

What's in That Picture?

Humanitarian Photographs and the Christian Iconography of Suffering and Violence

Lucien van Liere

1 Introduction

In her fascinating book on war photography *The Cruel Radiance*, Susie Linfield (2012) discusses a photo made by Jerome Delay in Baghdad in 2003. The photo depicts women mourning the death of Mohammed Jaber Hassan. Together with scores of others, Hassan was a victim of a bomb attack on a market in Baghdad. The women are all dressed in chadors. This is a portrait of “deep sadness that merges into anguish”, Linfield acknowledges. In the deeply creased cheek of an elderly woman depicted in the picture she senses a universe of sorrow. But then Linfield changes her tone and continues, “looking at Delay’s picture, that universe did not encompass me or pull me in; the image created no bond between me and the Iraqi women”. She experienced no empathy, nor pain or guilt. Instead, the picture reminded her of countless other photographs “of black-draped women as they wail over their sons – and, often, celebrate them as martyrs and spur others on to new, deadly feats” (27). The image coming alive in this picture for Linfield celebrates instead of mourns death. What she saw in the photograph was not what the picture showed her. A much wider image full of conflict memory, religious difference, and visual violence, became active, took over, and prevented her from being ‘pulled in’.

Since the 19th century, photographs of humans have been used to ‘tell’ something about conflict. Latest media technologies have consequently been used to raise public awareness of human suffering (Lissner 1977; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015, 1). Since these technologies developed greatly in the 20th and 21st centuries, photographic imageries have been used to display harm, suffering, and atrocities, but also to suggest conflict-positions using binary models of innocent victims versus violent perpetrators. Christian missionaries and organizations have been at the cradle of – what is called – ‘humanitarian photography’ (Twomey 2012, 2015; Stornig 2018).

A deeper reflection from a religious studies perspective can shed an interesting light on why photographs and videos impact our understanding of

violent conflict. To contribute to such a perspective, this chapter focuses on the picturing of human bodies in conflict photography that mediates religious iconography. With 'religious iconography' I refer to visual images that are symbolically 'possessed' (see below) by visual and narrative religious traditions. I will forefront western Christian trajectories of religious imageries of suffering as signifying frames that move between the viewed and the viewer. From this perspective I pay attention to photographic portrayals of human bodies in humanitarian and atrocity photography that mimic Christian iconographies such as the suffering Christ, or the Pièta. The aim of this chapter is thus twofold: to analyze how photographs suggest binary frames, and to understand the power of photography as (partly) rooted in historic repertoires of meaningful suffering. Both trajectories are intermingled. In the following paragraphs I will therefore first pay attention to the power of pictures and critically discuss the reservations Susan Sontag formulated towards photographs as lacking complex narratives. Her comments can be understood as distrust towards how we look at photographs as indeed atrocity photographs suggest simple directories of innocent victims versus (often absent) violent perpetrators. At the same time, we need an approach towards the impact of photography on how conflict is understood and how and why some photographs 'speak' to us the way they sometimes do. Hence, in the following paragraph I will use notions from W.J.T. Mitchell on the agency of pictures. Mitchell's distinction between pictures and images helps to comprehend how certain understandings of humanitarian photography are related to religious and cultural repositories of iconized meaningful suffering. In that context, I will explore how moral humanitarian perspectives on sensational photographed suffering is at least partly based on such repositories of suffering that are stored in memorized ways of seeing. From this perspective I will describe how many humanitarian pictures share a deeply rooted rescue-narrative that may be linked to Christian soteriological trajectories of suffering, guilt, and moral response. After discussing the photographic imageries of this narrative, I will consider a few photographs that were understood by journalists and scholars within the imagery frame of this Christian iconic repository.

Before we continue, a critical note should be made. This chapter is rather explorative. Discussing regimes of seeing, interpretation, and empathy runs the danger of discussing loose, even vague relations that are far from self-evident. Still, I think it is important to explore these lines of thinking in order to comprehend more deeply how we understand conflicts based on their materialized visualizations in contemporary media and how our way of looking at visualized suffering and violence relates to the frames of meaning that are (still) active in our specific contexts. This chapter explores these lines of

thinking without any pretensions to have outlined definitive frameworks in a convincing manner. It is rather an invitation for further discussion.

2 **Visuality, Materiality, Conflict**

The materiality and visuality of violent conflict have not yet gained much attention in religion-related conflict analysis (as explained in the Introduction of this book). Yet, the visualization of violence is part and parcel of its complexity. Our understanding of what goes on in a violent conflict is nowadays heavily instructed by media coverages, videos, and photographs that suggest a certain realness of what goes on. Movies, series, games, and memes also play a role in suggesting wide frames of conflict and often propose simple moral views. Due to the rise of social media as main source of information, the rapid sharing of decontextualized pictures, user-generated recordings of events, misinformation, and deep fakes, visualizations of conflicts no longer belong solemnly to the controlled property of the big news agencies. How people's perceptions of conflict are determined by these visuality is neglected by scholars if the focus is too strongly on conflict *causes* which are often understood in rather mental terms (see Introduction). A one-sided focus can lead to an underestimation of the impact of conflict visualizations. This, while strategies of communication representing violent conflict through visual imageries have accelerated and visual interconnectivities have increased (Friis 2015, 728). These developments not only threaten mainstream media but might also endanger social stability among communities (Weimann 2006; Bräuchler 2013). Governments are concerned about the impact of these developments on public perceptions of social conflicts and make efforts to control the affects raised by photographic imageries and user-generated short videos (Butler 2010, 72).

Whereas in religious studies the analysis of visual representations of (religion-related) conflict is still weak, in racism studies and feminist studies, much more attention is given to visuality, for example by concentrating on how human bodies are portrayed and captioned within sensational photography (Smith 2004; Goldsby 2006; Wood 2009; Lydon 2016). Also in visual analysis, the medialization of pictures and how (the distribution of) photography reflects conflict-positions is addressed (Linfield 2012; Tulloch and Blood 2012; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). But in these critical studies, it is religion and religious iconography that is often a blind spot or addressed only by implication or in footnotes. Also in the analysis of power-relations as represented in humanitarian photography or in war photography, religious iconography is

often neglected. This, while some iconic conflict pictures can clearly be related to a religious archive that may direct certain conflict-perceptions. In western contexts, this archive is grounded in memorized ways of seeing and iconized visualizations, for example in photographs of mothers with wounded or dead children mimicking a Pièta (such as the world press photos of 2012 and 2017) or in photographs reminding of a crucifixion. But also wider, in the binary frames often suggested by humanitarian and atrocity photography demanding guilt and moral judgments. How we look at pictures is part of the narratives we live in. In line with this, Roxanne Brook Vigil rightfully argues that scholars should pay more attention to societal meanings that are “associated with the image that is produced as a form of narration”. Visuality is closely related to the production of meaning as “the visual component affects the way meaning is produced through violent images when they are narrated against the backdrop of society” (Brook Vigil 2017, 4–5). Let us first discuss some skeptical reservations about whether photography can make people think or whether photography (and with that the pictorial) does not pass the lines of ‘sheer entertainment’.

3 Seeing Photographs

During the First Gulf War in 1991, I was part of a critical leftist student group. To underscore our opinion about how morally wrong this war was, we distributed pictures of Iraqi child victims to raise empathy. We, or at least I, thought that seeing a picture of a suffering child would work as a wake-up call, appeal to a shared humanity, and would in the end lead to a stronger public rejection of the war. I thought these pictures were self-evident. I saw these photographed children as the source of my actions, as if they were ‘demanding’ me to tell ‘the truth’ of what happened to them. I never questioned what these pictures exactly showed: for me, these pictures were atrocity photographs showing the innocent victims of a senseless war. We were certainly not alone in thinking that photography of war victims would affect emotions of empathy. The strategy to appeal, shock, and argue by using photography of ‘vulnerable victims’ has been used by many political, religious, and human rights groups. Pictures of people in distress are widely used on the internet and in folders, by the recruitment of combatants for governments, guerilla groups, and jihadi groups, by governments and organizations, protest-groups, and interest-groups. The visualization of conflict by focusing on the tormented fragile human body is an important strategy to influence (public) opinion. Guided by their captions, pictures have become strong statements influencing opin-

ion in digital participatory cultures. But this is also what makes them things of conflict. War and atrocity photographs often suggest simple understandings of complex conflicts. The focus on bodies in conflict photography often suggests physical transgression and reduces the intricacy of conflict to a simplified moral binary of good victims and bad perpetrators. This focus can affect strong emotions. The awareness of the powerful influence of pictures on conflict-perceptions results in specific usages by conflict actors and by the sensational press and has thus also raised profound distrust.

Already in the 1970s, way before the global popularity of the internet and the mass-sharing of photographs and user-generated videos on TikTok and other platforms, Susan Sontag maintained that photography was becoming one of the “principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation” (24). Photography, including war photography, had gained enormous prominence throughout the 20th century and Sontag saw how pictures could influence human experience or even create. Being very sceptic, she clearly articulated her ambivalence in a book that would become an icon in critical visual analysis, *On Photography* (1977). The distrust towards the visual, also uttered by writers such as Roland Barthes (and earlier by Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Siegfried Kracauer) and by those (loosely) standing in Sontag’s tradition seems to be more relevant than ever (Sekula 1984; Linfield 2012). This distrust comprises criticizing the political emptiness of photography due to a lack of context and critiquing the affective affirmation of visuality as pure entertainment. Although for example Barthes admired photography, he was very skeptical about photos as sources of information and knowledge. He responded to an exhibit in Paris on so-called ‘shock-photos’ in the early 1970s saying that ‘shock-photos’ have no effect at all. They are “overstructured” and dispossess the viewer from judgment (Barthes 1979, 71). Frederic Jameson, not shy to use strong words, argued even stouter, that the emerging visual culture is essentially pornographic and has its end in “rapt, mindless fascination” (Jameson 1990, 1). Later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag succinctly summarized her opinion about photography sharply as turning events or people into objects that could be symbolically possessed (2003, 72). Although her critique was more nuanced in 2003, the political and ideological uses of the visual continued to cause her concern, not in the last place because of simplified moral understandings that tear pictures out of their contexts. Sontag’s critique remains topical. Atrocity photography and videos can be used by either side of the conflict to state arguments about what is shown, as happens at this moment of writing with visual material from the Russian-Ukrainian war. But atrocity photography not only dims the context and historical narrative of the event that was ‘captured’ and ‘shot’ but also affirms social

preferences and self-understandings of the viewers. In an analysis of American visual culture, Jeffrey Alexander (2012) for example shows how after the Second World War a narrative gradually gained popularity that stressed the extreme vulnerability of 'good' victims which resulted in new forms of identification and entertainment. Shortly after the war, photographed victims of the Shoah reached the US. While in the beginning they were included in an American rescue narrative showing the evilness of the Nazis; later however they became the objective 'proof' of what modern people are capable of. Alexander points to *The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum* in Washington, DC, where visitors were invited to 'experience' the story of extermination (89). The museum works with pictures of victims to tell the story. Edward Linenthal, American historian and consultant of the museum, is quoted by Alexander as arguing that the faces "of Holocaust victims in the exhibition are shattering in their power (...). The faces (...) assault, challenge, accuse, and profoundly sadden visitors throughout the exhibition" (quoted in Alexander, 90).¹ At this point the victims are frozen in pictures, are 'endangered' by entertainment (see also Adorno 1992 [1958], 88) and become 'symbolically possessed' by the narratives of the audience.

4 Feeling Photographs

Sontag's main point of critique on photography is that photographs lack narratives. The pictures shown in a museum do not 'tell', and if they tell, it is just a suggestion that leave the interpretation to the viewer. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler has criticized precisely this point in Sontag's account. Deriving from the idea that interpretations of photographs are more than subjective acts and "take place by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect", she allows for the photograph itself to become a "structuring scene of interpretation", that may "unsettle both maker and viewer in its turn" (Butler 2010, 67). Butler's comments open a way to look at a picture and 'see' how it 'speaks'. How do unsettling photographs have agencies that overwhelm us? Why was I convinced that war photos of children in distress could confront even the harshest promotor of the war in Iraq with the consequences of his or her inhumane point of view? Look at these children!

Especially since the 'pictorial turn', that famously gained momentum through the works of W.J.T. Mitchell, the harsh skepticism towards pictures and

1 For the controversies and difficulties around the museum, see Linenthal 2001.

photographs that became mainstream criticism on the political left, has been a bit nuanced. Not that the power of visuality as a medium to neutralize war and suffering as an 'experience' was denied or neglected. Rather, the idea that texts, rationality, thinking, or – in Mitchell's own words – “[l]inguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, various models of ‘textuality’” (Mitchell 1995, 11) should prevail as critical frames to approach visuality, as if what we see only depends on what we know, or, as if knowing should precede seeing, is put into perspective (16). The visual is, so to say, not a sheer projection of the rational. As Martin Jay had concluded in his landmark study on the denigration of vision in French philosophy one year earlier, “there is no privileged vantage point outside the hermeneutic circle of sight as perceptual experience, social practice, and discursive construct” (Jay 1994, 587). Would it then be possible that even though pictures cannot escape our projections, something might break through? Something maybe that does not per definition affirms what we want to see or how we like to be entertained, but something that is more deeply embedded in our biological and cultural histories? Horst Bredekamp has coined the term “image acts” to point to the ‘agency’ of pictures as they make people think and act (Bredekamp 2010). There seems to be a powerful ‘image’ in pictures of suffering that impacts on the viewer, convinces the viewer of a certain realness that lies beyond the flat reality of ‘just’ a photograph. Putting this in an even wider perspective and blurring the lines between discourse and picture, Helle Palu writes in an article on visual representation and the US war on terror that words “are not only words, but at the same time pictures, too. Metaphors are not only words or verbal expressions, but they are at the same time mental images in use, and very often these mental images in use are realised as visual images in use” (Palu 2011, 175). This complex of visuality, discourse, and imagery, is highly relevant for the analysis of conflict pictures in religious contexts, as I will show. Pictures are the visual grammar of conflict that uplifts ‘what goes on’ to a transcendent level of religion, politics, and human rights.

The power of a picture in relation to human emotions and social embeddings, what a picture can ‘do’, cannot thus simply be reduced to emptiness or mindless fascination, as Jameson would have it. The flat and blunt portrayals of human bodies in pain can shock anyway and not only with the background knowledge of a compound narrative. Photographs, so to say, are part and parcel of the epistemology of conflict. Discussing the agency of pictures, Mitchell says in an interview that a picture is “at least potentially a kind of vortex, or ‘black hole’ that can ‘suck in’ the consciousness of a beholder, and at the same time (and for the same reason) ‘spew out’ an infinite series of reflections” (Grønstad and Vågnes 2006, 1). Pictures do have a certain ‘agency’ and may

arouse 'unconscious' trajectories. However, pictures do not work outside the communities that senses them symbolically. Randall Collins describes how close-ups during memorial meetings for 9/11 victims that were broadcasted on American TV channels created emotional participation and entrainment among the viewers at home. The faces shown were faces that mourned the victim(s). "These long-distance rituals can give a sense of shared emotion, solidarity, and respect for symbolism" he claims (Collins 2004, 55). Especially the televised presentation of close-up faces that mourn the dead in the context of symbols like flags and national anthems, charge these symbols emotionally with meaning and create a feeling of being a community under attack (see Marvin and Ingle 1999).

In Mitchell's view, the image is something that does not belong to the picture but might cause feelings of nausea, shock, or amazement while looking at the picture. An image is, Mitchell writes, "any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other" (Mitchell 2005, xiii–xiv). The potency of pictures creating feelings of a black hole, is unthinkable without the image and reveals the diffuse embeddedness of pictures in wide political, cultural, religious imageries. Images belong so to say to the subjective domain of (collective) memories stored in cultural representations, (local) epistemologies, and – indeed – religious archives that determine up till a certain extent what we see in a picture and how we respond to it with empathy, guilt, anger, or disgust. "Image acts" (Bredenkamp 2010) 'speak' not in the void. This counts especially for 'images' of suffering that have a rich history in western iconographies and have become 'iconic' images that appear in various pictures. Iconicity collects material and discursive representations in a historic continuum. In this sense, iconicity is not per definition religious but (also) historical and always archival. In western imageries for example, pictures of Shoah-survivors are part of such a non-religious memorized way of seeing. In line with this, the photograph taken of Fikret Ali and other inmates at the Trnopolje camp in the Prijedor region during the war in Bosnia depicted these men as emaciated and behind barbed wires. The picture was published on the cover of *Time Magazine* in August 1992 with the caption "Must It Go On?" The photograph reminded many of the Nazi death camp pictures that were taken just after the liberation of these camps. At least partly due to this 'image', in Mitchell's sense, the picture of Fikret Ali caused heated debates in the press (see Campbell 2002). For many, the photograph roused a complex mix of somatic shorting and cultural-historic fascination through which the historic imagery erupted. Also, earlier, during the Biafran war (1967–1970) photographs of starving children were widely published and compared to photographs of children from Nazi concentration camps. Although the Shoah had

not yet received the symbolic core in western memory culture it had reached in the 1990s (see Alexander 2012), Lasse Heerten has convincingly shown how “the visual interconnection between Biafra and the Holocaust” contributed highly to how westerners understood what was going on (Heerten 2015, 253). Photographs of mostly groups of people, often children, reached the front pages of western magazines. Heerten observes that also in captions they were never given a voice to speak of their own. “The agency to speak – and to act – lies entirely within the Western observer” (256), he writes. The famine of Biafra was fully placed within the imagery of the Shoah. A decade after the Biafran war, in 1977, the same year Sontag published her critical study, Jørgen Lissner addressed, as one of the first, the problematic relationship between representation and imagery in humanitarian photography and argued that such photographs of starving and malnourished children widened the gap between those representing (humanitarian organizations from ‘the North’ in search for funding) and those represented (the poor South in need of rescue) (Lissner 1977).

5 An Archive of Iconic Suffering

I think it is important to save the possibility that human physical responses of disgust, nausea, and shock can be pre-rational responses to what is perceived without explaining these responses by rationalizing all emotions to socio-political and religious imageries and narratives. However, my concern here is predominantly with the way photographs contribute to religion-related conflict positions which means that I am interested in what photographs ‘do’, and how they are part of the material infrastructure of suffering and meaning.

Scholars of visual culture point to historic trajectories that have become part of our cultural pictorial memory and determine up till a certain extend what we recognize, how we respond to pictures, and what we think we see. ‘Seeing’ is a creative and selective process that combines what is seen with a pictorial repository and individual and social needs (see Jokeit and Blochwitz 2020, 445). Although scholars often refer to photos that remind of such pictorial repositories of suffering and consolation (for example Caruso 2016, 78; Merziger 2018, 244), clear lines between western Christian iconography and current ways of understanding responses to humanitarian and atrocity photography are not drawn by most authors. Indeed, these lines are not clear most of the time but, as I argued, a careful exploration of how iconized visuality of conflict impacts on conflict understandings (and even conflict policies) is an important venture that is very much needed. I will shortly draw a few historic

lines of this repository to explore how humanitarian and atrocity photographs can become iconized through modern-day media by containing references to visualized Christian representations of meaningful suffering.

For a long time, suffering had a deeply religious and political meaning in Christian European cultures. If suffering was portrayed in visual arts, it was often the justified suffering of sinners, heretics, and enemies, or the unjust suffering of martyrs, Biblical figures, and Christ. Visual violence was meaningful, educational, and virtuous. Religious arts portraying human suffering could (and still can) fascinate without shock for what is seen, as this was/is part of a collective narrative iconicity, both memorable and recognizable. Historian Valentin Groebner (2004) describes how towards the end of the Middle Ages the physical agony of Christ was depicted abundantly in arts and plays in European cities (see also Terry-Fritsch and Labbie 2012; Marculescu 2016). This was not only done to move the viewer and for entertainment purposes. Groebner also points to the imagery that appears in these pictures as significations of the social world in which they were made and showed. The bloody suffering of Christ so to say charged perspectives on human suffering, but also moral ideas on justified suffering. Timothy Gorrige, in his study on religious and secular trajectories of atonement, writes that “the death of Christ dominated the ‘structures of affect’ of Europe for five hundred years, and in so doing they pumped retributivism into the legal bloodstream” (1996, 224). In the Middle Ages, public executions “in the cities were often strikingly described in a Christological tenor”, writes Groebner (225). The spectacle of the scaffold participated in the bloody image of Christ. For the viewer, legal punishment coincided with the visual religious imagery of retaliation and retribution. Interestingly, in the course of history, the human body became increasingly part of visual entertainment. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the bodies of saints and of Christ as portrayed in the arts, became more sexualized and violence more graphic.² Art historian Stephen Eisenman writes about the erotization of suffering in western paintings and sculptures. Retributivism became, so to say, more articulated. Based on Leo Steinberg’s famous study *The Sexualization of Christ*, Eisenman writes that “Christ at the moment of his crucifixion is often depicted as intensely beautiful, even sexually aroused” (Eisenman 63). Christ’s body became more painted with physical details. This gave him a more human appearance, parallel to developments in theology and

2 For example, the famous *Saint Sebastian* paintings by Guido Reni (1615) or by Peter Paul Rubens (1614), or earlier in renaissance paintings of Christ on the cross like the *Man of Sorrows* by Maertan van Heemskerck (1532) or the *Crucifixion* by Lucas Cranach (also 1532).

philosophy (Taylor 2007). The violated human body fused with the image of meaning, narrative, devotion, and theology to become the picture of Christ. The suffering Christ, saints, heretics, and enemies were all part of a regime of judgment and retribution, but these images also had impact on how suffering was understood and called up the believer to relate to the pain of Christ who suffered *pro nobis*. Suffering was part and parcel of a great narrative of meaning. Thomas Laqueur (1989) describes how views on the suffering human body in the 18th and 19th centuries were still strongly rooted in ideas of the physicality of Christianity and its emphasis on the body of Christ. While this body had been the central focus of Christian devotion, mediating between suffering and acts of mercy, another trajectory appeared in these centuries, deeply rooted in this Christian imagery, namely the suffering of the individual that “came to have a power of its own” without referring only to the regimes of transcendent judgment (177). This enabled the imagination to “penetrate” the life of another, writes Laqueur, and he continues: “Humanitarian narrative exposes the lineaments of causality and of human agency: ameliorative action is represented as possible, effective, and therefore morally imperative” (178).

In this context it might not come as a surprise that towards the end of the 19th century, photographs of suffering of non-westerners to raise empathy among communities in ‘the West’ at an organized level first appeared in the context of Christian missionaries and organizations. The Indian famines of the 1870s and 1890s were brought to mostly Christian European, American, and Australian audiences through photographs (Twomey 2012). Heather Curtis (2012; 2015) shows how photographs of this famine were abundantly spread among American evangelicals. Since the introduction of the first portable Kodak in 1888 and fast developing printing techniques it became possible to print photographs in magazines. Photographs were, contrary to engravings, seen as true pictures. The Indian famine was one of the first photographed human disasters that was published by press agencies. The purpose of showing these photographs was clear and framed in virtuous terms. As Curtis writes, “by combining images of suffering people with graphic narratives of misery, publicists sought to stimulate American spectators to engage in benevolent action” (Curtis 2012, 157). The photographs were used to shock and raise empathy. Curtis writes that especially US evangelicals were at the cradle of this kind of – what she calls – “pictorial humanitarianism”, the use of images of suffering as instruments for producing sympathetic feelings and raise money for missionary or humanitarian projects. A decade later saw the first clear case of atrocity photography when photographs of the atrocities in the Congo Free State became known to a European audience through campaigns with lecture and lantern, also organized by missionaries. These were especially photos of

children posing with severed limbs and dressed in white clothes to dramatize the amputations (Grant 2015, 64–89; Linfield 2012, 48–50). Grant, referring to Jacobsen (2014), writes that although scholars have understood photographs of the Congo Free State mainly in secular terms, “it was Protestant missionaries who established the basic narrative structure in which the photographs were situated, and these missionaries initially spoke not of rights but Christian duties” (Grant 65). Analyzing the photo-archive of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the wake of the First World War, Francesca Piana writes in a similar vein that

[T]he ICRC relied on both Swiss and Western cultures and morality. Christian symbols as well as a religious sense of ‘sin’ underpinned images, which a virtuous and civilized audience was expected to respond to by giving money. The immobility of victims, visual references to the crucifix, images evoking Madonna holding Jesus as well as of saints and martyrs were some of the elements characterizing the ICRC’s iconography of victimhood. (Piana 2015, 153)

It is too far-fetched to draw clear lines between these histories of iconic suffering and current conflict photography. It is however at least interesting to see that conflict photography in western countries depicting non-western conflicts, echoes trajectories of retribution that are embedded in Christian archives of meaningful suffering. Photographs and viewers are entangled in a dialectic process of pain and rescue. Evoking confrontation, they work within a regime of a (secularized) hamartiology. This process gives agency to the image. Linfield writes that “every image of suffering says not only ‘This is so’, but also, by implication, ‘This must not be’, not only, ‘This goes on’, but also, by implication, ‘This must stop’” (Linfield 2012, 33). Up till a certain extent this becomes also visible in the way war photographers reflect upon what they do. James Nachtwey for example writes that documentary photographers provide a fundamental service: “they inform, or educate, a mass audience in order to reform the conditions that are responsible for the suffering of large numbers of people” (Nachtwey 2009, 4). One of the war photographer’s tasks, Nachtwey contends, is to “reveal the unjust and the unacceptable, so that their images become an element in the process change” (Nachtwey, 5). Although a clear Christian iconography went often missing in the 20th and 21st centuries, moral frames in which atrocity photography is frequently put, still echoes this long tradition of meaning-making, suffering as revelation, and devotion as awareness. In the by the mass media exploited photographic portrayals of ‘innocent victims’, and in the recognition of (unintentional) victims as martyrs, one

might recognize devotional trajectories around the innocent Christ and the unjust but 'revealing' suffering of martyrs.

6 The Basic Narrative Structure of Victimhood and Rescue

Photography has played an increasingly important role in many situations of violent conflict. In the history of atrocity photography, especially children and women have often been portrayed as victims. This is interesting because the traditional iconography depicts mostly males as victims and women as devoted and consoling. We will later see that especially the suffering of males evokes iconic trajectories of the suffering Christ, while that of women and children evoke more clearly the religious and humanitarian binary we discussed above. I will first pay attention to this photographic framing of women and children.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, writes Heide Fehrenbach, suffering children "were increasingly pictured with mothers in variations of the well-known Christian tropes of Madonna and child or the Pièta" (2015, 167). In a similar vein, Peter Balakian, writing about the photographic imagery of the Armenian genocide, points to Victorian Christianity's ideal of childhood. Seeing gritty photographs of dead children, or begging children, evoked "deeply felt notions of the child as innocence endangered, defiled by evil, in need of rescue from the heathen" (Balakian 2015, 111). After 1945, photographs of children became ubiquitous in the publications and campaigns of religious and secular NGOs and international humanitarian organizations (Fehrenbach 2015, 167). It cannot come as a surprise that pictures of children in despair can activate a register of strong feelings and responses and are therefore often used by NGOs and interest-groups to define a conflict as disastrous and unjust. Even so, Kate Manzo writes about an iconography that uses modern western childhood for humanitarian identity strategies (Manzo 2008, see also Piana 2015, 156). For example, a photo of the 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh from Aleppo (2016), sitting at the backseat of an ambulance while looking shellshocked was widely featured by western media as a way to relate to the humanitarian crisis in war-ravaged Syria. According to Omran's father however, the photo was used by rebel groups for propaganda as he told a reporter of Iran's Al-Alam TV (BBC News 2017). According to CNN-reporter A.J. Willingham, commenting on photos like this and echoing a Christian trajectory explained by Balakian (above), the reason why many indelible images are often of children, is that while "war seeks to paint in black and white, good and evil; a child is never the enemy. And yet, they are so often the victims. To see a child this way is to see war without

politics or ideologies. What's left underneath is just crushing human sorrow" (Willingham, compare Balakian 110–1). This view is often expressed by scholars of visual analysis and photography (Linfield, 130–3). It is clear how portrayals of child victims influence how people can grasp the legitimacy of conflict.³ Despite Willingham's view however, many photographs do raise political, ideological, or religious views precisely because they depict children and suggest a conflict frame of strong violent perpetrators and defenseless innocent victims. 'Innocent' children, in a sense, recount the innocence of the sufferer in classic iconic portrayals. Both trajectories suggest perpetration without visualization, a moralized lens in which only the innocent 'reveals' the truth and calls for retribution, whether within a religious or in a humanitarian frame. Linfield writes that children represent the "ur-human". Although photographs of children are no more political explanatory, she contends, they are often understood to "expose the wounding of innocents" (Linfield 130). Precisely this power of pictures raises imageries and narratives about who did the wounding and may suggest "rapt" binary frames on innocence versus guilty.

The idealization of the victim within a binary frame of pure versus impure, peaceful versus violent, innocent versus guilty constructs the power of the image which contributes strongly to political and gendered interpretations. "In contemporary humanitarianism", Marta Zarzycka argues, "poor, indigenous, and displaced communities are frequently both feminized and constructed as child-like – helpless, immature, erratic" (Zarzycka, 2015). Women and children are, so to say, more suitable as ideal victims than males in their prime (Christie, 1996, see also: Moeller 1999, 107). Pictured as the 'ideal victims' however, they suggest configurating ideas of power and perpetration. Dubravka Žarkov describes in her detailed study *The Body of War* on representations of female and male bodies in the Serbian and Croatian press before and during the Balkan War how the victimized female body "is one of the most powerful metaphors in the violent production of collective identities. The ubiquity and visibility of these practices continue to produce women as victims only, and as the only victims, denying women both subjectivity and agency and denying men their vulnerability" (Žarkov 178). According to Žarkov, this scheme

3 An example Andrew Silke (2005) gives is the Provisional IRA bombing in Warrington, England, on March 20, 1993, in which two children, a three-year-old boy and one twelve-year-old boy, were killed. The boys' deaths were widely reported. *The Daily Mirror* posted a photo of the youngest victim, Jonathan Ball, on its cover titled "Sacrificed. And For What?". A peace march was organized in Dublin. An IRA sympathizer who wanted to join the demonstration along with some other members noticed that the protesters were actually furious with the IRA. Britain had suffered many attacks, including earlier in 1993, but the Warrington attack in which two children were killed, changed the mood. After this attack, the IRA no longer focused on shopping centers and other civilian targets, but on economic targets.

produces dominant binary categories of femininity and masculinity through notions of those who endure and those who perpetrate violence. Also, in an article on photojournalism, human rights, and the US war in Afghanistan (2001–2021), Wendy Kozol writes how a strong (feminist) critique has been expressed against what she calls the politics of pity in photojournalism, depicting “Third World” women as victims in need of rescue (Kozol 2014, 191). Kozol sharply describes how the post-9/11 retaliation narrative in the US was combined with a rescue narrative on suppressed women. By presenting precarity within a Eurocentric rescue narrative, “racialized” sentiments about Afghan women became part of the US rhetorical justifications for waging war (196). In the wake of the war, AP photographs pictured women that were less veiled or not on the run as refugees, as women’s progress towards a western imagery of gender liberation. “Crucially, in the months after the fall of the Taliban, many photographs visualized women as newly constituted citizens through participatory acts in a global commercial culture” (202). After the Taliban retook Kabul in August 2021, photographs of veiled women reappeared in the western press, stressing the re-emergence of non-participatory positions of women in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. They became again women in need of rescue. The feminization and the framing of children as innocent victims point to the continuation of soteriological scripts in humanitarian photography that work through binary frames of innocence versus guilt and victimhood versus perpetration. Also, many of these photos suggest a regime of judgment, based on human rights instead of Christian values. Still, Christian scripts that have long been part of the western imagination seep into humanitarian photography: retribution, redemption, judgment. These scripts contribute at least partly to the power of images that appears in conflict photography. This is not to say that Christianity forms the fundamental frame to understand this photography and its impact. My perspective comes from a different angle: certain imageries (in Mitchell’s sense) from an iconographical religious past that is related to meaningful suffering are still at work in pictures of conflict photography. These imageries inspire how we look at certain conflicts and activate rescue-narratives that can be seen as the cultural echoes of trajectories of retribution, conversion, and transcendent judgment.

7 Iconic Power

While sharply criticizing the projection of a Eurocentric humanitarian visual discourse on Afghan women in need of liberation, say, the ‘symbolic possessions’ (Sontag) of objectified pictures, Kozol neglects the deep soteriological notions of Christian European missions and virtuous ideas of duties that echo

not only in the photograph (what is shown) but also in the responses of viewers that create at least partly the fuel for her criticism. She stresses photographs predominantly as power-frames drenched in cultural-political assumptions of progression and humanitarianism. However, discussing the impact of photography on conflict perspectives should also take the deeply rooted iconic power of pictures into account. Photographs might emit an iconic power for the viewer, which roots the picture deeply into the 'image' of religion and culture. This iconic repository contributes to the sensations and meaning-attributions of photographs. Photo critic John Berger for example describes how in October 1967, when a picture was published in his evening paper with the dead body of Che Guevara, this reminded him of Mantegna's painting of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1490). But although Mantegna's painting tells a story, as was the purpose of paintings in the 15th century, the publication of a photograph of Guevara's dead body in a newspaper has a sharp political meaning, Berger maintains, namely in which this body becomes a mere object of demonstration. Not to demonstrate the horror of death, and certainly not the suffering of the innocent, but, at "the instant of horror, the identity of Guevara and, allegedly, the absurdity of revolution" (Berger 2013 [1967], 9). Berger's notion raises the question of how pictures join iconographic trajectories and how this contributes to both their success and to their conflictual potential. Berger's memory of Mantegna's painting brought him to the sharp political meaning of what was meant by showing Guevara's dead body.

Still, it is not easy to understand how the iconic power of photographs exactly work and certainly not all photographs have this power. The question then remains is how Berger's 'remembrance' and that of many others pointing to religious iconic images appearing in photographs are recognized and determine conflict understandings. This question is somewhat different from the one I tried to answer above, which focused on themes that are part of a religious archive, such as redemption and judgment, themes still belonging to the missionary western zeal. The central question now concerns the pictographic tradition of religious iconography.

Dominik Bartmanski and Jeffrey Alexander write that objects "become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power". But this is not enough, they contend, because to be 'successful' and have impact, viewers need to have – what they call – an "iconic consciousness when they experience material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force" (Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 1). In a similar vein, Robert Haiman and John Lucaites define an iconic photograph as "an aesthetical familiar form of civic performance coordinating an array of semiotic transcriptions that

project an emotional scenario to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis" (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 29). This sheds another light on Sontag's critique of photographs becoming objects that can symbolically be possessed. Indeed, the subject of possession is itself possessed by the aesthetical force that appears in the picture, a relation the subject has with a complex history of shared iconicity. The subject's response belongs so to say to the script as the response of the audience belongs to the script of the passion-play. For Berger, the full victory over Guevara's death became sensible when the photograph reminded him of Mantegna's painting of Christ.

Photographs not only evoke moral judgments, as the paintings and statues of the crucified did and still do, but also depict the human body as vulnerable against a background of sheer injustice. This sharp binary is part of the icon-making of modern humanitarian photography in which the bodies of individuals are depicted as violated against the backdrop of often anonymous perpetrating powers. These photographs suggest disproportionate power-relations and sensational approaches of basic contradictions that give these pictures an iconic status. In the following paragraph I will discuss three cases in which conflict photographs were integrated into Christian iconographies. The emphasis here is on how the audience 'captured' conflict photographs within Christian iconographies of suffering.

8 Iconic Photographs

On 22 September 1997, Hocine Zaourar, a war photographer working for Agence France-Presse, took a picture in a local hospital in Benthala, just south of Algiers. The picture shows a crying woman who seems to be comforted by another. The picture was a rare image of the Algerian civil war (1991–2002) and would become World Press Photo of the year in 1997. Zaourar took the photograph a day after a massacre of hundreds of civilians by insurgents. The photograph was almost immediately published in about 750 journals and newspapers worldwide and was captioned by *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* as "a Madonna in hell" (Flood 2017, 115). Juliette Hanrot has argued that the photograph gained popularity in Western countries because of its appeal to a Christian iconography of suffering (Hanrot and Clévenot 2012, 111). Captions dramatized this image by mentioning that this woman had lost eight of her children during a raid a day before although later it became clear that the woman in the picture, Oum Saad, was grieving for three other relatives, not her children. However, positioning her "as a mother mourning the loss of her eight children", Joseph McGonagle writes, "draws parallels with notions

of motherhood worldwide" (McGonagle 2014, 80). The misinformation of a grieving mother allowed many media to draw relations between the picture and romanticized Madonna-iconographies. This may surely have contributed to becoming the World Press Photo of the year. Maria Flood notes that "the association of the woman in the picture with a Christian imaginary of suffering points not only to the Eurocentrism of Western viewers, but also highlights a certain Occidental gaze on non-Western suffering, embodied, in this case, in the figure of the passive female victim" (2017, 116). This way, non-Western suffering implodes into iconic epistemologies of Western suffering. Distant viewers are not just receivers of information on suffering, Paul Frosh writes, but are "performative co-constructors of witnessing" (Frosh 2009, 60) and may as such determine the understanding of conflict. In this case, these co-constructors 'converted' a Muslim woman into a Catholic Pièta.

In another case, the image of Christ appeared for many in a photograph of the scene where Matthew Shepard had been murdered. Shepard, a 21-year-old gay student at the University of Wyoming in the US was killed in 1998 by two men after a car ride. He was found near a wooden crossrail fence and barbed wires in a meadow. A mountain biker found him and at first thought Shepard's body was a scarecrow. This comparison to a scarecrow, and an "(erroneous) image of Shepard tied in spread-eagle fashion that this called to mind, would be much cited in the coverage and cultural imagery of his murder" (Petersen 2011, 24). A picture of the murder-scene with the crossrail fence and barbed wires contributed to interpretations of martyrdom. Shepard had been widely portrayed in visual arts as a modern 'gay martyr', a saint, or a Christ-figure (Cherry 2020). Paul Middleton writes that the ability of 'America' to identify with Shepard *and* "the Christological imagery drawn from the well of American religiosity" and the "contestation of Shepard by some ultraconservative religious groups", construed the success of the story (Middleton 2020, 192). He observes that "for a martyr narrative to work, it must emphasize community boundaries and create an outside, 'evil other'" (190) which means that the impact of a picture cannot be derived from the religious script alone; the religious imagery is part and parcel of a tradition in which conflict-frames are suggested. The haunting image of the suffering Christ or of the tortured martyr contains a strong conflict-frame that continue to refer to vulnerable victims and often absent aggressive perpetrators. Shepard's 'iconization' into this binary regime of innocence versus cruelty, thrives on robust trajectories of collective memories of romanticized martyrdom within Christian American communities.

Iconization also became visible in the reframing of an execution video. In 2015, a video was published by *al Hayat Media Center* and showed the beheading of 21 migrant workers by a branch of Islamic State at a waterfront near

Tripoli. The victims were dressed in the gear of Abu Ghraib while the perpetrators were dressed in black ninja-style clothes. The video was clearly made with the aim of generating impact on the internet using sharp contrasts in colors and positions. In the middle stood a man who identified the victims as “crusaders” and argued that their action was a retaliation for the oppression of Coptic women willing to convert to Islam in Egypt (see Van Liere 2020a for a context-analysis). The video generated an enormous response among political and religious leaders, in newspaper articles, and on social media. In many cases, the victims were clearly reframed in Coptic and Catholic iconic scripts of martyrdom. Stills from the video featured on internet platforms with captions referring to Islamic State and Coptic Christians, adding to perspectives of Christians in Egypt and elsewhere as structurally persecuted by an ‘aggressive’ Islam (Van Liere 2020a). Offline in Egypt, the faces of the victims were iconized within Coptic trajectories of martyrdom whilst appearing on banners and murals. Online, some stills were artistically reframed into iconographies of martyrdom and some artworks creatively added the presence of a Jesus-figure. For example, one painting, uploaded on Flickr a few weeks after the video was featured, depicts Jesus wearing his cross ahead of the men who are about to be executed (Montgomerie). The painting pulls the atrocity into a religious frame and spews out, to use Mitchell’s phrasing, in a series of images. In artworks like this, the atrocity becomes more than an act of violence and the ‘meaning’ of the beheading as given by the perpetrators in the video, is turned upside down. The victims who are dressed in the gear of Abu Ghraib and ‘convicted’ as categorical retaliation now transform into martyrs, becoming ‘witnesses’ of the suppression of the Coptic church and of Christians worldwide by Islamists. The victims are given meaning within a wide historical continuum in which they are ‘saved’. Interestingly, artworks such as paintings are used to reframe pictured or videoed violence and provide clear meanings based on religious iconography. This also happened with the photographs of Saad and Shepard. This sheds an interesting light on the observation made by Sontag, namely that paintings tell stories while photographs do not. In these cases, we see how photographs and stills from a video become narrated within artworks and reframed into well-known religious scripts.

The suffering of Oum Saad, Matthew Shepard, and the migrant workers⁴ has promptly been elevated into strong social imageries of religious groups,

4 The names of the victims are: Bishoy Adel Khalaf, Samuel Alhoam Wilson, Hany Abdel-Masih Salib, Melad Mackeen Zaki, Abanoub Ayad Attia, Ezzat Bushra Nassif, Yousef Shokry Younan, Kirillos Shukry Fawzy, Majed Suleiman Shehata, Somali Stéphanos Kamel, Malak Ibrahim Siniot, Bishoy Stéphanos Kamel, Mena Fayez Aziz, Girgis Melad Sniout, Tawadros Youssef Tawadros, Essam Badr Samir, Luke Ngati, Jaber Mounir Adly, Malak Faraj Abram, Sameh Salah Farouk, Matthew Ayariga.

not only inscribing these photographs and stills into iconic trajectories (that gave them at least up till a certain extent their power) but also providing them with a soteriological frame of rescue and redemption and thus contributing to a conflict-perspective of victims and perpetrators along religious lines.

9 Christ at Abu Ghraib

As shown in the cases above, conflict photographs can be uploaded to 'iconic epistemologies', that is: knowledge charged with iconic repositories and intermingled understandings of meaning. In this final part I will discuss a case from the Abu Ghraib photographs of prison abuse by American GIs in Iraq. The photographs were widely published in late April 2004 and appeared everywhere in journals, magazines, on websites, including websites promoting violence (like the Muntada al-Ansar website), as well as on human rights platforms. Since 2004, an enormous amount of academic and opining articles, studies, and reports appeared around the case, as well as documentaries such as Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedures* (2008) and movies for a larger public like *The Boys of Abu Ghraib* (dir. Luke Moran 2014) and *The Report* (dir. Scott Z. Burns, 2019). The impact of the photographs was enormous and still resounds in many academic and political statements and publications, not only in the English-speaking Western countries but also in the Middle East. US Major Alexander Maxwell (pseudonym) noted (quoted by R. Gordon) that the abuses and torture in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib have contributed more to the support for Al Qaida than any Islamic ideology or theology (Gordon 2014, 164). Also, US general Stanley McChrystal, who held several command positions in the coalition wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wrote in his memoirs that "In my experience, we found that nearly every first-time jihadist claimed Abu Ghraib had first jolted him into action" (McChrystal 2013, 172). The Abu Ghraib pictures and narratives generated several circles of violence. For example, the beheading of Nicholas Berg in 2004 is seen as a response to 'Abu Ghraib' (see van Liere 2020a; 2020b). The crooked power balance emitted by the pictures was not only articulated in dress versus naked, high versus low, but also and maybe even especially so by the guards shown relaxed and laughing over their prisoners.⁵

5 This article is not the place to discuss humor and violence but this relation and how humiliation that is guided by the visible pleasure of perpetrators causes fierce responses remains largely underexposed in academia.

Of the few hundred pictures that were made public (out of approximately 16,000) one particular picture became a metonym for Abu Ghraib while it was picked up again and again by journalists, cover designers, and webmasters in the West: the hooded prisoner who was nicknamed 'Gilligan' (Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh) by his guards, with a black hood and wires on his hands, his arms spread. Interestingly, to my knowledge, the picture that was widely published in the Middle East was the photograph in which a scared prisoner was driven into a corner by a guard and a black dog. Osama bin Laden commented on this photograph at length, 'seeing' the true powers of 'America' revealed in the impurity of this dog (see van Liere 2020b).

Shortly after the pictures were published, Mitchell wrote a short opining article in the *Chicago Tribune* about the hooded man with his arms spread: "Whatever the truth about the person under the hood, his image has become the globally circulated icon of the war in Iraq". The reason for this hooded man to become such an icon was, writes Mitchell, that he seemed to be "what we used to call a 'Christ figure.'" This specific use evoked "a long history of images that unite figures of torture and sacredness or divinity" (Mitchell 2004). In a later publication, Mitchell (2011) understands the iconic 'image' as having two bodies "shuttling between sovereignty and abjection, terror suspect and torture victim, criminal and martyr"; an ambivalence between state power (Christian democracy and enlightenment) and religion (Muslim tyranny and idolatry) evoked by the iconography of Christ (158–9). Mitchell is surely not alone in seeing a 'Christ figure' in 'Gilligan'. John Paul also wrote that upon seeing the pictures, he felt he had already seen them before, and links the pictures to trajectories of Christian representations of the mockery and torture of Christ in western art history (Paul 2011, see also Eisenman). Afterwards, questions were raised of whether this was a 'real' situation of torture or that the picture was misleading (Linfield, 157–8) but a Christ-figure was widely recognized in the picture.

Sabrina Harman, the photographer of many other Abu Ghraib pictures, later said that she couldn't phantom the public fascination with the Gilligan photograph. "There were so many worse photo's out there", she said, "nothing negative happened to him really". He wasn't tortured, she claimed. Harman couldn't see the iconic power of precisely this photograph. Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris acknowledge the association with Jesus on the cross, but a picture must be ghastly to behold, they write, and pictures of Jesus are part of religious imaginations. Rather, they explain the fascination for precisely this photo as an image of carnival weirdness that is mysterious, a primal scene of martyrdom, while at the same time a symbol of what "we know" was wrong at Abu Ghraib (Gourevitch and Morris 2008). How can this picture be a symbol

of what “we know” was wrong? Again, also this picture, as many pictures of Abu Ghraib, emits strong disbalances of power which contributes to its iconicity. Although in many other pictures of Abu Ghraib the power-relations are physically presented in dichotomic visualities like dressed versus naked, up versus down, standing versus lying, the Gilligan photograph visualizes sheer victimhood and tranquility at the same time. Faleh was standing on a box in a gesture of surrender while every move could be deadly. It is a picture of a world being threatened but standing still.

At this point, art historian Stephen Eisenman contends, based on the same photograph, that images of torture, power, and domination, are a transgenerational part of western cultural history. He argues that the Abu Ghraib pictures were both shocking and familiar. The trajectory or, as Mitchell would have it, ‘image’ that appears in these pictures is the human body “as something willingly alienated by the victim (...) for the sake of the pleasure and aggrandizement of the oppressor” (Eisenman 16). Eisenman uses the Pathos-formula, coined by Aby Warburg, to label this iconic trajectory which portrays the victim as a willing sacrifice to the omnipotent power, something that is abundantly visualized in Roman and Christian art (for example Christ as willing sacrifice). The tranquility of Faleh’s picture that gained momentum together with the threat of electrocution seems to fit well within this frame of subjectivized victimhood, something most other published pictures from Abu Ghraib are lacking. It is at this point striking to see that especially males who suffer ‘unjust violence’ are integrated into martyr narratives and iconographies of the crucified Christ, like Shepard and ‘Gilligan’.

The visualized difference in most other pictures between cheerful guards and mostly low-positioned (half-)naked prisoners also evokes for many a more categorical perspective on difference with ‘religious social identity’ as a schismatic imagery. The fact that (most?) prisoners were Muslims possibly influenced the scenario of torture in which men were forced to go naked, masturbate, take in erotic poses, or wearing women’s underwear; forced differences that links to the western imagination of a squeamish and sexually interesting ‘Islam’. American imam Abdul Malik Mujahid wrote shortly after the pictures were published that the “photos of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners have stunned and disgusted the world. But it is their sexual humiliation that is garnering much of the attention”, and he continues: “Unlike what some in America lead us to believe, no one hates America in the Muslim world because of democracy and freedom. It is the immorality of America (...), along with American foreign policy which defines the conflict between the Westernized elite and religious elements in Muslim societies” (Mujahid 2004). For Mujahid, the pictures were part of a bigger continuum of a “Westernized elite” and

“Muslim societies”. Joseph Pugliese also writes in a similar vein that the pictures compel viewers to “bear testimony to the deployment and enactment of absolute US imperial power on the bodies of the Arab prisoners through the organizing principles of white supremacist aesthetics that intertwine violence (...) with Orientalist spectacle” (Pugliese 2007, 33). And from a different but comparable perspective, Bruce Lincoln interpreted the power-relation in the pictures as a clear ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. The GIs “endlessly repersuaded themselves” of the immense difference between them: we “are high; they are low. We are clean; they are dirty. We are strong and brave; they are weak and cowardly. We are lordly; they are virtually animals. We are God’s chosen; they are estranged from everything divine” (Lincoln 2007, 102–3). Finally, theologian and writer Sarah Sentilles notes that the body postures in the Abu Ghraib photos, which were crafted through torture, replicated “echoes” of the cross and of the crucifixion, but by doing so also further violated the victims of torture “by identifying Muslim prisoners [in the pose of] Christ as a form of forcible conversion”. This is, she argues, “at least rhetorically, the objective of most colonial projects” (Sentilles 2007).

What is striking about these interpretations is that they go behind the ‘seen’ and observe these photographs as signs of much deeper cultural and religious scripts that are predominantly understood within the sheer difference radiated in the photographs between victims and perpetrators. One might indeed ask whether these pictures are not reframed within sensational binary models such as East and West, Muslims and Christians, that enforce rather than analyze the visualization of events that are considered. The bodies of the prisoners and guards become media of grand narratives evoking colonial histories and missionary strategies. As a result, these pictures become just ‘snapshots’ of an iconized epistemology proving a rather theoretical point that does not move beyond this episteme itself. The disbalance of power contains a script, deeply related to religious understandings, necessary for the ‘revelation’ of injustice against the innocent, and for the making of the martyr. Verily, this is a trajectory that digs deep in western repositories of meaningful and revealing suffering.

10 Photographs as Things of Conflict: Conclusion and Discussion

How is a photograph a thing of conflict and what role does religion play in this? As described in the Introduction of this volume, a thing of conflict can be anything that belongs to an infrastructure and is part of social networks. In this chapter, this infrastructure is taken in the sense that conflict photographs can

trigger an – what Bartmanski and Alexander call – “iconic consciousness” that is deeply rooted in cultural-religious trajectories. Visualizations of conflict, although fragmented and scattered across many media platforms, can evoke a vertical historic infrastructure in which the imagery of pain and suffering is charged with religious meanings. Natalia Mielczarek’s analysis of mutations of iconic pictures in modern news media and internet sharing, shows that due to technological developments, fragmentations of the classic grand narratives highlight a changing role of iconic pictures in processes of signification (Mielczarek 2016). Therefore, the classic iconography of suffering becomes vague and is often, though not always, less recognized. Nevertheless, the binary frame that appeals for virtuous responses and that is connected deeply with western archives of Christian soteriologies, remains unbroken.

Of course, not all photographs of suffering can be related to a grand narrative of meaningful suffering. Some photographs, and this may be part of the ambivalence we saw in Sontag and Barthes, can shock without becoming recognized within an iconized grand narrative. Also, the question of how and why human suffering is portrayed in pictures and videos remains relevant. Theodor W. Adorno for example asks how to do justice to victims of injustice by *not* showing what was done to them (Adorno 1992 [1958], 88, see also Barry 2010; Peters 2014). However, this does not refer to the binary frames we discussed in this chapter. As argued, many atrocity and humanitarian photographs signify the dynamic reconstruction of humanitarian identities and can be analyzed as visual references towards virtuous cultural-religious self-perspectives. While we should be reluctant to come with strong claims regarding the iconography of present-day photographs of suffering, we can with some confidence argue that in many western humanitarian and atrocity photographs, a basic narrative of the rescue of innocent victims is suggested which is part of their impact. This reminds us of the binary frames presented in iconic trajectories of the suffering of the innocent Christ, the martyrs, and of the consolation and grief of the Pièta that were part of religious infrastructures and had and still has the power to confront the believer, who is a traditional part of the narrative itself, with guilt and responsibility. Of course, this basic narrative is not only pictorial but also sourced in chains of wide narrative structures that materialize in specific situations. Humanitarian and atrocity photographs can be assessed from a critical perspective that pays attention to how the scripts we discussed are presented in photographs and in responses to photographs, and to how this contributes to conflict-understandings. This happened in Biafra, Afghanistan, and Abu Ghraib from where photographs of people in need of rescue were featured. In humanitarian and atrocity photography, the picturing of women and children seems to continue the soteriological trajectory of

rescue and salvation by evoking frames of innocent victims versus violent perpetrators and by pulling the viewer into this narrative. In some cases, as we have seen, photographs are reframed within iconographic artworks of suffering which allows a deeper integration of an iconic consciousness into political and religious contexts. Interestingly, photographs of non-western suffering can complicate this narrative, for example if the binary frame of innocent versus violent is challenged by other binary frames like the women dressed in chador evoking biased images of justifications of violence versus rejections of violence. In Linfield's case to which I referred in the introduction, a photograph of mourning women wearing chadors was understood as signifier of religion-based justifications of violence. Or, in a different vein, Sentilles' critique on identifying the posture of 'Gilligan' with that of an iconic Christ is evoking another binary frame of non-Westerners versus the ("at least rhetorically") colonial project of forced conversion. Although the basic narrative is historically deeply rooted in Christian visualizations of suffering and remains intact as a binary of moral oppositions, this narrative is getting fragmented in many other stories that continue to 'speak' through the visualizations of suffering in photography. Although explorative, in this chapter we have identified certain elements of this Christian iconography that have been rearranged in photographic images. This way, this chapter contributes to an understanding of the relationship between iconographic trajectories, visual infrastructures, memorized ways of seeing, and ideas of meaningful suffering that impacts on how we 'look' at and understand conflicts, 'symbolically possess' what we see, take in positions, and suggest solutions.

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