

ISLAM
THROUGH
WESTERN
EYES



FROM THE CRUSADES TO
THE WAR ON TERRORISM

JONATHAN LYONS

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*To my mother, Evelyn Lyons,
who taught me respect for language*

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WAR WITHOUT END?

This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.

GEORGE W. BUSH

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath are just the latest reminders of the West's complete and enduring failure to engage in any meaningful and productive way with the world of Islam. For almost ten centuries, attempts at understanding have been held hostage to a grand, totalizing Western narrative that shapes what can and, more importantly, what cannot be said and thought about Islam and the Muslims. This is no less true today from the political arena to the counterterrorism think tanks, from the academy to the Internet "blogosphere," than it was in the medieval halls of the Roman Curia and the courts of the European Crusaders.

Further, this same narrative, which reflects what I call the anti-Islam discourse, exercises a profound and corrosive effect on a range of issues across the contemporary social sciences, including sociology, politics, the history of ideas, law, religion, international relations, human rights, and security studies. It casts a shadow over the way social scientists of various stripes think and write and speak about Islam and the Muslims. It shapes how social scientists listen to what Muslims say and interpret what they do. And it guides their research programs and publications, their private advice to governments, and their statements to the press and the public at large. These developments have, in turn, left Western societies both intellectually unprepared and politically unable to respond successfully to some of the most significant challenges of the early twenty-first century—the global rise of Islamist political power, the more narrow emergence of religious violence and terrorism, clashes between established social values and multicultural rights on the part of growing Muslim immigrant populations, and so on.

As a result of these failures, the notion of a looming "clash" of world civilizations, advanced first by Bernard Lewis (1990) and more comprehensively by Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996), is moving steadily from a theoretical exercise—one that the foreign-policy establishment and academics alike initially dismissed (e.g., Mottahedeh 1996; Gergez 1999; Abrahamian 2000)—toward a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹ To see how effectively this notion has captured Western imaginations, one has only to consider the successful Swiss referendum campaign in November 2009 to write into the Constitution a ban on the building of minarets or the decision by Oklahoma voters in November 2010 to bar the use of Islamic law in state courts. Tellingly, in the cases of both Switzerland and Oklahoma, no such "threats" ever existed. In such an atmosphere, it has been all too easy for the contemporary U.S. neoconservatives and the

supporters worldwide, who have relied on this anti-Islam discourse to generate fear of the Muslim other, to sell the “war on terrorism” as essential to Western security, and to lead the West into its greatest confrontation with Islam since the Middle Ages.

Properly unpacked, the anti-Islam discourse can be shown to provide more than just the context and imagery that surround the war on terrorism, the present wave of Islamophobia, or the broader cultural project advanced by adherents of Huntington’s coming civilizational clash, despite the interrogatory tone of the title to his original journal article—“The Clash of Civilizations?”—Huntington leaves little doubt that he expects a future conflict, driven not by ideology or economics but by culture: “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (1993:22). Perhaps more telling, the book-length version appeared three years later under virtually the same title, but without the question mark.

Although it is a relatively simple matter to “connect the dots” between this discourse and the present state of tensions between Islam and the West, to stop there would be to overlook the profound nature of a discourse that has silently shaped one thousand years of shared history and that seems destined to shape the future as well. Its powers extend well beyond the war on terrorism, and they explain a whole host of subtle but important derivative effects without which the clash-of-civilizations thesis that underpins this war would quite literally be unthinkable.

Since September 11, 2001, the West has launched two major wars against Islamic countries; contributed directly through conflict to the deaths of tens of thousands of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan and indirectly to the loss of many tens of thousands more lives through disruptions to health and other basic services;² helped suppress popular religious and political aspirations across the Muslim world, from Palestine to Somalia to Southeast Asia; restricted civil liberties at home; and cracked down hard on its own Arab and Muslim populations in the name of counterterrorism.³

The Central Intelligence Agency, meanwhile, coordinated a clandestine campaign to kidnap suspected Muslim terrorists and shuffle them around the globe—often with the help of friendly security services—so they may be tortured in third countries or simply dumped into the juridical no-man’s-land of the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay without regard for the Constitution, the Geneva Convention, or many of the founding ideals of revolutionary-era America. The George W. Bush administration, armed with memoranda from like-minded legal scholars, went so far as to authorize the torture by U.S. forces of certain “high-value” prisoners as part of its self-declared war on terrorism. The resulting damage to the rule of law and other liberal values, not to mention to America’s worldwide standing, has been significant.

Central to this anti-Islam discourse is a series of familiar ideas that echo across today’s political arena, on the Internet, on “talk” radio, in the so-called quality press, and, all too frequently, in the academy. Such notions include the following: Islam is a religion of violence and is spread by the sword; its tenets are upheld by coercion and force; Islam’s prophet, his teachings, and even its God are false; Muslims are irrational and backward, “medieval,” and fearful of modernity; Islam is by nature fanatical; Muslims are sexually perverse, either lascivious polygamists or repressive misogynists or both; they are antidemocratic and despise Western notions of civic freedoms; and, finally, they are caught up in a jealous rage at the Western world’s failure to value them or their beliefs.

This phenomenon is not, however, simply a matter of stereotypes—reassuring modes

thought and expression to castigate the Muslim as other and simultaneously reinforce the value and values of the West; if it were, the well-defined boundaries of the discourse would have eroded or otherwise shifted significantly, at least in places, over more than one thousand years of increasing physical, intellectual, economic, and theological contact and contestation between East and West. Rather, we must recognize that fundamental to this discourse has been the creation in the Western consciousness—and thus in Western thought—of an impermeable conceptual barrier constructed from the very tissue of the discourse itself.

Rarely have the central themes of the anti-Islam discourse faced serious critical scrutiny or nuanced analysis. Rather, they are often asserted or simply left unstated and unacknowledged, so that they operate silently in the background as they shape our statements about Islam and the Muslims and define the disciplines that organize and classify such knowledge. In an observation as apt now as when it was first advanced nine hundred years ago, Guibert de Nogent, a chronicler of the First Crusade, noted that it was not important actually to know anything about Islam in order to attack it: “It is safe to speak evil of one whose malignity exceeds whatever ill can be spoken” (quoted in Rodinson 1987:11).

As a result, the West’s “conversation” with Islam has always been a one-sided affair, essentially a dialogue with itself, revealing much about the subject but little or nothing about the object in question. In the vernacular of today, “It is all about us.” This one-sidedness has meant a fatal decoupling of the Western idea of Islam from the meaning and content of Islam as a vital religious, social, and cultural institution in its own right. Incompatible with the West’s interests or outside its conceptual understanding—or at times merely inconvenient—the belief system of the Muslims has been set aside in favor of a denatured Islam that better fits the established discourse.

Thus a Muslim woman cannot wear the veil simply because she believes that God has so ordained or to express her own religious feelings or identity; rather, her doing so must be the result of patriarchal repression by her husband, father, uncles, or brothers. Likewise, there is little incentive to trace the complex and at times contradictory record of traditional Islamic texts on violence, personal struggle, and resistance—signified in the Western mind under the emotive rubric of jihad.⁴ Instead, a necessary, causal relationship between Islam and violence is posited, and countless examples are adduced to support it, the September 11 terrorist attacks being currently the most spectacular. Put another way, Islam qua Islam is allowed no independent existence but is effectively a creation of the Western mind. Unnoticed in the Western world, this phenomenon has not gone by without comment among the Muslims: for decades, the religious revolutionaries of Iran have referred to this construct dismissively as “American Islam.”



How, then, has the West’s comprehensive idea of Islam persisted intact and essentially unchanged—thrived, even—over the course of one thousand years? What has so far retarded any real development or evolution—whether seen in terms of traditional Western notions of historical change, the “discontinuities” of Gaston Bachelard and the postmodern French philosophers, or Thomas Kuhn’s “paradigm shift”—in the dominant narrative? As we argue in the pages that follow, the answer lies with the formation in the eleventh century of the anti-Islam discourse, which to the present day defines and explains Islam and regulates

what it is that we hear and see of the Muslims. The same discourse determines the West's apprehension of any new observations or information about Islam by shaping them to fit its requirements and demands, by dismissing them as inaccurate or unimportant, or by ignoring them outright.

My central theoretical position is simple: the very idea of Islam reflects a Western discourse perpetuated by those social groups and institutions that stand to benefit from its survival. Three interrelated questions about the anti-Islam discourse provide the underlying structure of my analysis: how is this discourse formed? how does it operate? And, last, the classical problem in the social sciences: *Cui bono?* Who benefits? This approach moves away from a pure exercise in intellectual history and casts it instead as a matter for broader inquiry that cuts across a number of traditional disciplines. herein also lies its explanatory power. When we open this particular window on Islam as discourse and take a look, what do we see that has not been seen before?

Here, I am largely following the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in the early phase of his career—roughly the period ending with his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970. Foucault has written widely on epistemological phenomena in strictly Western contexts, including studies of the discourses of madness (1961, 1988), clinical medicine (1994a), prisons (1991, 1994c), and sexuality (1978). At one point, he proposed a study of what he called the “great division” between occident and orient, but he never carried out this project (1961:iv; see also Rosemann 1999:270). Foucault did, however, venture into the contentious issue of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, supporting it much longer and more enthusiastically than most others among the European Left.⁵

Despite this lack of any specific focus on Islam, Foucault's methods—what he has referred to as his “toolbox”—can go a long way toward explaining why it is that certain things can be thought and said about Islam and the Muslims and certain other things cannot. This practical strand in Foucault's work is often obscured by the difficult, indirect, and at times maddeningly cryptic nature of much of his writings. Yet Foucault tells us clearly what he has in mind: “I would like my books to be a kind of ‘toolbox’ which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area.... I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers” (1994c:523–524, emphasis added; quoted in o'Farrell 2005:50).

In an effort to build on Foucault's work and to address some of its limitations when applied to the West's anti-Islam discourse, I also take into account some classic studies in sociology—most notably the works of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and C. Wright Mills—as well as the cultural criticism of Edward Said. Whereas Foucault provides particularly effective tools for the excavation of evidence of the formation and operation of the West's anti-Islam discourse, the sociology of knowledge can help fashion a response to the final element of my analytic framework: Who benefits?

The philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur provides a useful definition of the last strand of my theoretical approach, even though that definition was originally presented amid a critique of sociology's limitations: “The sociology of knowledge rejects an immanent history of ideas which would be governed only by the structure of problems and their philosophic solutions. It attempts to replace the would-be history of ideas within the total dynamics of society” (1965:58). Yet a displacement of this “would-be history” and an examination of the social dynamic at work can best explain the unchanging and persistent nature of the anti-Islam discourse.

This latter approach, then, sets in relief several specific issues: Which social groups and institutions have benefited from excising the enormous Arab cultural contribution to the West from the history books? From the notion that Islam is inherently violent, or that it is fundamentally antipathetic toward women? Who benefits today from perpetuating these ideas? And how can I best account for the periodic ebbs and flows—the occasional ups as well as the predominant downs—in relations between Islam and the West as well as for the larger, more stable narrative arc that reaches from Muhammad's revelation to the present day? [Chapters 4](#), [5](#), and [6](#) address these underlying issues in a series of thematic explorations, which, when taken as a whole, make up this social history of the Western idea of Islam.

A few other prominent features of my approach also bear noting at this time. First and foremost, I have chosen to focus exclusively on the West's discourse of Islam—that is, the body of accepted and therefore acceptable Western knowledge about Islam and Muslims; any real exploration from the Muslim perspective is beyond the scope of this inquiry. This point cannot be overemphasized, for Western analysis and scholarship too often focus exclusively on what it is they say about us and ignore the baseline assumptions, thoughts, texts, and symbols that make up Western-dominated Islamic studies and its associated disciplines.

Here, too, I want to avoid the fallacy scholars sometimes put forth that the Muslim world saw in the crusading Christians the same existential, civilizational threat that the latter clearly saw in it (e.g., von Grunenberg 1961:31–63; echoed in Berger 1973:56). In fact, the caliph's court in Baghdad turned a blind eye to the fall of Jerusalem in 1099 despite pleas for help from local Muslims, and it took decades for the forces of Islam to set aside their internal squabbles and repel the invaders (C. Hillenbrand 1999:69–74). This fallacy is a critical error for it presumes that whatever was going on in the West was mirrored or should have been mirrored in the East and that the two experiences can thus be understood and assessed on the same terms and in the same way. This assumption leads only to a dead end.

Second, it needs to be stressed that an analysis of the anti-Islam discourse can be carried out without direct reference to the West's claims to any truth-value in its statements about Islam; the truth—or lack thereof—of those statements produced is no defense against the underlying fact that the entire conversation takes place almost entirely within the very confines of the discourse. Many scholars have sought to refute, for example, statements linking violence, coercion, and authoritarianism to the very essence of the Muslim faith (e.g., Afsaruddin 2006a, 2008; Saeed 2006; Khatab and Bouma 2007). Others argue that the same link can be established for other faiths and belief systems, from Judaism to Scientology (Appelby 2000), or that violence lies at the heart of all religious experience (Girard 1974, 1996).

Although weighing in on this and other questions that the anti-Islam discourse has addressed may be instructive, it is not strictly necessary, for the argument of any individual scholar is dissipated in the face of the overwhelming power of the broader discourse at work. It need hardly be said that I do not mean to purvey some idealized universe free of all moral, political, or social values. Rather, I argue that we must first explore the way the anti-Islam discourse operates to produce such statements and to eliminate or bar other statements and why this discourse has remained intact across one thousand years. Only then can we begin to venture into the realm of assessment and evaluation.

Third, I have limited the scope of this inquiry by generally restricting myself to Islam and

defined by the historical experience of the early Muslim empires, from Afghanistan, the subcontinent, and western China to north Africa and across to al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain. These areas were, after all, the “Muslim world” as apprehended by Christian Europe at the formation of the anti-Islam discourse, and in many ways they remain so today. The West’s “discovery” of a wider Muslim umma (religious community) has done nothing notable to alter the discourse, except perhaps to strengthen its central foundation. When we are told, for example, that Indonesian Muslims practice a “softer” variant of the faith, this assertion amounts to nothing but a reinforcement of the original narrative.

Throughout this study, I use the terms Islam and Muslim quite deliberately in both their religious and cultural meanings rather than fall back on the specific ethnic identities such as Arab, Persian, Kurd, and others that compose the diverse world of Islam. Marshall Hodgson’s classic work *The Venture of Islam* (1974) proposes a calibrated set of distinctions among the terms Islam, meaning the faith itself; Islamdom, the counterpart to Christendom (that is, those areas where Islam predominates); and Islamicate, the civilizational complex as a whole. Bryan S. Turner (2003, 1:1–2) would add the terms Islamist, to encompass political Islam, and Arabic, as a subculture of Islamdom in which the Arabic language is dominant.

For my purposes, this terminology, although worth bearing in mind in other contexts, is subsumed in the broader anti-Islam discourse, which by its very nature does not make or require any such distinctions. At issue here is the West’s discourse of Islam and Muslims, not a discourse of Arabs, Seljuk Turks, the Fatimids of Egypt, or whatever group may have predominated at a given historical moment. As far as Christendom was concerned, they all shared a single, overriding identity as Muslims, and it is this overarching religious identity that the anti-Islam discourse addresses. Today the West tends to think largely of Arabs when speaking of Islam, but in fact the object of the anti-Islam discursive formation has always been “Islam-ness,” not “Arab-ness.” In short, the West’s construction of Islam and Muslim has been essentialist, uniform, and not conducive to nuance and variation.

As we shall see in the course of this book, the discourse is always spelled out in terms of this Islam-ness, regardless of any ethnic, national, or even scriptural identifier applied to the Muslims at a given moment. Such ethnic complexities were particularly opaque to European Christendom, which had only the vaguest notion of the distant Muslim peoples. Pope Urban II’s original call to crusade, for example, was directed against the Persians—“an accursed race, a race wholly alienated from God,” in one version of the pope’s declaration of war—rather than against the socially and politically ascendant Arabs. Others equally damned the Arabs or the Turks or simply lumped them all together as “Saracens”—that is, the children of Abraham’s wife, Sarah—or as “Ishmaelites,” named for Abraham’s eldest son. Finally, “the West” is taken here to encompass the lands of medieval Christendom and the modern states and societies—including their associated discursive practices—that have emerged from the West and that dominate the world today.



The continuity of such broad categories as “Islam” and “the West” as well as their utility within the established narrative came into sharp relief with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Five days later, President George W. Bush (2001b) wrapped himself and the nation securely in the mantle of Christian holy war, first declared in the eleventh century: “This is

new kind of—a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.”

The White house immediately expressed the president’s regret over use of the word crusade, acknowledging that it might have “upset” the Muslim world (Fleischer 2001). Nonetheless, Bush repeated the term five months later when he made it clear that this military campaign, like its medieval forerunners, would extend beyond a single nation or a single people to represent a civilizational alliance of like-minded forces. Thanking the Canadian military for joining the effort, Bush (2002b) said: “They stand with us in this incredibly important crusade to defend freedom, this campaign to do what is right for our children and our grandchildren.”

President Bush later guarded his public use of language more carefully, but powerful figures in his administration clearly felt no such compunction, and they spoke out without sanction or rebuke from the White house. John Ashcroft, then attorney general with responsibility for enforcement of America’s beefed-up security laws, told a conservative radio interviewer: “Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you,” whereas Islam is “a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him” (quoted in Sheer 2002). The top intelligence officer then in charge of the Pentagon’s pursuit of Osama bin Laden, Lieutenant-General William G. Boykin, assured the Christian Right that the U.S.-led war on terrorism was a struggle between the beneficent God of the Christians and the false “idol worshipped by Muslims. Boykin asked members of the Good Shepherd Community Church in Sandy, Oregon: “Why do they hate us? The answer to that is because we’re a Christian nation. We are hated because we are a nation of believers” (quoted in Arkin 2003).⁶

Accompanying this rhetoric from U.S. officials has been a groundswell of popular Islamophobia, running from North America through Europe and on to Australia, that has undermined the very idea of liberal democratic society. Since 2001, the incidence of hate crimes in America against Muslims and Arabs in general—or those presumed to be Arabs—has also risen sharply, although data available from the Council on American–Islamic Relations (2008), a Muslim advocacy group, report some significant improvement between 2006 and 2007. One study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2004) found that 46 percent of Americans surveyed said that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence, a substantial increase from the previous year. That number has since fluctuated between a high of 45 percent and a low of 35 percent as of August 2010 (Pew Forum 2010).

According to data collected by the Pew Forum (2007) in 2006, the number of American respondents saying that Islam had nothing in common with their own religious faith increased from 59 percent to 70 percent since an earlier survey in 2005. Asked to give one-word impressions of Islam, those surveyed offered negative attributes twice as often as positive ones; fanatic was the second most frequent response (after devout), but the terms radical and terror were also popular. Fifty-eight percent of these same respondents said they knew “little or nothing” of Islam (Pew Forum 2007). A follow-up study in 2009 found that 65 percent of those interviewed felt Islam differed “very much” or “somewhat” from their own beliefs and values—the highest figure for any faith in the survey—although the number of respondents linking Islam to violence declined somewhat, to 38 percent.

A separate survey of religious attitudes in America by Robert Wuthnow found that 28 percent of respondents said that it should be illegal for Muslim groups to meet and practice their faith, and 47 percent and 40 percent, respectively, said that the words fanatical and

violent applied to Muslims. By contrast, 25 percent regarded Hindus as “fanatical,” and 2 percent applied the word to Buddhists (Wuthnow [2003] 2004:164). The Gallup organization found that a majority of Americans see “little” or “nothing” to admire in Islam or the Muslim world (Abdo 2006a).

Australia’s Muslim and Arab community has likewise faced a sharp increase in incidents of racial and ethnic hatred in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., aggravated by the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, which targeted Australians and other foreigners (Poynting and Mason 2006:367). A 2003 study for Australia’s Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission reported that 87 percent of Muslims surveyed had experienced racist abuse or violence since the September 11 attacks (Poynting and Noble 2004). A survey of European attitudes showed rising antagonism toward Muslims in 2008 over previous years, with 52 percent in Spain, 50 percent in Germany, 46 percent in Poland, and 38 percent in France now displaying negative attitudes (Pew Forum 2008).

Anti-Muslim sentiment is particularly virulent on the Internet, from which it easily spills over into the cultural mainstream and into the old-line media world of television, radio, newspapers, and books (Tirman 2010). Prominent supporters of the Bush administration, in particular members of the Christian Right, have been regular features of old and new media alike, routinely condemning Islam and its prophet. The late Reverend Jerry Falwell, whose Christian Right lobby wields enormous influence within the Republican Party, called Muhammad “a terrorist ... a violent man, a man of war” (“Falwell Brands” 2002). America’s premier televangelist, Pat Robertson (2002), labeled the Prophet “an absolute wild-eyed fanatic” and “a killer.” And the Reverend Jerry Vines, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America, with an estimated 16 million members, said that Muhammad was a “demon-possessed pedophile,” asserting that he had twelve wives, the youngest of whom was nine years old (quoted in Sachs 2002).⁷ As of this writing (October 2010), the number of hits generated by an Internet search of Muhammad and “pedophile” had increased tenfold in the three years that I have been tracking this informal index. It is important to note that this number has been swollen recently by a vigorous online defense of Muhammad mounted by Muslim believers. When I first started tracking the figures in 2007, the field was almost exclusively in the hands of anti-Islam polemicists. Yet the number of hits easily exceeded 100,000 all the same.

Public attitudes reflect the public discourse. The 2007 Pew survey, for example, found that the media was the single biggest influence on Americans’ attitudes toward Islam, especially among those with negative opinions toward Muslims. The Western media have displayed a virtual unanimity that the terrorist attacks represent an existential threat to America, to its core values, and, in fact, to Western civilization as a whole—all framed as part of a declaration of cultural war by the angry, antimodern, and alien forces of Islam. Historian Ervand Abrahamian (2003:530), in a review of the coverage of September 11 and its aftermath in what he called the “quality” media aimed at “the American literati and intelligentsia”—defined in the study as the newspapers the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* and the news magazines *Time*, *Newsweek*, *New Republic*, and *Atlantic Monthly*—found a remarkably consistent message in the headlines and content of news stories.

In a note introducing a special section that would run for four months, the flagship *New York Times* promised its readers “complete worldwide coverage of the roots and consequences of September 11.” This daily feature, bannered “A Nation Challenged,” and the

newspaper's other pages proffered such headlines as "This Is a Religious War," "Jihad 101," "Barbarians at the Gate," "The Force of Islam," "Divine Inspiration," "Defusing the Holy Bomb," "The Core of Muslim Rage," "Dreams of Holy War," "The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islam," "Rage," and "A Head-on Collision of Alien Cultures" (Abrahamian 2003:531).

The contemporary reverberations of Islamophobia have spread around the globe, as the clamor in late 2005 and early 2006 over the publication of a series of Danish cartoons of Muhammad made all too clear. Around 140 people were killed, mostly in the Muslim world, during public protests against the cartoons, which were originally created for Denmark's biggest newspaper and then reprinted widely in the name of free speech. Danish embassies were set on fire, and some Muslim countries announced boycotts of Denmark's exports. The moral outrage of Muslims at lampoons of the Prophet was met by equal outrage among Westerners at the notion of restraint on freedom of expression and at the notion that Muslims could be so outraged (Lyons 2010).

The affair began with the publication in September 2005 of twelve editorial cartoons of Muhammad in the daily *Jyllands-Posten*. One of the images portrays the Prophet with a bomb-shaped turban. In another image, Muhammad is pleading with a queue of would-be suicide bombers outside heaven's gate: "Stop. Stop. We ran out of virgins." This latter is a reference to the assertion, popular in some Western circles, that suicide attacks are motivated by promises of sexual reward in the afterlife and cannot possibly be rational or deliberate acts of military, political, or personal resistance (Lyons 2010).

Major dailies in Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and many other countries around the world published some or all of the cartoons. France's influential *Le Monde*, for example, reprinted two of the original cartoons, created one of its own for the front page, and made all twelve of the Danish images available online. Virtually all other French newspapers also carried examples in support of *Jyllands-Posten* (Berkowitz and Etkind 2007:780).

In Australia, the controversy fed seamlessly into the "values debate"—essentially a running proxy war over multiculturalism, national identity, and, by extension, national security in a rapidly changing world. For the most part, it served as fuel for those who felt that the country's official policy of multiculturalism was pandering to demands by Australia's Muslim minority that, by virtue of their religious and cultural practices, they be treated differently from the non-Muslim majority. Concerns over national security were not far beneath the surface. Marking the fifth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, Prime Minister John Howard warned his audience: "There is a section of the Islamic population which will not integrate ... [and has] values and attitudes which are hostile to Australia's interests" (quoted in "Those Who don't Share our Values" 2006).

Pope Benedict XVI has also firmly planted the banner of Christian particularism in the post-September 11 landscape. In an address on September 12, 2006, at the university of Regensburg, where he had taught in the 1970s, the pontiff (2006) quoted what the late fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus said in a religious debate with a "learned [Muslim] Persian" on the subject of holy war: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The pope did acknowledge a well-known injunction in the Qur'an against "compulsion in religion" (2:256)⁸ but assured his listeners that "experts" had dated it to the early years of Muhammad's prophethood, when the

Muslim community was still too weak to compel obedience among nonbelievers.

Benedict (2006) then went on to argue that the use of force in religion offends Christian rationality but is in keeping with the Muslim conception of a God whose omnipotence transcends any such category—that is, one who can literally defy reason: “The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature.” Many Muslims were outraged by these claims. In their eyes, the pope had explicitly passed over a chance to repudiate the emperor’s charges that Islam offered nothing but violence, a move they considered a Vatican endorsement of those charges; he had also failed to acknowledge the Catholic Church’s own sponsorship of the anti-Muslim Crusades or other acts of inhumanity in the name of God, such as the Inquisition, the brutal suppression of the Cathar heresy in southern France, and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula; and he had repeated the charge that Islam and by extension its conception of God were not rational, unlike his own Christian faith.

Evangelical Christians, meanwhile, have been even more explicit than Pope Benedict in casting doubt on the theological teaching that the God of the three major monotheist faiths is one and the same. In fact, after September 11 the relative few among American evangelical preachers and commentators who had been willing even to countenance such a view hardened their attitudes significantly. Recent years have seen an outpouring of anti-Islamic polemical works by leading evangelical figures disputing the “one God” thesis and locating the September 11 attacks and other acts of terrorism specifically within the Islamic holy texts (Cimino 2005:165–166).

Of course, the anti-Islam discourse hardly stands alone. The Western experience can be defined by a number of such fundamental discourses, each of long standing and great power. They include the discourse on gender, the discourse on race, the discourse on the Enlightenment and the idea of “progress” in general, and the discourse on science—to name a few of the most prominent. The anti-Semitic discourse, perhaps, deserves specific mention for it might appear at first glance to resemble that of the Western narrative of Islam. Any such comparison, however, is misleading. Although Jews were regular targets of persecution and discrimination, and organized violence across medieval Europe, they retained a necessary place in Christian theology and exegesis and thus retained a legitimate, if problematic, place in Western thought and society. Augustine taught that the existence of the Jews bore witness to the validity of Christian scripture’s claims to roots in the old Testament, and Christian eschatology held that some Jews were destined to convert as an immediate prelude to the End of Time.

Unlike the Cathar heretics and later the Muslims, the Jews could never fully be cast as others; as such, they could never become the explicit targets of Christian holy war, although “collateral damage” has often been heavy. In a letter exhorting the people of England to join the Second Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the leading voices of the twelfth-century Latin church, cautioned would-be holy warriors that the Jews, widely blamed in the popular imagination for the death of Jesus, must not be harmed amid this revival of religious zeal: “The Jews are for us the living words of Scripture, for they remind us always of what our Lord suffered. They are dispersed all over the world so that by expiating their crime they may be everywhere the living witnesses of redemption” (1953:462). Nor did the Jews ever present, despite anti-Semites’ favored tropes, anything like the economic, political, intellectual, and religious challenges to Western Christendom that were posed by Islam.⁹

I have chosen to examine the anti-Islam discourse for a number of reasons. First of all, ~~has not previously been properly recognized or studied. In fact, little attention has been paid~~ general to Western historical narratives of Islam beyond the classic works of Norman Daniel (1960, 1966, 1975) and Richard Southern (1962) and the more recent studies by John Tolan (2002, 2008). By contrast, the literature on the treatment of Jews and heretics has been considerable. For example, Robert Moore's *Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (1987) explores the persecution of “deviants”—that is, Jews, heretics, lepers, homosexuals—but makes no mention of the Muslims (cited in Tolan 2002:xvi). Second, the anti-Islam discourse interacts or overlaps to varying degrees with each of those prominent discourses listed earlier, making it central to our understanding of Western civilization as a whole. Third, I believe that it can shed light on a whole range of intellectual, social, and political problems facing the social sciences and, more broadly, contemporary Western societies.

The anti-Islam discourse, for example, pervades Western histories of ideas. Scholars have known since the late 1950s of almost certain links between Copernicus's “revolutionary” planetary theory and the work of Muslim astronomers two hundred to three hundred years earlier—that is, from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, respectively. Yet the West largely clings to the notion that whatever intellectual glories once existed in the Muslim world—if it acknowledges them at all—were extinguished for good by the masterful antiscientific polemics of the Muslim theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who died in 1111.¹⁰ As a result, the full import of this information about Muslim astronomers and subsequent discoveries about the longevity of Arab science well past the “end date” assigned by the West's traditional historical narrative remain largely unexamined.

However, to explore these discoveries would mean to step outside the anti-Islam discourse, which assures us that Islamic science fell victim early on to Islamic obscurantism and the formidable person of al-Ghazali. Given such a turn in Muslim intellectual life, what use could there be to speak of, say, late medieval Islamic science? or what need to probe Copernicus's connections to the Muslim world? Such silence is indeed deafening. A more cogent explanation for the decline of Islamic science would avoid the “Ghazali trap” and might take into account the role of geopolitical, economic, and social factors.

There is also considerable evidence that Muslim intellectual and cultural traditions played an important role in the rise of the European university, an event trumpeted by the predominant historical narrative as a defining moment in the emergence of Western civilization. Classic exemplars of this latter tendency include Charles Homer Haskins (1955) and Edward Grant (1996), who calls the rise of the universities a “peculiarly Western phenomenon” (34). Yet Muslim traditions dating to before the advent of universities in the West included the grouping of foreign students into associations, or “nations,” similar to the medieval practice at the university of Paris and elsewhere; the wearing of distinctive dress and gowns by the teaching masters; the awarding of a chair as a seat of honor and comfort for a distinguished teacher; the granting of a recognized degree, in this case the teaching license in Arabic, the *ijaza*—to permit students deemed ready to take on pupils of their own; and a number of specific concepts familiar to advanced Western education, such as the *studium generale* and, quite possibly, the *artium baccalareus*, or bachelor of arts degree (Makdisi 1981b).

The presence of the anti-Islam discourse has again all but precluded serious investigation

into any links between the Arabs' educational institutions and practices and the development of that treasured Western cultural accomplishment, the university. Despite reasonable evidence and a sophisticated analysis, George Makdisi's work on the subject has been effectively rejected outright (see the discussion of this rejection in Hallaq 2002–2003:5–6).

Turning back to Foucault, this time invoking his principle of “reversal” in an attempt to peer behind the established discourse, we can ask what the effects might be if the dominant anti-Islam discourse as it applies to the history of Western ideas were rejected—or at the very least set aside. Many enormously exciting possibilities suddenly begin to suggest themselves. Miscellaneous facts that have been merely floating around, with no theoretical home to call their own, suddenly start to fall into place.

These facts include the “mystery” of the Muslim provenance of Copernicus's mathematical work and of our university system; the Arabic origins of much of the Western scientific lexicon; the unmistakable strains of the Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroës throughout the works of Thomas Aquinas and other seminal Western thinkers; the links between medieval Arabic poetry and that of the troubadours; the powerful Arabic literary influences on such quintessentially “Western” figures as Dante and Cervantes; and the undoubted genius and creativity of the great Muslim legal minds. Once the veil of the anti-Islam discourse is pulled back, these orphaned bits of information, small enough to ignore as curiosities or aberrations on their own, begin to provide a new coherence and a new meaning to the broader picture of the relationship between East and West.

If we cast an eye back over the past millennium of relations between Islam and the West, it is certainly possible to identify an alternative narrative that removes their undoubted contestation from the accepted framework of East versus West and places it within a single cultural arena (as has been done, for example, in Makdisi 1990; Voll 1994; Esposito 1999; Turner 2001, 2003; Bulliet 2004; and Lyons 2009a). Yet the prevailing discourse is so powerful and authoritative that such an approach has failed to make any serious inroads in Western thought. The result is an unnatural and clearly unhelpful separation of two rich and powerful cultural traditions that share far more than we are generally prepared to acknowledge. This separation, in turn, distorts Western understanding of the Muslim world and its culture and all but guarantees that any attempt at East–West communication will result in what the Turks call “a dialogue of the deaf.”



Islam Through Western Eyes, then, seeks to create a framework that takes into account not only the discursive formation that one might call “Islam,” but also the interconnected relations and activities of those I term “Islam experts”—that is, those responsible for statements that make up “serious speech” on the topic of Islam and the Muslims. Such statements lead to a rarefied existence and are privileged by claims to truth and meaning that are widely recognized or otherwise validated, preserved, studied, emulated, and passed on. They are the stuff of textbooks and classroom instruction, learned journals, monographs, public lectures, art exhibits, items in the news media. Throughout their existence, they remain at all times subject to rules of formation that are hidden or otherwise inaccessible to “speakers” and “listeners” alike.

The domain of statements may be further qualified by their existence within a specific

discursive formation or discipline. discourse analysis within an accepted discipline particularly useful, for it casts in relief the internal rules that operate within that discursive formation and highlights the non-contingent role played by truth and meaning. As Foucault argues: "A discipline is not the sum total of all the truths that may be uttered concerning something; it is not even the total of all that may be accepted, by virtue of some principle of coherence or systematization, concerning some given fact or proposition" (1972b:223).

Just because a statement may consist of a truth about plants, for example, that does not necessarily qualify it as part of the recognized discipline known as botany. It must first be seen to be among possible truths and then be validated by the rules of formation at work within that field: "In short, a proposition must fulfill some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; before it can be pronounced true or false it must be ... 'within the true'" (Foucault 1972b:224). I take this same approach and apply it to the Western science or discipline of Islam and the Muslims—that is, to the serious speech that we call the "anti-Islam discourse."

As a result, I treat primarily the statements of those who have put themselves forward as Islam experts and that are accepted as such in distinct historical epochs or eras as the raw data for analysis. From time to time, I may also examine popular or other lay manifestations of this expertise. However, the discourse on Islam has been since its very formation in the eleventh century the exclusive realm of such experts, in the face of whose expertise the public at large has had little choice but to act as passive, trusting receptors.

Such expert statements can be found in a wide variety of Western sources, including those that in a different methodological context and a different analytical framework might be considered "secondary" ones: works on the history of science, philosophy, or religion; ethnographic and anthropological texts; news items; bureaucratic reports; and statements made by politicians and government functionaries. These sources are the primary canon of the anti-Islam discourse, for in them we can see the discursive formation in full cry. Other documents I consider resemble more traditional primary sources—for example, the memoirs of colonial administrators in British-ruled Egypt and India, Montesquieu's philosophical and literary writings, accounts of Urban II's call to crusade and other political speeches, and essays by leading Renaissance humanists.

As should be clear by now, I am not particularly interested in the veracity—the seriousness, if you will—of claims by serious speech to either meaning or truth, although sometimes it may be useful to put forward alternative understandings or interpretations that surface periodically but that remain outside "the true." Rather, my primary aim is to explore how the discursive claims are produced and deployed in the first place, only to be set aside later—as on a library shelf—and then hauled down again in the furtherance of the discourse and at the behest of new social actors or institutions. I propose to do this by examining what Foucault calls the "modes of existence" of such statements as the most fruitful way of understanding the workings of the anti-Islam discourse: "The analysis of statements ... questions them as to their mode of existence, what it means to them to have come into existence, to have left traces, and perhaps to remain there, awaiting the moment that they might be of some use once more; what it means to them to have appeared when and where they did—they and not others" (1972a:109, emphasis added).

In addition to my analysis of discursive statements about Islam, this work also invokes a more traditional approach to the matter of the Islam expert: how does he or she benefit from

the prevailing discourse? however, these two avenues are perhaps not as far apart as one might expect when first contemplating the interaction of the classical world of Max Weber and the post-structuralist milieu of Michel Foucault. Weber reveals throughout his works the importance he places on his subject's notion of reality and on that subject's point of view, which constitutes his *verstehende Soziologie* (interpretive sociology), which takes into account insight into the individuals' behavior rather than attributing such behavior to idealized types or positivist abstractions (Turner 1974:39).

Nevertheless, Weber does make significant room for the social power of ideas and their ability to shape and direct human behavior. Weber's (1965:51–52) insights are not diminished by his own entanglement in the anti-Islam discourse, which leads him to insist that “early Islam” was a hedonist religion carried out by the warrior classes. In his understanding of the orient, Weber here was following neatly in the footsteps of the classical European thinkers of the nineteenth century—Adam Smith, John Stuart Mills, Karl Marx, and others (Turner 1974; Martin-Asgari 2004). Writing on the social psychology of world religions, Weber notes: “not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the track along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (1958:280). Although clearly less interested than Foucault and the post-structuralists in the epistemological context of discursive formations, Weber acknowledges that ideas, like railway “switchmen,” can also be a determinant of social action.

Weber's sociology fits neatly within my own framework in several other ways. First, he argues that one's worldview and its accompanying motivations are molded by the self-interest of one's social strata. Second, he defines social action as that which “takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course,” a position that downplays or even excludes subjective behavior of any one particular social actor (1947:89; see also Turner 1974:41). Third, Weber is not particularly interested in “an objectively ‘correct’ meaning or one that is ‘true’ in the metaphysical sense,” a central characteristic that distinguishes “the empirical sciences of action,” including sociology, from such “dogmatic” disciplines as jurisprudence, ethics, and logic (89–90). Taken together, then, many of the central elements of Weber's classical project dovetail nicely with my own inquiry into the ways that varying social groups, herein defined as Islam experts, have deployed the same anti-Islam discourse to advance their own interests in concert with one another, even as the context and meaning of those interests may have changed over the centuries.



[Chapter 2](#) discusses my theoretical approach to the anti-Islam discourse. [Chapter 3](#) explores the formation of Islam as discourse—thus addressing the first of my underlying analytic questions: how was this discourse created? It also lays the groundwork for the discussion of the social, intellectual, and political influences that this discourse has exerted ever since.

[Chapters 4, 5, and 6](#) take a thematic approach, breaking down the anti-Islam discourse into a number of component parts and placing each in its appropriate social and historical context. The central themes they investigate are Islam and science, Islam and violence, and Islam and women. These themes are among the most prominent elements of the public discourses surrounding Islam, but the list is by no means exhaustive.¹¹ Islam Through

Western Eyes then concludes with a proposed alternative reading of relations between Islam and the West and suggestions for future research.

FOUCAULT'S TOOLBOX

Archaeological description is precisely ... an abandonment of the history of ideas, a systematic rejection of its postulates and procedures, an attempt to practice a quite different history of what men have said.

MICHEL FOUCAULT, *THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE*

*THE WESTERN STUDY of Islam and Islamic movements has been dominated in recent years by the disciplines of political science, international relations, history, and others, but space for new approaches to the field needs to be staked out. Islam Through Western Eyes seeks to respond to a call for just such a new approach issued by sociologists Philip W. Sutton and Stephen Vertigans in 2005. Lamenting the academy's failure to recognize and then explain in any satisfactory way the contemporary "growth of practicing Muslims, the establishment of Islamic states and the emergence of radical Islamic social movements," Sutton and Vertigans write in *Islamic Resurgence: A Sociological Approach*: "Sociological analysis potentially brings something unique to our understanding of this important phenomenon by connecting Islamic history to changes in the figuration of international states, the rise of political and violent forms of Islam alongside widespread beliefs in 'civilized' values and 'superior' (and 'inferior') civilizations. In short, the absence of a thoroughgoing sociological perspective leaves our understanding of resurgent Islam relatively fragmented and therefore partial" (2005:2).*

As these authors recognize, most efforts to date to address contemporary Islam and the Muslims within a sociological framework, albeit indirectly rather than head on, have so far yielded little and have often clouded the issues more than they have clarified them. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the popularity and longevity of secularization theory—the notion that increased economic development necessarily brings with it decreased levels of religiosity—within the social science corpus and among sociologists of religion in particular, virtually ensured that inquiries into what is commonly termed an "Islamic revival" or "Islamic resurgence" would see it as an unexpected development to be explained in terms of reactions to or escape from economic, political, or physical hardships.

By effectively correlating a rise in secularization with the emergence of this Western notion of modernity, the established approach dictates that growing Muslim religiosity and expanding Islamic movements be seen as deviant or reactionary phenomena restricted to marginalized populations (Sutton and Vertigans 2005:27). This characterization has introduced into the study of non-Western societies serious distortions across many distinct disciplines. The postmodern experience challenges the embedded notion that there is a single, grand narrative that defines the nature and direction of progress, modernity, and development for all societies alike (S. Thomas 2005:11). Yet as Robert Keohane has acknowledged, "The attacks of September 11 reveal that all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with

respect to motivation” (2003:272).

~~The root of the problem lies in the same Enlightenment notions of progress that so heavily imbue the works of such pioneering social scientists as Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud. All saw religious expression as significant but somehow outside the main flow or direction of modernizing societies (Berger 1999:2–4; Beyer 2006:97–98). One of the central concerns running throughout Weber’s work, for example, is the notion of rationalization, as measured by the degree to which intellectual coherence and consistency over time replace magical elements in a society’s approach to religion. This *Entzauberung*—best understood as “disenchantment,” in the sense of the loss of mystery—lies at the heart of Weber’s sociology of knowledge and describes a process whereby charismatic and prophetic knowledge is gradually reinterpreted and rationalized, first by a new stratum of acolytes and priests and later by intellectuals and bureaucrats who reflect the dominant forces in society at large (Gerth and Mills 1958:51–65; Swatos and Christiano 1999:212).~~

~~In *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber writes: “As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world’s processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply ‘are’ or ‘happen’ but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful” (1965:125). This growing demand for meaningful order and the accompanying demystification of the world, then, represent “secularization”—a process that increasingly came to be seen as both a social good and a universal phenomenon against which all societies could be measured and assessed. Weber himself appears to have had in mind a rather fluid definition of “secularization,” particularly in its application to the study of religion.¹~~

~~In the hands of Weber’s heirs, however, secularization theory evolved from the vague assessment of church–state power relations or the extent of religious authority to the full-blown “claim that, in the face of scientific rationality, religion’s influence on all aspects of life—from personal habits to social institutions—is in dramatic decline” (Swatos and Christiano 1999:214). Underpinning much of this development was the influential work of Talcott Parsons (1977), who adopted an evolutionary approach grounded once again in an Enlightenment notion of development and progress. The result is effectively an approach to religious history in which the “stages” of development are defined in advance (Swatos and Christiano 1999:218–219). This advance definition falls into the trap of what Paul M. Sweezy (1953) once dismissed as the predilection among social theorists for “the present as history” (cited in Miller 1959:146).~~

~~Classical secularization theory has beaten a retreat over the past decade or more amid growing recognition of rising levels of religious activity throughout the world and across virtually all traditions as well as among new Religious Movements (e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Greeley 1989; S. Thomas 2005). One of the theory’s earlier supporters, Peter Berger, has since acknowledged that proponents of secularization were wrong in their assertion of a necessary, causal link between modernity and a decline in religiosity on both the societal and individual level: “The world today ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (1999:2; quoted in Sutton and Vertigans 2005:27). Moreover, Berger (1999:4) notes, religious communities have not been forced to adapt to secularity in order to survive, as the theory predicted; rather, those that have thrived in the modern world are precisely those that have resolutely refused~~

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