Islam as an Enemy?
A Study in the Social
Construction of "Realities"

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In my years of teaching about Islam I have often been asked whether we can call Islam the enemy of the West or of Christianity. Before answering this question in any concrete form it is necessary to do some preliminary legwork. This essay does not argue against the designation of Islam as "enemy." There will be no argument from the Qur'an or the Hadith (the record of the sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad), or from philosophers or jurists of Islam to oppose the designation. Rather, here I will ask whether, as Westerners and Christians, our views of Islam over the past two decades are based upon clear thinking and self-reflection or whether they are the result of the myriad forms of social construction we have at our disposal.

Since the appearance of *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1967, sociologists and philosophers have struggled with the extent to which the "facts" that we live by and act upon are actually the result of socially constructed reality.[1] It appears that, especially as we function in groups, we need to establish abstract generalities that we accept as fact in order to function well as a society and as individuals in society.

[1]Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1966).

Too often in our reflections about Muslims, we create an "enemy" that is based on our own cultural biases and generalizations. Genuine human encounter can undermine this process.

To what extent is our picture of Islam socially constructed and then generalized to the point of being dangerous? How do we benefit by seeing Islam as we do? Are there profound negatives associated with socially constructed views of Islam that will make life in the twenty-first century increasingly difficult and dialogue aimed at peace and justice nearly impossible?

A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

Questions of inevitable strife between the West and Islamic civilization were asked long before 9/11, recent events in Europe, or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, and its dissolution in December 1991, there was speculation as to just who or what would replace it as the enemy of the Western democracies and democratic culture. Years of debate resulted regarding a proposed impending "clash of civilizations," which included the nomination of the Islamic world as the new enemy. The term "clash of civilizations" was first used by Bernard Lewis in his 1990 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "The Roots of Muslim Rage."[2] The concept then received its classical formulation in 1993 by Samuel Huntington.[3] Critique of Huntington's thesis from many quarters was immediate. Debate over the issue prompted Huntington to expand and explain more deeply his theory in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.[4]

"Is the Huntington thesis an example of how we naturally tend to construct the form and nature of the enemy?"

Huntington's basic claim was that the collapse of conflict between the ideological rivals of the Cold War would be replaced by a realignment of the world political order along lines defined by cultural and religious identification and values. Huntington believed the cultural and religious identifications of the world's peoples preceded the ideological identifications of the Cold War. He claimed these identifications would reemerge within the context of the modern nation-state to define future conflicts. Hence, international politics would best counter the new alignment of naturally occurring cultural and religious identifications, and especially their potential conflict with the West, through policies designed to pit non-Western cultures against each other, following a pattern inherent in the phrase, "my enemy's enemy is my friend."

We must ask: Is the Huntington thesis an example of how we naturally tend to construct the form and nature of the enemy? Many see multiple dangers in this kind of social construction of the enemy. I will look at two critiques that illustrate

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[2]Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, 47–60.

[3]Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993) 22–49.

[4]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

what many perceive as a dangerous move in our understanding of the world and our relations to Islam.

Charles Amjad-Ali has argued that Huntington so painted Islam and its engagement with the West that the West is

> deprived of all its religious elements and is viewed exclusively in cultural terms, and the Islamic world is reduced to an all-encompassing, all-consuming, exclusively religious culture. This does not auger well either for Islam or for the construction of an alternative political and international model that could serve the intents of peace and justice in the world. Instead it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy which has made life in recent years incredibly difficult for many in the world.[5]

Amjad-Ali points to two problems: (1) definitions of the West and Islam are based upon differing or opposite bases and (2) this opposition leads to self-fulfilling prophecy that is disruptive of people's real lives.

In his critique of Huntington and others who seek to create general and abstract cultural identities and characteristics, Edward Said points out, "To Huntington, what he calls 'civilization identity' is a stable and undisturbed thing, like a room full of furniture in the back of your house."[6] When we reify the other as an unchanging entity naturally bound to conflict with ours, we engender a response along the same lines, that is, the West is seen as a "monolithic category that is supposed to express hostility to nonwhite, non-European, and non-Christian civilizations."[7] The response of reified culture to reified culture leads to this dilemma: "The more insistent we are on the separations of cultures and civilizations, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and about others."[8]

Said, based upon these critiques, then asks a series of telling questions that bear upon my reflections here:

> But is this the best way to understand the world we live in? Is it wise...to produce a simplified map of the world and then hand it to generals and civilian lawmakers as a prescription for first comprehending and then acting in the world? Doesn't this method in effect prolong, exacerbate, and deepen conflict? Do we *want* the clash of civilizations? Doesn't it mobilize nationalist passions and therefore nationalist murderousness? Shouldn't we ask the question, Why is one doing this sort of thing? To understand or to act? To mitigate or to aggravate the likelihood of conflict?[9]

These questions are clearly important in our current world situation. In what

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[5]Charles Amjad-Ali, *Islamophobia or Restorative Justice: Tearing the Veils of Ignorance* (Johannesburg: Ditshwanelo CAR2AS, 2006) 4.

[6]Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Definitions," in *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, ed. Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 79; previously published in Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 569–592.

[7]Ibid., 70.

[8]Ibid., 84.

[9]Ibid., 72.

follows, I will reflect upon the process of reification itself. How and why do we construct abstract generalizations about the other such that we create the enemy we describe? How have Islam and Islamic culture been painted? Are we complicit in the creation of a corresponding Islamic response? Are we responding to Islamic reification of Western culture? Are we involved in an interaction spiraling toward danger, and are there ways to begin to think and act differently?

THE PROCESS OF REIFICATION

Reification is a process whereby living experience in all its complexity is pictured in abstract terms, then simplified and generalized in order to be more manageable. The abstraction is then regarded as if it had its own living existence. The process of reification often results in the "thingification" of the other in social relations. The other loses its concrete living reality in the abstraction.

How do we, through a process of reification, at least in part create our enemy? James A. Aho reminds us:

> The important fact to emphasize is that the enemy is a *joint* production. It is rarely a phenomenon achieved by any one person alone, but is something done socially, by all of us together...[I]f it is true that enemies are socially assembled, then they must also be socially disassembled.[10]

How are enemies assembled? The process follows a basic pattern:[11]

(1) We name or label the other, not only attempting to describe them, but to defame or separate them from us. The naming rhetorically accomplishes the creation of an enemy, ready for violation. Consider the power of such labels as "slut," "fag," "heretic," "Communist," or "fascist."[12] In themselves the labels set the stage for demonizing the other.

(2) We engage in legitimation of the label in a formal process taking place on hallowed ground. It can be legal (the hallowed courtroom), or it can take place in the halls of legislatures, in churches, or assemblies of peoples. The point is that the labeled one goes through ceremonies of degradation that have the power to make the label stick. The label must be validated such that the acts of the accused are not accidental, but part of an overall evil gestalt.[13]

(3) We utilize myths to substantiate the formal legitimation. Mythmaking supports the evil gestalt by giving biographical or historical information that is at best half-truth, but most often simply false. Our Christian history with Jews has illustrated this step repeatedly, for example, describing them

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[10]James A. Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994) 6.

[11]Ibid., 27. Aho is here using the theory of Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*.

[12]Aho, *This Thing of Darkness*, 28.

[13]Ibid., 29.

as "Christ killers" or speaking of secret attempts at world domination as alleged in the bogus work *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.[14]

(4) There occurs a sedimentation process whereby the label seems to be common sense and a common property of all of "us." Sedimentation is most often achieved by media or by word of mouth from generation to generation. By constant repetition the lie becomes "common knowledge," something "everybody knows."

(5) Finally, rituals maintain a state of tension, threat, or momentum that always reminds us of the danger of the enemy. We are told we must be vigilant. Military preparedness, the rituals of military service, and national holidays celebrating victories over evil maintain the state of alertness to the enemy.

One of the most powerful examples of negative reification is seen in warfare. Humans have known for centuries that success in physical conflict involves a process of making the enemy increasingly faceless and defined by group stereotypes. Studies have shown that soldiers will become less likely to destroy an enemy the more they see that enemy as an individual like themselves. How is this problem typically overcome? How do we get people to kill? The enemy must be so constructed that any real value of the personhood in the enemy is muted by the stereotype and the need to pursue some greater, more general good, either by expanding the cultural value for which one is putatively fighting or by protecting it against the alleged outside threat.

THE REIFICATION OF ISLAM

To what extent is our typical Western or Christian understanding of Islam prone to the processes of negative reification and the social construction of Islam as enemy? If our basic understanding of Islam is a result of a process of negative reification, what dangers are engendered in the modern world by following that process? If dangers are indeed foreseeable, are there ways to deconstruct the negative abstraction through attention to the particularities of Muslims and their faith and life values? This section and the next will take up these issues.

How do we "name" Islam? Naming brands a person or group with a label. The labels we use have a particular meaning, but in the reification process, anything or anyone loosely connected with the label can be tarnished by its force. Muslims, like Christians, can individually or as groups be historically or anecdotally associated with the label "terrorist" or "extremist." It doesn't take long to find instances to illustrate these labels in either tradition. But when the labels raise fears so that anyone loosely fitting the general category of "Muslim" is actually or provisionally tied to it, we have set up the circumstances whereby we expect a Muslim,

[14]*The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* is a fraudulent document from the early twentieth century that has been used then and now to legitimize anti-Semitism.

whether or not they have ever committed a terrorist act, to be just a hair's breadth away from doing so. Whether that person is a terrorist or not is perceived to be beyond our control, to be inherent in their very being Muslim.

> **"*Are there ways to deconstruct the negative abstraction through attention to the particularities of Muslims and their faith and life values?*"**

In a world of rapid and undigested communication and news reporting we can, and do, fall prey to the negative effects of event-oriented reporting, using it to "legitimize" our naming of Islam. The media cannot be condemned for an event-oriented worldview. That is their job. But we must also understand how a constant diet of reporting horrendous and violent events can consciously or unconsciously lead us to legitimate our labeling. Phrases like "Islamic terrorists" or "Muslim extremists" will ultimately open the way to an actual identification of the terms Muslim and Islam with terrorist and extremist. The "war against terrorism" takes on an almost sacred character. Islamic culture is portrayed as "hating our way of life and our democratic institutions." When events and rhetoric succeed in legitimizing the negative labeling of Islam with the taint of admittedly evil anecdotal events, then we begin the process of failing to understand Islam and Muslims, or, more tragically, failing to understand who we are and how easily the anecdotal evils of our history can be used to label us. The half-truth used to legitimate false knowledge is far more devastating than the outright lie.

Myths support our abstraction of Islam as enemy and allow us to see the enemy as inherently inclined to do the evil we expect of them. Typical myths about Islamic culture and Muslims abound, as illustrated in three brief instances. We have for centuries lived by the myth that Islam spread primarily and necessarily by the sword. While warfare and forced conversions are as common in Islam as they are in Western European and American history, it is simply untrue that Islam has its existence and power by dint of the sword. As Islam spread out of the Arabian Peninsula, its rapid expansion in a hundred years to control North Africa, the Middle East, and Persia could never be explained by military power alone. There simply weren't that many Muslim soldiers. The truth of the matter is that Islam filled a political vacuum and brought security to regions plagued by crisis and warfare after the fall of Roman influence and the weakening of the Byzantine Empire.[15]

Likewise, there is the myth that Islam is inherently antithetical to human rights, especially the rights of women. This is particularly telling because it fits so well into the process of making half-truths into essential truths. The anecdotal evidence of abuse, discrimination, and second-class citizenship for women can be used by accusers with differing values and social procedures to taint the portrait of

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[15]Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 33–44.

Islam. Differences among cultures in the world are real and, indeed, abuse occurs, but the mythmaking process makes these differences inevitable signs of unavoidable conflict between enemies. In addition, spreading this myth opens the West to critique as well, for our own human rights record is less than pristine.

The claim that Islam is inherently anti-Christian is another half-truth candidate for myth. While Islam has an attitude toward Christians that can be called "the ambiguity of commendation and censure,"[16] it is not true that there is inherent animosity. There is a tragic history of neuralgic issues, which has often led to violence. But, again, myth can take the half-truth and make it useful as a tool in constructing the Muslim as enemy of the West.

Our media, religious, and political institutions reinforce the myths and process of sedimentation through constant repetition of incomplete information. Policy makers and citizens of both the Western and Islamic worlds find an almost irresistible temptation to construct generalizations about each other based upon event-focused reporting and shallow analysis of news events. The press is not necessarily to blame, but the process of reporting does carry with it unintended results. We see the event and create an abstract reality to explain it. Event coverage is also often accompanied by "spinning" of the event to justify a particular action or policy, a process as old as human societies and societal conflict. How often can we encounter evil events and the naming that attends them before those names become a ritualized way of speaking about Islam? The real Islam of everyday life and faith is buried in ritual language that creates an enemy who is only perceived through terms like "terrorist," "violent," "extremist," "anti-Western," "hater of democracy," and the like.

Finally, has our process of reification actually prompted a response from Muslims such that our own complicity in creating the enemy is hidden? I have observed this phenomenon while living several years in Indonesia, a country with more Muslims than the entire Middle East combined. Many Muslims in that country have moved from a positive view of Westerners and Christians to the point where they will at least listen to anti-Western rhetoric. Why? Our language to describe Islam and our corresponding acts have led them to see us as the potential enemy.

DECONSTRUCTING THE ENEMY THROUGH POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT

How, then, can we deconstruct the social creation of the enemy and enter into a process that can lead to true understanding? We can achieve a deconstruction, but it must involve at least the following: (1) valuing the particular and avoiding the superfluous and, (2) the confession of "evils," which allows us to acknowledge our complicity in the creation of the enemy. We can do this by self-reflection, truth-telling, acknowledgement of difference, and dealing with differ-

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[16]I borrow this phrase from Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005) 136.

ence openly and honorably. What follows are general thoughts on how to overcome the negatives of the social construction of Islam as an enemy; specific suggestions must be made with a context in mind.

> *"Islam and Muslims themselves are tremendously diverse both in culture and in the ways they express their religious identity in life"*

We can find ways to allow Muslims and non-Muslims to "name" themselves. Islam and Muslims themselves are tremendously diverse both in culture and in the ways they express their religious identity in life. Positive engagement involves encounter and listening, speaking and service. Islam is often called a religion of orthopraxis (right action), so Muslims are accustomed to valuing a person based upon whether that person lives up to who he or she claims to be. Christians reveal themselves in this way as well, for good or ill. Christians seeking understanding can overcome their prejudices by exhibiting vulnerability to change through an understanding of Muslims in engagement with them.

We can find ways of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims that "legitimize" the self-understanding of each in the face of the other. Formal dialogue has long been a goal of Muslim/Christian engagement, but dialogue requires finding a level of comfort in speaking openly with one another. A basic element in securing a comfortable environment is discovering that one's own understanding of one's own faith is not only known by the dialogue partner, but appreciated. This is well stated in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue's *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*:

> It would be ideal if Muslims would finally be capable of presenting Christianity in such a way that Christians would recognize themselves completely, and if Christians could also give a picture of Islam in which Muslims would recognize themselves perfectly.[17]

Dialogue, then, would be predicated upon those involved being able to faithfully legitimize the living faith of the other. In this way, labeling is short-circuited.

We can find ways to get at the truths of our long-troubled history together that effectively debunk the "myths" by which we perpetuate enemy consciousness. The realities of Islamic history as well as Western history are full of violence and mistrust, and we have built many myths around that history. But myths lose their power over us when actual encounter brings the lie to the myth. Dialogue mutes the mythmaking of the past. When we engage real people and take the time and effort to study and understand our mutual histories and tragic events, the myths recede.

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[17]Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, trans. R. Marston Speight (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 32–33.

If our respective institutions perpetuate myths by repetition, how does the truth break in? It breaks in when we know our Muslim neighbor and when we seek ways to pass on that understanding. Muslims and Christians can make newsworthy events through mutual cooperation. Christians can seek new venues for gaining reliable information by studying Islam in classes and adult forums. Probably most effectively, where possible, Christians can work together with Muslims to seek ways to create and maintain a just society with fair and equal treatment for all. In this way, truth will pass from generation to generation by word of mouth, breaking the cycle of myth and labeling.

Learning to break the hegemony of "ritual" language and actions and learning to speak of one another appropriately and act justly is the hardest step, for it involves reevaluating our institutionalized ways of dealing with perceived threat. We already know that military and security solutions are at best stop-gap measures, necessary in any society to be sure and never to be gainsaid. But ritually to bang the drums of military preparedness, increased security measures, and hard-line confrontation at the expense of diplomacy and the search for justice will only perpetuate the need for countering "the enemy" instead of finding the other human being who lives among us.

The process of reification and the social construction of the enemy are dangerous in our contemporary age. We need to find more effective ways of dealing with the other faiths in our world, particularly Islam. Roland Miller, whose long service among Muslims lends authority to his voice, provides this summary:

> As churches and missions, we have a duty to remember our calling to service, reconciliation and peace-making, evangelism, and dialogue. We have a task to educate our people in relation to Islam, to teach the forgiveness of sins, and to reach out in love to Muslims in word and deed as the bearers of the Gospel....We can no longer ignore either Islam or Muslims.[18] ⊕

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[18]Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 427.