

‘ISIS IS NOT ISLAM’: EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, EVERYDAY RELIGION, AND YOUNG MUSLIMS’ NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

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Powerful narratives that invoke religious concepts—jihad, Sharia, shahid, Caliphate, kuffar, and al-Qiyāmah—have accompanied jihadi violence but also inspired robust counter-narratives from Muslims. Taking a narrative criminological approach, we explore the rejection of religious extremism that emerges in everyday interactions in a religious community under intense pressure in Western societies. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 90 young Muslims in Norway, we argue that young Muslims suffer epistemic injustice in their narrative exclusion from the mainstream and assess the narrative credibility they try to maintain in the face of marginalization. We suggest that young Muslims’ religious narratives reject a mainstream characterization of Islam as essentially a religion of aggression and simultaneously join forces with that mainstream in seeking the narrative exclusion of the jihadi extremists.

Key Words: Islam, terrorism, epistemic injustice, narrative criminology, counter-narrative, everyday religion

Introduction

True to its name, criminology has focused on people with experience of the criminal justice system rather than on the general population. Terrorism research follows the same pattern in offering thousands of studies addressing jihadi terrorism (Schuurman 2019), but only one in-depth account of how widespread religious narratives challenge jihadi views and practices. In that study, Joosse *et al.* (2015: 827) recommend a turn to everyday narratives: rather than focusing on the handful of Muslims who radicalize, researchers ‘should choose instead to focus on understanding the worldviews of the vast majority who do *not*’. Van Es (2019: 157, 2018) has similarly begun to model a shift in focus to that ‘vast majority’ who reject extremism. We follow their lead but focus more explicitly on the everyday religious narratives of Muslims who repudiate extremist violence.

Religious narratives have been seen as a key to understanding violent extremism (e.g. Halverson *et al.* 2011). The link between the broad religious belief system called Islam and the form of contemporary violence called Islamic terrorism has been shown to be tenuous, however (Roy 2008; Sageman 2014; Kundnani 2015: 7). Jihadi ideology and narratives interact, in complex ways, with socio-economic marginalization, international and national politics, individual psychological problems and social networks in generating extremism (e.g. Nesser 2015; Hegghammer 2016; Walklate and Mythen 2016; Khosrokhavar 2017). Narratives used by jihadists to justify violence include *jihad*

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(holy war), *Sharia* (Islamic law), *shahid* (martyrdom), *Caliphate* (Islamic State), *kuffar* (infidels) and *al-Qiyāmah* (the Day of Reckoning). Authorities on Islam have offered high-profile rejections of the jihadi readings, for example when several hundred Islamic scholars signed a letter denouncing IS and its theological views.¹ Much less is known about everyday opposition to jihadi rhetoric in the religious counter-narratives that are produced and shared within Muslim communities.

Religious narratives are a potent element in the discourse of violent jihadism (Halverson *et al.* 2011). It is not unusual for beliefs that support a narrative identity to be shored up by violence. Butler (2005: 4), among others, has shown how violent mainstream cultural beliefs can be. Far-right groups regularly express violent hatred against all Muslims, and Muslim women and men have been targeted in anti-Muslim attacks in Norway, the UK and beyond (Awan and Zempi 2019). Seventy-seven people died because of Breivik's anti-Islamic beliefs in 2011 and, in 2017, Osborne's attack near the Finsbury Park Mosque in London killed 1 person and injured 11 more. 2019 saw further attacks on mosques in Bærum in Norway and Christchurch in New Zealand and, in Stanway, England, a man shouted 'kill a Muslim' before attacking another man with a baseball bat and knife.

Our focus is narrative criminological in that we examine the *multitude* of ways in which narratively communicated senses of self and social identity can influence harmful acts (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Emphasizing the everyday religious character of counter-narratives, we examine how young Muslims in Norway construct a 'storied rejection' (Joosse *et al.* 2015: 827) of Islamic extremism, thus potentially constraining harm perpetrated by Muslims. We go further than Joosse *et al.*, however, in suggesting that there is another narrative impetus in these stories: namely to construct a 'storied rejection' of mainstream prejudices about Muslims and Islam, thus potentially constraining harm perpetrated *against* Muslims.

Narrative Criminology and Everyday Religion

Narrative criminology is the study of how stories instigate, sustain or effect desistance from harmful action (Presser and Sandberg 2015: 1). A primary interest of work within this framework has been how narratively communicated senses of self and social identity influence harmful acts (e.g. Fleetwood *et al.* 2019). Works that preceded and influenced narrative criminology often studied desistance narratives (Maruna 2001; Presser 2008). We shift the emphasis to everyday stories whose impetus is to constrain or reduce harm either by supporting a nonviolent stance within Muslim communities or by speaking to potentially violent mainstream beliefs about Muslims.

The stories we present here are 'everyday' religious narratives. We thus follow Ammerman (2006: 3) in privileging 'the experience of nonexperts, the people who do not make a living being religious or thinking and writing about religious ideas' (see also Hall 1997; Dessing *et al.* 2013). The young Norwegians who participated in this study invoked a peaceable Islam and denounced jihadi violence. That supports the view that 'the most powerful counternarratives that work against radicalization will already be in place within communities' (Joosse *et al.* 2015: 814). However, in a cultural context

¹<http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.

where, particularly since the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, there has been a tendency to narrativize all Muslims, and Islam itself, as violent, we argue that this also constitutes narrative resistance to mainstream cultural narratives of an inherently violent Islam and resistance to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Peaceable religious counter-narratives are both a response to violent religious extremists and a way of ‘talking back’ (Smith 1993: 398; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017: 190; van Es 2019: 142) to a discourse that reduces all Muslims to potential extremists.

Epistemic Injustice, Narrative Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Epistemic injustice, as conceptualized by Fricker (2007: 1), is ‘a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower’. It is prejudice-based, discriminatory and mostly affects people who are already marginalized. Among other things, it leads to the narrative exclusion of individuals and communities (Colvin in press). A turn to the philosophical concept of epistemic injustice is evident in recent social science research (e.g. Sherman and Goguen 2019), as well as in thinking specifically about terrorism. O’Donnell (2018: 981–2) has argued that the contemporary cultural imagination that believes in Muslims’ vulnerability to radicalization risks epistemic injustice ‘by in effect silencing and denying credibility to [Muslims] [...] and by constructing a set of (implicitly) racialised, colonial frameworks that constitute Muslims as a suspect community’. Fricker (2007: 44) argues that epistemic injustice undermines people ‘in their very humanity’—and, in doing that, it causes harm. Cultural anxiety around Islamic extremism and Islamic terrorism underpins what Sageman (2014: 567) calls the ‘Blame it on Islam’ approach to terrorist harm.

The accounts in this study are situated in the context of dominant Western narratives that construct (all) young Muslims as potential violent extremists. In that sense, the interviewees face what Presser (2005: 2070) calls narrative defeat because they are ‘held accountable’. The idea of Islam as a religion of war and terrorism is shared by jihadi extremist and mainstream anti-Islamic rhetoric (Ekman 2015; Shaffer 2016). When they locate an authority, in the context of the interview, to represent themselves and their religion against the popular narratives of Islam’s inherent violence, they are, we contend, practising narrative resistance.

Narrative resistance is establishing itself as a concept across disciplines (e.g. Canham and Malose 2017; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017; Plummer 2019; Sandberg and Andersen 2019). Narrative resistance responds to narrative power, where some stories ‘wield more power than others. When circulating widely in a culture (e.g. through the media, policy documents and everyday talk), such stories can achieve a type of “master status”’ (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017: 191). Dominant narratives are culturally powerful not least because they are often perceived as natural truths rather than as stories (Andrews 2004: 1; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017: 191; Bamberg 2004: 361). Alertness to narrative power, argues Plummer (2019: 5), ‘sensitizes us to the ways lives are asymmetrical and can be dominated, shaped, and influenced (sometimes damaged and exploited) by stories, and how, in turn, people resist and sometimes empower themselves through new stories’.

Counter-narratives respond to or resist dominant cultural narratives and can ‘support people in telling new and more helpful stories for their lives’ (McKenzie-Mohr and

Lafrance 2017: 192; Andrews 2004: 1). Here, we define counter-narratives as stories that challenge or oppose dominant stories either in mainstream social or in subcultural contexts. Counter-narratives intertwine with dominant narratives: they can appeal to or include components of dominant narratives as part of the narrative resistance (Andrews 2002; see also Bamberg 2004). Plummer (2019) differentiates between negotiated narratives and counter-narratives. Where counter-narratives repudiate and argue with a dominant narrative, negotiated narratives develop ‘weapons to resist while not challenging the existing order’ (Plummer 2019: 15).

The counter-narratives in this study draw on a wide set of narrative tools, including counter-neutralizations and boundary drawing. Conventional neutralization theory assumes an encultured standpoint: that is basic agreement with mainstream cultural values. The key function of conventional neutralizations is ‘to disavow deviance’ (Green *et al.* 2006: 304). Subcultural neutralizations, by contrast, ‘avow deviance in the context of a mainstream that has ‘lost its way’” (Colvin and Pisoiu 2018: 4). As a strategy of narrative resistance, interviewees in this study used counter-neutralizations to challenge the validity of subcultural neutralizations (such as the jihadi claim to kill in the name of Islam). A more common strategy, however, was boundary drawing (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Symbolic boundary work has been seen to motivate and justify criminal and harmful acts (Copes 2016). But populations close to extremists also mobilize symbolic boundaries (van Es 2018: 162). Our interviewees drew boundaries that excluded religious extremists from the community of those who understand Islam and/or are good Muslims, ‘othering’ the extremists as ‘mad’, ‘evil’ or ‘criminal’. Both counter-neutralizations and boundary-drawing tactics work to ‘empower incredulity’ (Joosse *et al.* 2015: 827)—that is deliberately to render certain stories and their narrators *incredible*—and, thus, to construct what Fricker (2007: 17) calls a ‘credibility deficit’ for those who champion violence in the name of Islam.

We focus on how young Norwegian Muslims view central Islamic concepts and stories that have been important for jihadists, in particular the concepts and related stories of *jihad*, *shahid*, *Sharia*, *Caliphate*, *kuffar* and *al-Qiyāmah*. In the analysis below, we give a brief description of how these are used by jihadists before describing the counter-narratives offered by the young Muslims who were interviewed. The underlying aim is to understand how storytelling can resist stigma and harm: here, both by constraining violent jihadism and by addressing prejudices about Muslims and Islam that can lead to violence against Muslims.

Method

Our study is based on interviews with 90 young Muslims in Norway aged 18–32, conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2017. The main criteria for participation were age and that the subjects defined themselves as Muslims. The interviews were conducted throughout Norway in 20 different municipalities and participants had backgrounds from 20 different countries. Most were Sunni, but we also interviewed Shiites and some who declared affiliation to a smaller Muslim group or who refused to differentiate between what they described as ‘sectarian’ affiliations within Islam.

A team of five researchers, three women and two men, from different cultural and academic backgrounds and with different religious affiliations and beliefs (including

Muslim), carried out the interviews. Because the aim was to research the everyday religious narratives of ‘ordinary’ Muslims, we tried to avoid activists, imams or other religious experts and leaders as interviewees. The interviewees were recruited using social networks, referral by university students and social media, such as Facebook, by contacting mosques and Muslim youth organizations and seeking out Muslim events. Interviewers followed a semi-structured interview guide on themes, including positive Islamic narratives, marginalization and discrimination, jihadi narratives, extremist organizations and de-radicalization. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were held in cafés or participants’ homes.

TABLE 1. *Study participants’ gender, age, occupation and ethnic and religious background*

Participants	90	Percentage ^a
Gender		
Women	45	50
Men	45	50
Age		
18–20	19	21
21–23	19	21
24–26	23	26
27–29	13	14
30–32	14	16
33+ ^b	2	2
Average age	25	
Occupation		
Student	36	40
Employed	41	46
Unemployed	7	8
Asylum seeker	3	3
Not specified	3	3
Parents birth country		
Somalia	21	23
Pakistan	11	12
Norway	6	7
Morocco	5	6
Iraq	5	6
Afghanistan	5	6
Two countries ^c	12	13
Other ^d	25	28
Converts	7	8
Islamic affiliation		
Sunni	74	82
Shia	8	9
Other ^e	8	9
Place of birth		
Norway	38	42
Other	52	58

^aAll percentages are rounded off to the closest number.

^bInterviewed because they had relevant information about their own youth.

^cEight participants had one parent from Norway.

^dQatar, Algeria, Palestine, Kosovo, Lebanon, Chechenia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Kurds from Iran and Iraq.

^eCombination of people with other Islamic affiliations than Sunni Shia, participants we do not have data on and participants who would not state their Islamic affiliation.

The interviews were designed to capture the everyday religion of the young Muslims interviewed (Sandberg *et al.* 2018). We asked about their everyday beliefs, issues such as God, the Prophet, faith, and conversion, and religious practices, such as prayer, fasting, clothing and sexuality. We also asked where they got their religious knowledge and what they thought about different religious affiliations in Islam. Here, we analyse in detail the part where we asked the participants about Islamic concepts and stories important in jihadi rhetoric. As opposed to the other parts of the interview, where we asked relatively open questions, in this section we were interested in their versions of particular religious narratives.

The socio-economic background of the participants is important, given a posited link between socio-economic background and vulnerability to criminogenic narratives (Ehrlich and Liu 2002). While our sample looks relatively privileged (36 students and 41 employed) it needs to be seen in the context of the Scandinavian welfare state. In Norway, 34 per cent have higher education (SSB 2019a), which is free. There were seven unemployed participants and three not specified in the context of a general employment rate of 3.8 per cent (and c. 10 per cent for youths; SSB 2019b). Our sample includes participants from relatively poor backgrounds who were currently students or in work and several with a criminal background. It is, therefore, relatively representative of the general population.

The sample also includes seven to ten participants with a history of engagement with extremist milieus or rhetoric who now no longer supported the use of violence for political or religious reasons. Most of the other participants had friends or acquaintances who had been involved in extremist groups and/or travelled to Syria to fight as foreign fighters. This reflects the relatively high percentage of Norwegian foreign fighters in Syria (between 120 and 140 in a country of about 5 million people). This means that, for our participants, discussions about jihadism and Muslim extremist groups were not something abstract or theoretical but directly relevant for their own lives and part of their communities. This was reflected in the great interest they showed in participating in the research and their high levels of engagement with the issues.

Young Muslims' Narrative Resistance

There are many ways to characterize counter-narratives. They can be formally distinguished by their use of factual rebuttal, emotional gestures or humour (Sandberg and Andersen 2019) or by the shape they take as tropes or full narratives (Sandberg 2016). Here, we explore a more content-based categorization of counter-narratives. We describe religious counter-narratives offered by young Norwegian Muslims that challenge jihadi master narratives. They resist, react and respond to violent extremist narratives that these young Muslims have been exposed to either through their social networks or in the media.

Jihad (Holy War)

In Islamic theology, it is common to distinguish between the greater jihad (the inner struggle to become a better Muslim) and the lesser jihad (the military struggle). The jihad 'of the sword' is in the traditional meaning of Islam a defensive war that should

be waged only on Muslim territory. Armed struggle is part of the classical interpretation of jihad—but as a duty of the state when under attack, not as an individual responsibility (Cook 2015). Radical political Islam and Salafi-Jihadism enabled a global jihadi movement that foregrounded military struggle and extended the concept to include offensive wars, attacks on non-Muslim territories and military and revolutionary warfare against regimes believed to be opposing Islam (Wagemaker 2016). This jihad narrative is at the core of Al-Qaida and IS propaganda (Halverson *et al.* 2011).

The young Muslims in this study did not share the Salafi-Jihadi understanding of jihad. A number of participants in our study linked jihad to defensive war. Melody explained:

Jihad is when you are being attacked for being a Muslim and you defend yourself in God's name and for yourself. It's not about you invading another country without them having done anything to you and saying that it's in the name of God. It can get tiresome, the fact that they put out a lot of negativity about Islam in the media. As long as the West doesn't attack you for being a Muslim in your country, you have no reason to attack them. It is completely wrong. It's just bullshit. It's propaganda as well.

Self-defence is recognized in most legal systems as a justification for harm. Melody's account is thus a clear appeal to mainstream values and inscribes her as narrator—and implicitly all Muslims like her—in mainstream culture. Melody was clear on the boundaries between her interpretation of jihad and the kind of warfare IS was involved in. She explained:

Jihad is not about going to another country as IS have done. They go to another country to attack, say it's in God's name, and that's what people have started to think is jihad. People misunderstand and it's so bad because that's what's being shown in the media. (...) When 0.000005% of Muslims in the world do something terrible they show it as a representation of all of Islam.

Melody weaves a critique of the Western media into her counter-narrative. It is not only the jihadists who are acting wrongly but also a mainstream media that actively furthers epistemic injustice by spreading the jihadi misrepresentation of what Islam says. She points to how jihadi rhetoric and the mainstream media's anti-Islamism paradoxically coincide in their view of Islam (Ekman 2015; Shaffer 2016). Both see Islam as a war of religion, and both are challenged by a counter-narrative that defines Islam as a peaceful religion and IS's terrorism and warfare as wrong according to Islam.

For many interviewees, however, jihad meant something different again. Houda explained:

Jihad is an inner war in a way. Inside you. When you want to achieve something that you need to struggle for. For example, I had inner jihad with myself last year in order to manage to read the Quran. The whole Quran. It was a challenge because I had to read a whole page every day. I do not work well like that but I have to show God that I am struggling to achieve paradise. The same when I get up to 'fajr'. Morning prayer, it is so good. I cannot get up at five a.m. But oh, I have to do some jihad to get to paradise. It's an uphill, it's not a downhill path to get to paradise. So yes, to worship God more, that is jihad.

Houda's reply chimed with many participants' description of jihad: as an inner struggle. Jihad meant not stealing, not being rude, avoiding pornography, controlling anger, reading for exams, being nice to their parents or generally being a better Muslim and

a good person. Jihad in this sense is the ‘inner’ or ‘spiritual’ jihad, the battle with yourself as opposed to the ‘jihad of the sword’ (Post 2009).

Among participants in this study, the understanding of jihad as an inner struggle dominated, but they also acknowledged the reputation jihad now has in the West. Mona had to think a little before answering our question:

What does jihad mean? In a strange way, I have a bad connection to it. The definition of jihad, I would say, is written in Hadith in relation to the war between Islam and non-Muslims, where people should sacrifice themselves for their religion. But yes, what does jihad mean? I do not think jihad says you should drive a truck into a crowd. I do not think it is right to kill in the name of religion.

Mona immediately associated jihad with terrorism. She then offered a counter-neutralization that discredited—as theologically incorrect—the jihadi claim to kill in the name of higher loyalties (religion).

Her narrative simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, ‘talks back’ to the prejudice that *all* Muslims ‘think it is right to kill in the name of religion’—a prejudice that is itself potentially criminogenic if it neutralizes hate crime against Muslims (in a ‘denial of the victim’ mode, where to harm Muslims is virtuously to protect the dominant group). Mona’s account shows an impetus to avert harm by correcting any misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims as aggressively violent. It both discredits contemporary jihadist aggression and offers a corrective to cultural prejudices that construct Islam and individual Muslims as aggressive.

The idea that jihad is an inner struggle has been fronted by Sufism (Cook 2015), arguably as a counter-narrative to the coincidence of jihadi and anti-Islamic depictions of Islam as a religion of war (van Es 2018). Systematic theological interpretations of the role of jihad in Islam are not our emphasis here. We are concerned with the everyday interpretations of Islam that exist among young Muslims. These clearly leaned towards understanding jihad as a personal, inner struggle focused on worldly temptations. Their narratives countered both jihadi narratives of the importance of armed struggle and anti-Islamic or mainstream news media stories of Islam as a religion of war.

Shahid (Martyrdom)

Many jihadi narratives glorify self-sacrifice—shahid or martyrdom. Cook (2007) suggests martyrdom was introduced to motivate Muslim soldiers in wartime; it has certainly been an important jihadi narrative in the context of war (Halverson *et al.* 2011). The Quran does not say much about martyrs, but some *hadiths* (stories of Mohammed’s life that came later) describe how martyrs will have a ‘direct’ road to heaven and will not have to go through *barzakh*, the stage between this world and the hereafter sometimes described as the ‘life in the grave’ (Eidhamar 2017).

When asked about shahid, Karim launched directly into an argument against suicide terrorists:

It is not written anywhere in the Quran that it is allowed to kill anyone, someone who is innocent. It is even said in the Quran; ‘killing a person is equivalent to killing all of humanity’.² This is to show the extent of how killing is a big sin in the Muslim faith. Every human being has a soul and every soul

²Referring to verse 5:32 of the Quran.

is holy in the religion. So to say that they want their sins forgiven or washed away is just nonsense. It's a joke because, in the end, they only create criminals.

The young Muslims in this study commonly quoted that verse from the Quran. Its use challenges the credibility of terrorists as narrators on the grounds that they do not know the true meaning of Islam. Karim is empowering incredulity when he presents the jihadi claims as 'just nonsense' and 'a joke'.

Karim is explicit that jihadi narratives are criminogenic ('they only create criminals'). Extremists were given the label 'criminal' in many participants' narratives. Harnessing the symbolic power that lies in state definitions of harmful activity, the label excludes religious extremists from the community of those who know what is right. It can be seen as a powerful trope for boundary drawing. Sarah defined the extremists as savages and 'ignorant idiots running around with a shotgun'. She asserted that 'shaytan is their god'—offering boundary work from a more explicitly moral and religious standpoint. If they worship Satan, Jihadi narrators lose the 'moral authority' that White (1981: 26) diagnosed as essential for narrative credibility. Other interviewees characterized the extremists as 'crazy' or 'brainwashed', invoking mental impairment, another powerful category of social and epistemic exclusion. All of these familiar tropes—criminality, evil and insanity—draw a boundary between the Muslims interviewed and Muslims who are extremists and function to exclude violent jihadists from the community of credible narrators.

Most of the participants associated shahid negatively with extremism but some offered positive counter-narratives of 'true' shahid. LouLou started out in the same vein as Karim, rejecting suicide terrorism as martyrdom in the derogatory terms of incredulity but developed her story to define 'real' martyrs in a way that exposed the terrorists as not just not-shihad but anti-shihad:

You will not get to paradise if you kill people. Those who are 'shahid' (martyrs) are those who walk in the street and suddenly get bombed because they have not done anything. I think they may be shahid because they do not know anything and they did nothing wrong. They are innocent. Not those who bomb – they are not shahid.

The Jihadi narrative is thus turned on its head. The jihadists emerge not as martyrs but as the kind of despots who make martyrs, and their credibility is radically undermined.

Rejections of shahid were often combined with the assertion that suicide is a grave sin in Islam. Asked about martyrdom, Rahmatulla immediately rejected its association with suicide terrorism:

The ugliest or craziest thing next to killing someone is to commit suicide, because you choose the foulest way out of this life. There is nothing in Islam that says that you can blow yourself up in London like what happened many years ago. The idea that sacrificing your life is the best way to promote Islam, through jihad for example, is completely wrong. As I said, Islam says that is a very wrong and immoral way forward. Islam does not support it. If you do commit suicide, you go straight to hell.

It is widely accepted in Islam and indicated by verses in the Quran (6:151, 4:29) that suicide is a sin. Rahmatulla's counter-narrative discredits suicide bombing by defining it as sin, not martyrdom or glory. He also brings the exclusionary trope of mental impairment into play ('craziest thing'). People who are *both* crazy *and* have not understood the basic precepts of Islam cannot possibly be credible narrators, his story implies.

The narrative of martyrdom is important for jihadists as it is for many other groups engaged in armed battle (Hatina 2014). It can be seen as a straightforward example of how stories can motivate harmful acts. While there has been a strong focus in narrative criminology on how narratives can inspire harm (Presser and Sandberg 2015), the interviews in this study show how criminogenic stories also can be effectively rejected. The interviewees discredit the jihadist stories as crazy, naïve, evil or criminal and thus work towards the narrative exclusion of jihadi storytellers in Muslim communities. They simultaneously distinguish their own accounts from extremist narratives, seeking a counter-status for themselves as credible narrators.

Sharia (Islamic Law)

In Islamic theology, Sharia is the road to *Jannah* (paradise). It literally translates as ‘the way’ and refers to Islamic laws that govern religious rituals and everyday life (e.g. prayers, hygiene and diet). Sharia law is a controversial concept both within Muslim communities and in meetings between Muslims and other groups. Under Sharia law, severe penalties, called Hudud punishments, are incurred for crimes against God, such as adultery, drinking alcohol and some forms of theft (Dupret 2018). In the jihadist conception of an Islamic state, these punishments also apply to non-Muslims. For contemporary jihadists, and for the IS in particular, the implementation of Sharia law and the reinstatement of the Caliphate form a ‘powerful source of narrative satisfaction’ (Halverson *et al.* 2011: 21).

Sharia was another concept that triggered engaged counter-narratives, as well as negotiated narratives as conceptualized by Plummer (2019). Reflecting on the views of mainstream Norwegian society, many of the interviewees immediately associated Sharia with Hudud punishments and responded to our question about what Sharia was by explaining that it was much more than Hudud. Abbas for example said that Sharia was ‘Islamic law’,

a set of rules, but there has been too much emphasis on the punishment part, Hudud, which is really misunderstood. I have some ideas about this. If you read the Quran then we can see verses that say: cut off the hand. But parts of the Quran are valid and other parts are not. We have a rule in Arabic that is called *naser*. That means that some verses do not apply and should be replaced by others. (...) It was a different time. Now there is no cutting off of hands or killings, because it turns out that those methods don’t give good results. So then it’s replaced by a modern system, for example the Norwegian one.

Abbas’s understanding was a liberal one, emphasizing *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning). He went on to explain that certain verses in the Quran were no longer valid in the light of developments in scientific knowledge. Other verses now had to be seen as more relevant. Western cultural beliefs do not usually associate this kind of pragmatism with Islam, but our study suggests that it is an important part of everyday Islam, as well as part of ordinary Muslims’ responses to jihadist literal readings of the Quran.

Magnus was one of the few interviewees who declared support for Hudud punishments. Even he, however, pragmatically relativized their applicability in the contemporary Norwegian context:

As a Muslim I'll have to support them, of course. But in the same way as in Norway you need proofs to punish, in Islam you need proofs to punish. I want sharia here, but not like that; I doubt that it will ever come. Because we're a non-Muslim country. We have to respect that this law does not apply here. But in a Muslim country then that is the law. If you commit adultery you know you'll be punished for it. In the same way as you will be punished for using drugs here.

Magnus's narrative displays his understanding and acceptance of contemporary Norwegian mores; he thus situates himself in the epistemic mainstream and distances himself from the extremist standpoint. The comparison with how things are done in Norway seeks reciprocal understanding and acceptance from his implied audience for Hudud practices in Islamic states: if people know the law, they only have themselves to blame.

More commonly, the interviewees presented Sharia as a set of rules for Muslims. Fatima, for example, described Sharia as a combination of the five pillars of Islam and being a good person. Her narrative foregrounded the five pillars—'praying, fasting, travelling to Mecca, respecting each other and respecting all people'—behind which the punishments of Hudud had only a background presence. Maryam rather similarly explained that Sharia was 'what we follow, for example how to pray, that's Sharia, hijab is Sharia, treating other people well is Sharia'. Rather than consigning Hudud punishments to the background, however, her narrative discounts them by insisting that they cannot, in practice, be applied:

No one can deny that they exist, but the thing is that if you read Sharia law and try to get some knowledge about how this will happen, then you learn that it applies to a particular time. It must be under Muslim rule and there must be four witnesses. It takes a lot! It's not usually the case that four witnesses are outside a window and watch people commit adultery. It takes a lot for these punishments to be executed.

Maryam's account does not directly reject the existence of Hudud punishments within Sharia but provides a negotiated narrative that tones down their importance and (like Abbas's) denies them contemporary relevance. Negotiated narratives (Plummer 2019) were observable when the young Muslims interviewed did not feel that they had the authority to dismiss or relativize a narrative founded in strong Islamic traditions but still wanted to mark some distance.

The association of Sharia with its interpretation and application by extreme jihadists triggered engaged resistance. Interviewees provided negotiated narratives around the contemporary relevance of Hudud penalties, in which they consigned them to a particular historic period, explained why they were primarily of symbolic value or obscured them behind a five pillars-based Sharia for contemporary society. Such storytelling enables the negotiation of difficult and existential issues without necessarily requiring a clear-cut conclusion (Bauman 1986). This flexible or negotiable attitude to Sharia enables 'culturalized citizenship' (van Es 2019), making it possible to combine Islam (and living in Muslim communities) with belonging in Norwegian society. Similarly, values that were felt to transcend religion or cultural background, such as 'being a good person', were often emphasized.

The Caliphate (Islamic State)

The Caliphate is an Islamic state, lead by a caliph who is believed to succeed the prophet Mohammed. Like many religious concepts, the concept of the Caliphate fluctuates

in different historical and societal contexts (Kennedy 2016: 3). Living in a perfect Islamic state is a central idea in contemporary Islamic revivalism and closely related to *the Pharaoh*, one of jihadism's key narratives (Halverson *et al.* 2011). Some schools of Muslim theology believe that there will be a new Caliphate before al-Qiyāmah (the Day of Reckoning). A key distinction between Al Qaeda and IS was the importance of apocalyptic propaganda and the creation of a territorial Islamic state (Gerges 2016). The Caliphate narrative has thus been more important for IS than for other jihadi organizations.

The participants in this study were less familiar with the idea of the contemporary Caliphate than with notions of jihad, Sharia and even shahid. Most had an understanding of the historic role of the Caliphate and some dreamed about a future perfect Islamic state. None had given profound consideration to the self-proclaimed Caliphate of IS in Syria and Iraq. Many, nonetheless, sought to discredit the idea of a contemporary Caliphate and drew boundaries separating the narrator from those who believed in it. Farid consigned Caliphates to the past:

They were important in previous times, during the time of the Prophet, but in today's society I don't think they are important at all (...). Who is to interpret those laws and rules that should apply in the Caliphate? Personally I don't believe that any human in contemporary society is capable of that. It's maybe brutal to say that, but it takes a lot to create a just Caliphate with laws and rules. Within Islam today, I don't think it is possible to create such a Caliphate. It's very challenging, almost impossible.

In this view, if a just Caliphate is not currently possible, then there had better be none. Sarah similarly saw the Caliphate as something only the 'stupid' would seek to restore in the present:

It has died out. There is no living Caliphate any more. It went down with the Ottomans (...). But IS describe themselves as a Caliphate, and I think that's just stupid. The Caliphate and those things represent the golden age of Islam, but it's nothing that can be resurrected.

An epistemic boundary is drawn here between the ignorant ('stupid') and those in the know (that there 'is no living Caliphate'). Nima's account chimes with Farid's when Nima explains that a Caliphate must be chosen by God:

I believe that if a state is to be perfect then it needs to be Islamic. Because Islam is perfected and then society becomes perfected. But the Khalifa system is created by humans and a Khalifa cannot be chosen by humans. A Khalifa should be chosen by God.

For Nima, as for Sarah, the Caliphate is associated with an idealized Muslim past. Farid agrees, though, for him, the coming of the Caliphate simultaneously belongs in a very distant future. None of them accept it as a legitimate justification for waging war or claiming territory now. Their insistence that human beings cannot resurrect the Caliphate in the present represents a solid negation of jihadi propaganda. Ahlam's account of the Caliphate tackled IS in particular:

I've read some of the rules they have in that state. Those aren't Islamic rules – in Islam you shouldn't be forced to do anything. If you pray you should do it of your own free will, and if you practise Islam you should do it of your own free will; if you're forced then you don't do it for God, but for the person that forces you. Then you won't get any rewards for those actions. Cause you don't do them for God. If you listen to ISIS that's wrong, it's not Islam. That state or Caliphate there is very wrong.

This was a position supported by many: if the population of an Islamic state was *forced* to follow particular rules, rather than following them for God, they were skeptical. The distinction between right and wrong Caliphates was further pursued by Mustafa, who described a Hadith story that

talks about the Caliphate; where there are young men with long hair who claim that they are going to join the Caliphate, but that's not part of the real Caliphate. When they recite the Quran, they recite only from the mouth, not from the heart. They don't feel anything in the heart.

The departure of foreign fighters to Syria, he insisted, is the result of a misreading of holy texts:

Many have read and misunderstood, so some believe that that time is now and that's why they (Syrian foreign fighters) go to Sham. Sham is the Syrian neighborhood; Lebanon, Egypt and so on, where foreign fighters go to join the Caliphate.

Again, the extremists are discredited as naïve readers of religious stories and purveyors of wrong knowledge. Mustafa's depiction of the false Caliphate resonates with a story told by Farid about 'imposters' (see also [Joose et al. 2015](#)) and a Hadith that mentions a group of false Muslims. Both narratives echo an important story in Islam about the hypocrites ([Halverson et al. 2011](#)), or the enemy within, and refer to contemporary religious extremists, implicitly to IS in particular, who used the idea of the Caliphate to justify and motivate aggression and state-building in Syria and Iraq. The dream of a perfect Islamic state has widespread appeal also for Muslims who are not associated with extremist groups; but the interviewees emphasized that the Caliphate is something to be introduced by God, not by people. That perfect state, therefore, belongs to a distant past or to the future, and those who do not see this are excluded, in their accounts, from the community of credible knowers.

Kuffar (Infidels)

Jihadi narratives use the term infidel (*kafir* in the singular, *kuffar* in the plural; *kufir* describes disbelief) frequently. Part of the reason for having a Caliphate is to isolate the believers from the infidels and create a perfect state. Extremist rhetoric is characterized by definitions of who is a righteous believer and who is not. The condemnation of unbelievers is closely related to what [Halverson et al. \(2011\)](#) describe as the jihadi master narrative of infidel invaders. The threat of the *kafir* can also come from within, and describing other Muslims as *kuffar* is a widespread strategy of jihadi groups.

The young Muslims interviewed tried to avoid the word *kuffar*—they were clearly uncomfortable with it. When they did use it, they chose the plural form *kuffar*, even when speaking in the singular (where one might expect *kafir*); *kuffar* was the everyday religious term in use for infidels in all numbers and forms. Loulou explained that 'a *kuffar* is someone who does not believe in God', but then added that 'Christians believe in God, and it is not for us to decide who is a *kuffar*'. She thus negotiated the narrative of non-Muslims as infidels with a more inclusive version of the believer that embraces everyone who believed in a God. Placing emphasis on God, not humans, as the deciding authority is a narrative negotiation familiar from the interviewees' rejections of the contemporary Caliphate. Giving God the ultimate and sole authority in these issues

effectively dismisses the authority of Muslim extremists and simultaneously implies that they are usurping the rights of God—a double disqualification of their stories.

Some interviewees resisted fundamentalist interpretations by insisting that kuffar was a purely neutral or objective description. Salam, for example, defined a kafir as a ‘non-believer person. One who does not believe in Islam. Kuffar is used as a derogatory term today, but it’s not. It’s just a term for someone who does not believe Allah. It’s just that’. Others said that kuffar referred to particularly bad people who opposed God. To be an infidel, it was not enough not to believe; one had to actively go against God’s work or be evil. Some turned the tables on the jihadi stories in the way observed in the context of martyrdom. Ifrah expressed the view that infidels were ‘those who kill people for no reason’, flipping the rhetoric around to damn violent extremists.

Sana initially took a clear-cut view: ‘Kuffar means that you are Christian, eat pork, drink, do not pray and do not fast. That’s a kuffar for me’. But she marked her distance from fundamentalist narratives by following her opening statement on infidels with a declaration of Islamic tolerance:

Islam says that we should respect all religions whether we agree or not. So it’s not like, ‘if a person is a Christian, kill him’. No, try to understand him, and if you don’t agree, respect that he thinks like that and he will respect that you think differently and then we can get along much better. Cause you can’t change everything. You can’t get everyone to agree with you. Everyone has different opinions about what is right and wrong.

Pleas for the acceptance of people with different beliefs featured in many accounts. Anniken, a convert, spoke of her family who were not Muslim. Her story pointed to the personal suffering fundamentalist thinking can cause:

I hear many friends who say, ‘Oh my God, that’s kuffar!’ I don’t like to use that word – it means my whole family are that. I love my father and he died one year ago. If you hear that he’s a kuffar, you don’t want to think about it. That’s not how I experience Islam. In Islam you should be nice to everyone, whether they are believers or non-believers, or Christians.

Other narrators cited traditional stories to illustrate the acceptance of other religions in Islam. Stories about the Prophet Mohammed were particularly popular. Mustafa, for example, integrated into his narrative a story about how Mohammed treated individuals from other religions:

For example, there is a story of a lady who threw garbage at the prophet when she saw him walking in their streets. Every day when she saw him she threw her garbage at him. One day she got sick. When he saw that she was not throwing rubbish any more, he knocked on her door with food and took care of her. After that she became a Muslim.

Such stories do different kinds of work: they counter the notion that Islam is a religion that cannot respect other religions, they negate the claim that it is a violent religion and they contradict the notion that Muslims treat unbelievers badly. The climax of Mustafa’s narrative—that Mohammed moved unbelievers to convert by his patience and kindness—repudiates both Islamic fundamentalist intolerance and Western narratives of an inherently aggressive Islam.

Mentioning the word kuffar/kafir to the young Muslims provoked various forms of narrative resistance, counter-narratives and negotiated narratives. They ranged

from interpretations of the word as a neutral descriptor for those who do not believe to powerfully metonymic accounts of how Mohammed always treated unbelievers well and more personal stories about struggling with the negative labelling of other people. All agreed that the term was being used in the wrong way by Muslim extremists.

Al-Qiyāmah (The Day of Reckoning)

Revival and mobilization in many religions are associated with the belief that one is living in the last days. According to [McCants \(2015\)](#), the main reason why IS was so successful was its capacity to convince its followers that the apocalypse was close. In more conservative Muslim traditions, predictions related to the Day of Reckoning or doomsday (al-Qiyāmah) are of minor importance. However, like authoritarian rule and the regional wars in the Middle East since the 1970s, the growth of Islam among young people has been fuelled by doomsday prophecies ([Filiu 2012](#)). Seeing signs of the final days everywhere and even staging them (when IS conquered Dabiq, for example) has been part of extremist rhetoric and recruitment. Believing that the world is coming to an end makes it more important to be ‘on the right side’ and less threatening to sacrifice one’s life.

The young Muslims interviewed for our study had a relatively relaxed attitude to the Day of Reckoning; few were convinced that al-Qiyāmah was just around the corner. Some, however, did refer to signs of living in the last days. Alima, for example, declared, ‘It is clear that what is happening now is written in the Quran. The signs are there. Clear signs. It is not only in Islam but in Christianity that judgment day is on its way, and in Judaism. And they are the central religions’. The second part of her statement distances her from the fundamentalist standpoint: by connecting the coming of the last days to other monotheistic religions, she broadens the base of her narrative authority and simultaneously signals that she is tolerant of these religions and feels a connection to them.

Ismail, too, described signs that the last days were approaching but with a more overt anti-jihadi twist.

Ismail: Before the Day of Reckoning people will hate each other, people will trust those that lie and will not believe in those that tell the truth. You can see a son killing his own mother, cruel stuff.

Interviewer: Do you think this has already happened?

Ismail: Yes, of course, it has happened. For example, IS is a sign of the Day of Reckoning, that it is close.

In a familiar move, Ismail turns the story of al-Qiyāmah against the extremist groups, who in his narrative are themselves a sign that the last days are coming. They become the representative of the devil rather than his opponents.

The majority of the interviewees did not claim to see signs of the last days, but the Day of Reckoning was nonetheless part of their religious beliefs. For many, it was an important motivation for living as good Muslims, but their theological knowledge of and personal engagement with the idea varied. Most knew the general history of al-Qiyāmah, in greater or less detail, and some also had personal versions of it. Esra for example described a recurring dream:

I have dreamt about it a couple of times. I had a dream when we were in the living room, me and my cousins. Then some big people came and knocked on the door and said that it was the Day of Reckoning. We had to get up and there were flames everywhere. And we have heard that on the Day of Reckoning everybody rises from the graves and becomes sand. They weigh what is positive and negative and if you have done a lot of bad things you go to hell.

In these accounts, the ideas of judgment, heaven and hell give meaning to death and motivate the narrators to live as good Muslims.

There were few signs of the extremist narratives of the last days, except where the narrators wove rejections of the jihadi stories of the Day of Reckoning into their accounts. Some repudiated the judgmental approach of the jihadists, declaring that it was for Allah or God to punish evildoers and not for human beings. Afrah, for example, opined:

I think the only person who should judge someone is God. It's between you and God, or Allah. That's why there is the Day of Reckoning. That's where good and evil get weighed up against each other. We are not Allah, really, so we can't judge people by what they have done.

Aisha took a similar view: 'it is God who punishes, it is not people who should punish each other'. The attribution of final authority to God echoes the narratives of kuffar and the Caliphate. It effectively discredits Muslim extremists' assumption of the right to judge who is and is not a righteous Muslim and to punish.

Another familiar technique was turning the narrative tables on extremist rhetoric in predictions about who would be punished. Sahra, for example, told a story about judgment day similar to Sandra's but concluded:

Account is taken of everything you have done. For example Hitler or ISIS or what Al-Shabaab does, even though they manage to get away with it in this world, then they won't be able to get away with it in the next, on the Day of Reckoning. Because everything you have done will come up again.

Hitler is a clear and powerful trope of criminal leadership. Equating IS and Al-Shabaab with Hitler and emphasizing that they will all be held equally accountable not only implies that justice will prevail but also that it is already clear (via the historic example of Hitler) that IS and Al-Shabaab will be judged negatively.

Stories about the last days, fear of the final judgment and an apocalyptic worldview have long fuelled jihadi rhetoric and have been especially important for IS (McCants 2015). The everyday religious beliefs of the young Muslims in this study included a certain tendency to see signs that the final days are approaching (Cook 2005), but their interpretations and expectations of the Day of Reckoning explicitly ran counter to extremist rhetoric. They presented it primarily as a call to be a better person and a better Muslim and not as a call to arms against infidels (Sandberg *et al.* 2018). Sometimes stories of al-Qiyāmah were used to discredit violent extremists: they were characterized as the ones who would be punished in hell or seen as a sign of the cruelty of the last days.

Discussion

Asking young Muslims about jihadi narratives risks framing them as a suspect community and thus perpetuating epistemic injustice (O'Donnell 2018). There is a danger of

contributing to a perception that they are somehow responsible for jihadi terrorism or peculiarly vulnerable to extremist rhetoric. As some young Muslims in a British study put it, ‘Why should we have to prove we’re alright?’ (Mythen *et al.* 2013). Our experience, nonetheless, was that young Muslims in Norway were keen to talk about the issues—they wanted a voice to present another image of Islam than the one they faced daily in the mainstream media and popular discourse. Of the different research projects we have run over the years, this was by far the easiest to recruit participants to. When interviewed, the participants were emotionally engaged and voiced their opinions with great commitment.

Given the groups of young Muslims travelling to Syria from Norway, this was not an abstract or theoretical matter for them. Most knew or knew of someone who had been fascinated by or drawn to jihadi narratives. The Salafi-Jihadi interpretation of jihad emphasizes the duty of armed struggle against anyone opposing Islam. Embedded in an apocalyptic narrative, the promise of eternal life, or of life in a perfect Muslim State, motivates sacrifice and justifies violence. The impetus of the everyday religious narratives—*jihad*, *Sharia*, *shahid*, *Caliphate*, *kufur* and *al-Qiyāmah*—that we encountered in this study was to limit crime and harm. Some interviewees said explicitly that they were averting harm by telling these stories in their communities and social networks (Mohamed and Sandberg 2019). Additionally, their accounts showed an impetus to limit hate crime *against* Muslims perpetrated by anti-Islamists or xenophobic members of the majority population.

While the formal teachings of Islam have been thoroughly addressed, there is little systematic knowledge about what young Muslims *actually* believe in. That is part of their narrative exclusion (Plummer 2019; Colvin *in press*). Attending to everyday stories can counter, or at least help reveal, narrative exclusion and epistemic injustice. The young Muslims in this study used the strategy of empowering incredulity (Joose *et al.* 2015: 827) to redraw symbolic boundaries, mobilizing their everyday religious knowledge to achieve the epistemic exclusion of extremists, whose claims about Islam they discredit as wrong, stupid or sometimes even satanic. The moral and credibility deficit that attends narrative exclusion is thus shifted on to jihadi narrators, while the interviewees are positioned on the side of the (peaceable) mainstream as acculturated citizens. The boundary is implicitly no longer between the mainstream and all Muslims but divides a mainstream that includes peaceable Muslims from violent jihadi extremists. Interestingly, the Western media is often seen to be narratively in league with the extremists in its persistent presentation of Islam as a religion of war and violence.

Young Muslims’ counter-narratives ‘talk back’ *both* to subcultural jihadi narratives of justified violence *and* to cultural prejudices about the intolerance and violence of Islam.³ ‘Talking back’ is generally regarded as subversive (of the dominant narrative), but it can simultaneously be normative if the speaker is seeking inclusion in the dominant discursive community. The young Muslims in the study offered narrative resistance to an excluding mainstream, rejecting its characterization of Islam as a religion of aggression. They simultaneously joined forces with that mainstream in seeking the narrative exclusion of jihadi extremists. They thereby reinscribed themselves into a religiously tolerant, peaceable mainstream community, disavowing membership of the subcultural community of values invoked by the jihadi fighters and imputed to all Muslims by cultural stereotyping.

³See also van Es, cited in European Commission 2018.

Conclusion

Criminological research and theory can benefit from going beyond the more familiar variables and explanations, such as poverty, criminal networks, dysfunctional families or individual pathology, to explore the details of specific ‘criminogenic’ cultural (Ferrell *et al.* 2015) or narrative (Presser and Sandberg 2015; Fleetwood *et al.* 2019) universes. This study shows, for example, how criminology can learn from studies of everyday religion (Ammerman 2006), especially when trying to understand how everyday religious narratives can arouse, but also counter, violence and harm. Criminological research on political and religious extremism is necessarily interdisciplinary and must put criminology into dialogue with religious studies, the sociology of religion, terrorism scholarship and political science.

Narrative criminology has emphasized the particularities of stories that motivate and constrain crime and harm. Here, our underlying aim was to understand how storytelling seeks to resist both violent jihadism and the prejudices about Muslims and Islam that can lead to violence against Muslims. The young Muslims interviewed for this study offered founded rejections of jihadi stories and rhetoric. Within Muslim communities, everyday beliefs and narrative resistance to violence seem likely to influence behaviours. One must hope that the mainstream is also listening.

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