live their faith. Not all Muslims fully adhere to the **five pillars** of Islam, yet they still self-identify as Muslims, in much the same way many Christians continue to self-define as Christians, despite rarely attending church: These are the “**invisible affiliates**,” who, while rarely — if ever — attending religious services, may still retain a religious identity. And some Muslims, just like some non-Muslims, live in a state of cognitive dissonance, proclaiming adherence to a belief that they contradict systematically in practice.

An even bigger problem with this view, however, is that, in its rush to cleanse Islam of the stain of terrorist violence, it fails to appreciate the role religion itself may play in bridging the gap between jihadi killers’ secular and criminal lifestyles and their posthumous portrayal as holy warriors, or “**soldiers of the caliphate**,” by both the Islamic State and the media that unwittingly serve as its echo chamber. A more convincing approach would be to acknowledge the potentially dangerous synergies between these two poles of the secular and the religious: how criminal lifestyles can be justified by religion as necessary for the greater good of Islam and how the redemptive narrative of religion can be enlisted to excuse a multitude of vices.

The former idea is, in fact, the defining philosophy of some Muslim street gangs in the West. According to this philosophy, stealing and violence are bad, but only in so far as the victims are Muslims — or “real” Muslims. Non-Muslims or “fake,” “coconut” Muslims, by contrast, are fair game and can be robbed and hurt with impunity. Drug-dealing is similarly permissible, as long as drugs are sold only to “kaffirs” and some of the proceeds are donated to good Muslim causes. In southeast London, for example, street gangs **combine** criminal badassery with an aggressive embrace of Islam, selectively appropriating symbols and motifs from the latter to justify the former. I have witnessed this same phenomenon in my current research on jihadi activism in Trinidad, where, in the central region of the country, a notorious street gang called the “**Unruly ISIS**” operates. And, of course, Molenbeek, in Belgium, was home to a network headed by the **now convicted** Islamic State recruiter Khalid Zerkani, who specialized in both

robbery and radical religious proselytism, using the proceeds from his network of criminals to send jihadis to Syria.

At a deeper spiritual level, religion provides a script for personal salvation and is thus especially attractive to those whose lives are mired in “sin.” The more poignant the sense of sin, the more urgent the desire to escape it. Which is why the jailhouse, as Mark Hamm’s **research** on prisoner radicalization shows, is the site of so many radical conversions. Hamm, a criminologist and former prison warden, found that the primary motivation for conversions to a non-Judeo-Christian religion among prisoners was “spiritual searching” in an effort to “resolve discontent.” He also found that prisoners with latent anxieties over spiritual well-being were especially amenable to the proselytizing of jihadi recruiters. The social anthropologist Scott Atran echoes this theme in his research and commentary on the Islamic State, **ventriloquizing** the jihadis’ jail-house pitch in this way: “[L]ook what this sick, nihilist society has done to you, but you can turn the tables [by] following God, redeem yourselves, save others and you can do this best by using the skills and knowledge of the underworld against the society that forced you to suffer there.”

The idea of sinners finding salvation through a life of selfless service to the faith cuts across religions. In *The True Believer*, published in 1951, the philosopher Eric Hoffer suggested that mass movements hold a special appeal to “sinners,” providing a “refuge from a guilty conscience.” He wrote that “mass movements are [custom-made] to fit the needs of the criminal—not only for the catharsis of his soul but also for the exercise of his inclinations and talents.” The Islamic State is not a mass movement, but it is certainly custom-made for the Muslim with a bad conscience or a long rap sheet — or both.

Seen in this light, the seemingly discrepant or hypocritical behavior of the Abdeslam brothers, who drank alcohol and took and sold drugs, makes perfect sense: They knew what they were doing was Islamically off-limits, and it is likely that this knowledge

shamed them. But they also may have known, or come to believe, that their sinning and the shame it brought them could be expunged through dedication to the sacred cause of jihad. Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who reportedly drank, ate pork, and was sexually permissive, may also have felt shamed by his own secular lifestyle — so much so that he sought absolution from it in murderous suicidal violence.

The recent wave of jihadi terrorism in the West seems to suggest the emergence of a new type of homegrown radicalization — religious conversion without devout commitment. Or a sort of *radicalization lite*, where self-identity, not behavior, becomes the relevant transformational measure. Lahouaiej Bouhlel, for example, lived a robustly secular and criminally deviant life right up until his death, yet he seemingly embraced a jihadi ideology that helped him redefine himself as a holy warrior and justified his atrocity. There is perhaps something intrinsically late-modern about these lite conversions, in that they closely reflect what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to as the “liquid” nature of contemporary social life, where the “liquid modern” man lives like a perennial tourist, changing places, jobs, lovers, values, politics, and even sexual preferences — all in the blink of an eye.

“Previously we were mostly dealing with ‘radical Islamists,’” Alain Grignard, a senior member of the Brussels Federal Police’s counterterrorism unit, told the journalist Paul Cruickshank recently. These individuals, he said, were “radicalized toward violence by an extremist interpretation of Islam.” But, with the emergence of the Islamic State, this has changed: “Now we’re increasingly dealing with what are best described as ‘Islamized radicals’” — young, urban Muslims who “were radical before they were religious.”

This is perceptive — but it isn’t quite right. Grignard mistakes gang delinquency for revolutionary political opposition. These lapsed Muslims were never radical; they were criminal. And then in the Islamic State, and the scripted violence it offers, they found a way of spiritually transcending their badassery, all the while remaining badasses. They found authorized transgression, a hallucinatory vision that simultaneously allowed and

redeemed their bad Muslim selves. They also found in the Islamic State an ideology that required no particular knowledge or lifelong commitment yet promised instant action and redemption. They found a religion, in other words, perfectly in tune with the prevailing era of liquid lives and loves.

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