

## **ISLAM AND THE WEST: NARRATIVES OF CONFLICT AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION**

**Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said**

### **Abstract**

**This article addresses one of the more vexing questions facing analysts of relations between the Islamic world and the West: How can we speak about deeply divisive cultural and political issues in ways that foster conflict transformation rather than an intensification of conflict? Using narrative analysis as an approach, we examine the most common “stories” that actors identifying with Islam and the West use to organize their thinking about conflict: a story of intercultural confrontation and a story of intercultural compatibility. After noting that both Western and Muslim narrators of these stories make a number of strikingly similar claims, we conclude by suggesting that a “new story” emphasizing intercultural complementarity can help agents of conflict transformation reframe differences and advance the cause of peaceful coexistence.**

It has become commonplace to observe that the Islamic world and the West appear to be mired in an intensifying cycle of political and cultural conflict, and that the most significant source of rivalry is the profoundly unsettled nature of American relations with the Muslim Middle East. In matters related to Persian Gulf geopolitics, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the politics of Islamic revivalism, American policy preferences for maintaining stability and control through a system of regional alliances are met with contrary regional preferences for dramatic change. Frictions generated by conflicting interests and desires spill over into the cultural domain, resulting in the politicization of identities and an escalatory conflict dynamic in which the basic value commitments, beliefs and mores of the “other” are regarded as threatening and problematic. The result is an atmosphere of doubt, distrust, and disrespect in which efforts to dominate and coerce adversaries displace initiatives to collaborate in a search for intercultural understanding and means of mutual political accommodation. On both sides of the troubled relationship between Americans and the Muslim Middle East, there is deep estrangement and a growing belief in the futility of communication.

As they seek to analyze the complexity of relations between America and the Muslim Middle East, social scientists face a dilemma: How can they make the cultural aspects of conflict more intelligible to policymakers and to the public without reproducing the provocative and sensationalistic frameworks popularized by exponents of “clash of civilizations” theses? Analyses of cultural differences at an international or global level, after all, are arguably even more prone to over-generalization than traditional discourse on the politics of nation-states; yet efforts that fail to come to terms with these cultural differences – offering instead conventional political and economic variables, usually with particular attention to issues such as hegemony and imperialism – fail to provide an adequate basis for conflict transformation. Whereas the first approach can easily serve to amplify the tensions it purports to describe, the second is unable to account for the volatile, interactive dynamics of identity conflict. Both approaches are alike, however, in their tendency to present implicitly deterministic portrayals of cultural or political relations, in which past legacies cast a long shadow over the future. Both are largely *retrospective* in orientation, and concern themselves far more with what “was” and “is” than with what might be. As a result, they give significantly greater conceptual weight to adversarial and destructive patterns of behavior than to countercurrents.

The present study takes a self-consciously *prospective* approach to relations between Islam and the West, and is less concerned with explaining “how we got here” than with exploring “where we might go next.” Rather than dwell upon problems of representing cultural and religious factors, this paper takes it for granted that cultural narratives are 1) significant, and 2) pluralistic. Simultaneously recognizing the significance and pluralism of cultural narratives about conflict allows us to come to terms with the constitutive impact of identity and deeply embedded meanings, without contributing to dangerous stereotypes that foreclose latent possibilities for conflict transformation.

In any situation of intense conflict, there is a tendency among disputants to become trapped inside their own stories of threatened identity, justified fear, and unjustifiable suffering. As advocates of narrative mediation have recognized, it is often more useful to help the narrators of these stories become more conversant with their counterparts’ framing of events than to attempt to impose a common and presumably neutral frame of reference. The task of the mediator, then, is to seek points of convergence between narratives, and whenever possible to uncover “unstoried experiences” of cooperation or even mutual affinity that may somehow enable antagonists to shift from “conflict-saturated” stories to stories that permit the formation of a new relationship (Winslade and Monk, 2000).

Such an approach to understanding the narrative dimensions of conflict is greatly needed if there is to be any possibility for conflict transformation between Islam and the West. Recent events have significantly increased temptations on both sides of this macro-cultural relationship to embrace deeply polarized and conflict-saturated narratives. At the popular level, narratives of intercultural rivalry have already become dominant.

To avoid becoming “trapped inside a story,” we must critically examine the contents and origins of these polarizing narratives, while also investigating non-dominant counter-narratives of intercultural compatibility and complementarity. The existence of remarkable cross-cultural parallels between different narratives signals both danger and opportunity. Parallel themes of perennial confrontation and rivalry suggest that further escalation of conflict remains a genuine possibility, yet counter-narratives concerning intercultural compatibility and even value complementarity offer hope for improved relations.

### **The Power of Narratives**

According to Marc Howard Ross (2002, p. 303), narratives may be defined as “frameworks for action” through which members of particular identity groups “understand the social and political worlds in which they live, and explain the conflicts in which they are involved.” Narratives, then, are the stories that members of social and political groups tell about themselves and their relations with selected “others,” to create or reinforce a sense of collective identity and shared purpose. Dynamic rather than static, narratives bind individuals together within an active and adaptive community, and change in response to traumatic events and emergent challenges. Despite their dynamism, however, narratives manifest consistency over time because group members draw upon a shared stock of cultural symbols and historical experiences to create meaningful bonds, shared social goals, and maps of the world that are infused with emotion and metaphor (e.g., September 11 = Pearl Harbor). Though contested by rival factions and leaders within a group, the narratives which come to dominate public discourse are often those which serve most effectively to give definition to in-group identity and values through reference to an out-group. Such narratives provide authoritative, commonsense understandings about the nature of perceived threats to the group and its values, and connect the fears, insecurities, and problems of the moment both with past tribulations and with a forward-looking political program.

As Ross (2002) emphasizes, analysis of narratives can provide considerable insight into conflict situations. First, narratives play an undeniable causal role in conflict dynamics, by ruling certain political options either “in” or “out” for communal groups and for those who claim to advance their interests. Narratives that promote exclusive in-group loyalties, negative images of adversaries, and escalatory conflict moves can easily exacerbate tensions, while narratives that highlight common ground shared by disputants can make resolution of conflict more likely. Second, narratives provide invaluable information about the understandings that disputants have concerning the nature of their conflict and the driving motivations of each party. They manifest the emotional fears and visceral threats experienced by conflict protagonists, and therefore provide criteria for effective settlements. An essential part of the search for constructive responses to

conflict, Ross (2002, p. 304, *emphasis added*) notes, is “the development of *new narratives*, ones which do not directly challenge older ones, but which reframe them in more inclusive terms that deemphasize the emotional significance of differences between groups and identify shared goals and experiences”.

In contemporary tensions between America and the Muslim Middle East, the role of narratives about “the West” and “Islam” is decisive. Prevailing narratives on each side of the cultural divide exhibit remarkably similar tendencies toward polarization of identity issues, adversarial framing of historical relations, and rejection of shared responsibility for contemporary conflict. Similarities between counter-narratives that may be found on each side are even more marked – exhibiting not only isomorphism but also substantive agreement on matters related to intercultural relations and historical memory. The existence of such positive narrative themes cutting across the lines of conflict provides insight into resources that are available to those who wish to “tell a new story” that reaffirms distinctive communal identities while acknowledging the experiences of the “other” and supporting aspirations toward intercultural peace.

### **The Story of Intercultural Confrontation**

#### *Images of the “Other”*

American relations with the Muslim Middle East are mediated by images – images that Americans hold of Muslims and images that Middle Eastern Muslims have formed of America. These images, in turn, are embedded within narratives, and a striking theme in prevailing American and Muslim narratives is cultural conflict between “Islam” and “the West.” When America and the Muslim Middle East interact, then, the significance of the interaction is not limited to the manifest, external appearance of a political discussion or an economic transaction. The significance of the occasion is a function of the meaning that the protagonists give it.

Dominant Middle Eastern and American narratives about relations between Islam and the West focus on the manner in which their respective civilizations have defined themselves in opposition to each other. Though the narratives differ with respect to their invocation of historical facts, their overarching themes are so similar that we may refer to them as constituting a single “story” of intercultural confrontation.

Despite centuries of relations defined as much by commerce in goods and ideas as by intermittent warfare and strife, the historical memories and imaginations of Islamic and Western civilizations tend to cast each other in adversarial roles. Quite regularly, Muslims and Westerners have viewed the “other” as unassimilable – as a “mirror on the wall” personage who speaks only to confirm their own greatness, virtue, and self-sufficiency. This idea of the “other” as an inferior rival or shadow of the “self” has led to dehumanizing stereotypes as well as to habits of selective perception in which negative

interactions are remembered while more positive encounters are forgotten.<sup>1</sup> The resultant images are implicated in the violent excesses of such low points in Islamic-Western relations as the wholesale slaughter of the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem by the Crusader army in 1099 C.E. (Armstrong, 1991, pp. 178-179; Maalouf, 1984, pp. 50-51), and, more recently, the terrorist attacks that destroyed thousands of lives at the World Trade Center.

Narratives of competition between Islamic and Western civilizations derive their subject matter both from the geopolitical tensions of the present and from the politicized cultural legacies of the past. For European Christians developing a sense of collective self-consciousness amidst tumultuous internal rivalries, the idea of an Islamic “other” – be it “Saracen,” “Moorish,” “Turk,” or “Muslim” – provided a basis for articulating a shared identity, a set of common values and, at times, a common political program. The notion of a struggle between “Islamic civilization” and “the West” is a recent transmutation of a much older theme; the terms of reference for Western Christian cultures have been redefined by secularization of the public sphere and of collective identity, and by the simultaneous definition of an “East,” or “Orient” through which Europeans and their descendants on other continents might come to know their own contrasting distinctiveness (Neumann, 1999). Likewise, Muslims in the Middle East and beyond have developed a greater sense of their own identity and values through competition with “Frankish,” “Christian,” and “Western” “others.” The “other,” then, is integral to the way each cultural grouping has understood itself. The preferred label for the “other” of the present is applied retroactively, and conjures up images of conflict from the past.

Although the term “Middle East” is of quite recent provenance, it evokes rich and varied associations in what we may refer to as the “collective imagination” of the West. Despite the fact that the Middle East accounts for only a small fraction of the world’s Muslims (a plurality of whom may be found in South and Southeast Asia), Western images of the Middle East (especially the Arab Middle East) and of Islam are deeply intertwined.<sup>2</sup> These associations are laden with vivid and often contradictory images: peaceful desert oases and enormous oil refineries, fabulous newfound wealth and interminable religious conflicts, luxury vehicles and camel caravans, sword-bearing Arabs in traditional Bedouin dress and military leaders in starched khakis, inarticulate veiled women and immodest belly dancers, world-changing prophets and fanatical charismatic leaders, shrouded saints in sandals and tyrants in palatial estates. While more romantic and colorfully exotic images often prevailed during the colonial era, when European supremacy was unquestioned, the return of Islamic discourse to the international political stage since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the eclipse of Cold War ideological rivalries in the late 1980s has cast these images in a darker hue. Though diverse, these images are united by the same idea of “otherness” that has haunted Europe’s relations with the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa in the past. The Muslim Middle East, Westerners are inclined to believe, is a land of harsh extremes.

They are tempted to view it as a part of the world that may justifiably be considered strange and even arbitrary – a place that runs in accordance with unfamiliar rules that only learned historians and foreign policy experts can understand, an exception to generally held principles and expectations.

If Americans and Westerners are often tempted to regard the Muslim Middle East as a foil – a means of defining themselves in relation to everything that they presumably *are not* – Middle Eastern Muslims are more than capable of manifesting a similar attitude toward a Western “other.” This attitude comes complete with an array of images and associations that most Westerners would not regard as flattering, particularly in the areas of sexual morality, family life, crime, and public safety. Like Western ideas about the Muslim Middle East, the images have at least a provisional basis in reality, but are often more representative of Hollywood than of day-to-day life.

In the dominant “self/other” perceptions of Westerners and Middle Eastern Muslims, real cultural differences are exaggerated and distorted. Each side experiences the reality of the other vicariously; commercial television programming and opportunistic political discourses mediate experiences of the “other” by accentuating the strange, the sensational, and the shocking, with a minimum of interpretive context. Middle Eastern programming, for example, often provides grist for the mill of defeatist, conspiratorial theories of American foreign policy making, while Western media productions reduce the complex disputations of Muslims on the rights of women and non-Muslims to a simple “moderate vs. extremist” dichotomy, typically leaving the impression that the most “strict” and even disturbing interpretations of Islamic values are the most authentic and widely accepted. Without necessarily resorting to the outright fantasies and fabrications that emerge in times of conflict, prevailing narratives in both the West and the Middle East neglect common ground and context in favor of events and arguments that may be taken to symbolize the preconceived idea of incommensurable, deeply opposed cultural value systems. “Otherness” is taken for granted, even at the level of basic human motivations and preferences for violence or nonviolence. The “other” is innately hostile and overbearing, while the “self” is by nature pacific yet placed on the defensive by adverse circumstances.

Muslims and Westerners who narrate the story of confrontation seek to place Islamic-Western relations within an “us versus them” framework that posits continuous historical antagonism from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the present day. They project a world of protracted conflict between incompatible civilizations defined by religious allegiance, cultural affinity, and historical bonds. To underscore the allegedly violence-prone character of boundaries between civilizations and explain current tensions between America and contemporary Muslim movements, they highlight instances of conflict between leading powers of each camp – the Arab tribes versus the Byzantines in the seventh century, the “Saracens” versus the Franks during the era of the Crusades, and Ottoman Turks versus European empires in more recent times. To support speculations concerning the future volatility of cross-cultural relationships, conflicts *between* groups

identified with each civilizational camp are emphasized at the expense of more numerous conflicts *within* civilizations.<sup>3</sup>

As distasteful as crude enemy images may appear to the moderate and largely apolitical majorities in both cultural regions, the preoccupation of image-makers and sensationalists with instances of confrontation and cultural divergence has fostered widespread attitudes of distrust and resignation to the seeming “inevitability” of conflict stemming from irreconcilable differences. These attitudes have become increasingly compelling to many in the wake of two Persian Gulf wars, the attacks of September 11, and the escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence that followed the breakdown of the Oslo process. As a result, competition and violence are taken for granted as part of the natural state of things, rather than regarded as problems worthy of fact-finding and soul-searching investigation. All who would seek to understand conflict between Middle Eastern Muslims and the West must therefore face widespread and powerful perceptions that “our reality” and “their reality” cannot meet, and that authentic security is to be found in cultural retrenchment combined with vigorous efforts to repress, repel, or convert the adversary.

When conflict intensifies, discussion of competing interests and areas of possible compromise gives way to a reframing of conflict in terms of opposed values and essences. “Our values” and “their values” are deemed mutually exclusive, and the latest frictions become yet another episode in a centuries-old chronicle of untoward events. Militant Muslim groups liken U.S. hegemony over the Middle East to Crusader occupation and cite Western speculations concerning a “the clash of civilizations” as proof of hostile intent.<sup>4</sup> For their part, influential American pundits often float references to the notion of an irreconcilable “clash of civilizations” before proposing that a World War II or Cold War analogy is more strategically appropriate; the appeal of militant Islamic “counter-imperialism” ideologies and the capabilities of “*ji*had” groups signal a need for policies similar to those used to “roll back” fascism and communism (Goldberg, 2001). Rather than engage their counterparts in dialogue, powerful voices in both cultural camps utilize strained historical analogies to argue that the necessary lessons for dealing with contemporary problems are to be found in epic struggles against the communal adversaries of times past.

Nearly twenty-five years after the Iranian revolution, American doubts concerning the ability of Middle Eastern Muslims to govern themselves and Muslim mistrust of American intentions appear to be interacting in a more precarious manner than ever before, and the perceptual gap appears to be widening (Halliday, 2002). Middle Eastern Muslim analysts, on the one hand, tend to view militant groups such as al Qaeda as byproducts of foreign hegemony, distorted processes of change, and the defeat of secular Arab nationalist movements in the Arab-Israeli conflict. American commentators, on the other hand, tend to view extremist groups as evidence of inherent backwardness – i.e., of cultural intolerance and an associated inability or unwillingness to assimilate into the international system by adopting Western liberal models of thought and governance

(Lewis, 1990, 1993). Where Muslim voices argue that cultural and political change proceed best when people are allowed to learn from their own trial and error process, without external manipulation or control, a majority of American analysts call for tighter controls on Middle Eastern governments and societies, if necessary through a policy of forceable regime change in countries such as Iraq. The manifest assumption behind such policy convictions is that Middle Eastern Muslim populations lack indigenous resources for democratic reform, understood in Western liberal terms. Reform, then, must be imposed on the region – first by combating subversive regimes and movements, and second by encouraging authoritarian leaders to adopt economic reforms that might eventually proceed to freedom of speech after a process of secularization and growth (Zakaria, 2001).

### *The Construction of Differences*

To understand narratives of confrontation between the West and Muslim peoples, we must be attentive not only to history and contemporary politics, but also to subtleties of human psychology and intercultural relations. As analysts of ethnic conflict recognize, members of communal groups tend to define their identity not only through the affirmation of positive qualities that are said to be manifest among their group's members, but also through *contrasting* these positive qualities with the putatively inferior traits of out-group members (Cohen, 1985; Northrup, 1989; Stein, 2001). This creates a sense of bounded identity, reinforces in-group solidarity, affirms shared values, strengthens individual and collective self-esteem, and facilitates cooperation to achieve common purposes. In short, "others" provide the collective "self" with a means of defining its own qualities and boundaries. The bonding culture that unites members of a group is formed by defining both "existential *otherness*" – *what* is normatively bad and therefore rejected in interactions among group members – and also "existential *others*" – *who* is, at best, outside the embrace of the community and, at worst, a threat to the in-group.

This is another way of saying that, in intergroup relations, self-perception plays a profound role in conditioning the way that the "other" will be perceived. Although down-to-earth, material issues and interests play a decisive role in any significant intergroup conflict, cultural differences powerfully affect the way in which conflict is symbolized and conducted. Culturally charged perceptions determine the *meaning* that estranged groups give to their conflict, and the meaning that groups give to their real and imagined differences defines the quality of relations between them. Similarly, *actual history* – to the extent that we are able to reconstruct it – plays a far less powerful role in shaping relations between communal groups than *remembered history*: the history that the record-keepers, politicians, and storytellers of a community define as pertinent to challenges that the group faces today. The way we remember the past – what it says

about who “we” are, who or what our adversaries are, and what lessons we should apply to our present affairs – affects the way we construe the present, and vice versa.

Because Islam appeared on the stage of world history shortly after the rise of Christianity to political prominence within the Roman and Byzantine empires, Islam has been a factor in the definition of Western identity for centuries, consistently playing the role of “rival” and theological/ ideological “other.” Islam’s sudden breakthrough in Arab conquests of Byzantine and Sassanian lands, not to mention Spain, presented early Christians with both a political and a theological challenge, and eventually gave rise to the conception of Islam as a “religion of the sword.” European Christians did not, however, immediately conceive of Islam as a source of serious ideological competition. From the beginning, their images of Islam were colored not only by the vicissitudes of relations between Muslim and Christian groups, but also by internal cultural and political preoccupations. The “Islamic other” was defined through largely ethnic distinctions – as a Moor, Saracen, or Turks – and used as a foil in debates about Christian virtue (Daniel, 1993).

Western images of Islam have long been based as much on imagination and presumption as on knowledge. In the Middle Ages, when the greatest threats to Christians were political anarchy or failure to live up to religious ideals, European Christian writers represented Islam as a force of chaotic and violent passions of the flesh. At the time of the Crusades, Christian chroniclers referred to the “Saracens” as idolaters who worshipped the sun and Muhammad rather than as fellow monotheists; yet during the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation characterizations of Islam shifted to accentuate theological deviation, heresy, and corruption – the same sins that Protestants and Catholics were vigorously attributing to each other. By the time of the Enlightenment, a newer and more familiar Islamic “other” began to appear. This time it embodied fanaticism, intolerant backwardness, and obscurantist despotism in the face of rational faith and liberty.<sup>5</sup> More recently, images of Islam have been shaped by the perception that Islamic culture represses women, encourages intolerant fundamentalism (a term that was originally associated with a twentieth-century Protestant movement in favor of literal Bible interpretation), and incites terrorism. Although the emphasis has differed in accordance with the salient issue of the day, the idea of Islam as “other” or as an “exception” to Western standards has remained constant. This idea grows in cultural prominence during times of direct political conflict, when Islam is viewed as alien, intrusive, and aggressive.

Like Western impressions of Islam, Muslim images of the West have varied in accordance with cultural and political circumstances. Prior to the Western expansion in the modern age, Muslim thinkers lacked elaborate notions of a “Western other,” and indeed took little interest in their European neighbors. Where initial Western ideas about Islam were shaped by insecurity in the face of a theological and political challenge, early Islamic ideas about European neighbors developed within a context of political dynamism and cultural self-confidence. Muslims, after all, interpreted the rise of Islam to

a world-historical force as a sign of divine favor, just as Christian interpreters of Islam viewed the good fortunes of their counterparts with great existential discomfort. For Western chroniclers, the defeat of Muslim forces at Pointers by Charlemagne was a watershed moment, while for Muslims it was, if anything, a minor setback in a remote and presumably backward region of world. For medieval Muslims, then, the European “other” was perhaps a confirmation of relative Islamic greatness, just as Jewish and Christian peoples living under Islamic rule were viewed as generally non-threatening forerunners to a more comprehensive and morally rigorous civilizational force. Such, at least, was the state of affairs when Muslims felt secure in their worldly status, jeopardized far more by marauding Mongols emerging from Central Asia than by Europeans. The principal exception to this sense of security (some might even say complacency) vis-à-vis the West was the Crusades. Memories of invasion by Christian armies during the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries have provided Middle Eastern Muslims with a major narrative motif for understanding the significance of modern colonialism and of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Muslim self-confidence vis-à-vis the West began to diminish with the loss of Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and, more significantly, with the collapse of Ottoman rule over a large swath of Eastern Europe. Americans remember 1492 as the year Columbus, sailing under the Spanish flag, discovered America. Contemporary Arabs and Muslims remember the year 1492 not for the voyage of Columbus to America, but rather for the fall of the kingdom of Grenada, the last Arab Islamic presence in the West. In retrospect, this year marks the beginning of an era in which Islam receded to the East – to the periphery of an increasingly dynamic European state system – to become a non-Western phenomenon. With the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 and later the Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarji in 1774, the Ottomans retreated from Europe and Muslims were reduced to passivity in world politics, leaving for Christianity the task of shaping the modern world. As Muslims see it, they were excluded from history; their destinies were now determined by increasingly intrusive Western powers such as France, which occupied Egypt in 1798 during Napoleon’s reign.

To this day, the experience of Western imperialism remains the overarching framework within which many Muslims reconstruct their memories of the past. A widely shared impression among present-day Muslims is that Islam is struggling to regain its international stature after a prolonged eclipse in the face of Western colonial expansion. From Algiers in North Africa to Zamboanga in the southern Philippines, European powers such as France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain succeeded in conquering indigenous Muslim populations and extracting natural resources from the new lands that came under their control. For Muslims, the West came to resemble what Islam represented for early European Christians: a tremendous political and cultural challenge. Particularly in the Middle East, this perception has remained acute even with the passing of colonialism, in no small part on account of Cold War geopolitics, Western oil interests, and the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

Recent decades have witnessed the slow and often painful reemergence of Muslim peoples in world politics. The end of colonialism brought Muslim “nation-states” into existence for the first time, but many of these states have faced great difficulty establishing political legitimacy. Challenges to the legitimacy of Muslim states arise not only from the cultural and ethnic diversity of their subject peoples, but also from Islam’s traditional subordination of principles of nationality, ethnicity, and territoriality (the implicit basis of modern states) to the bonds of religious solidarity. Especially in the Arab Middle East, the legitimacy of post-colonial states is undercut both by longstanding Islamic affinities and by the crosscutting ties of ethnic and national feeling with which they are associated. Division among Arabs is attributed to the Western colonial legacy.

Today’s Muslims face the challenge of reorganizing and redefining themselves within the context of a world order that has been arranged by others. One example of the way in which the modern world order has been defined in advance for Middle Eastern Muslims may be found in the term “Middle East” itself. This notoriously imprecise label has been used minimalistically for the eastern Arab states, Iran, and Israel, and more expansively for a swath of territory stretching from Morocco to Pakistan. Although widely accepted today among Arab, Israeli, and Persian analysts, the idea of a “Middle East” was originally formulated from a European vantage point and came into general usage when the British chose to use it as the designation for a strategic region between the Nile and the Oxus rivers, under a specially designated military command (Eickelman, 1998, p. 5; Hodgson, 1974, pp. 60-61).

Middle Eastern Muslim images of the West are colored simultaneously by envy and fear, admiration and suspicion. Western technological, economic, and political achievements are appealing, while the assertion of Western military, political, and economic power creates feelings of distrust and resentment. Pervasive Western cultural penetration generates deep ambivalence, in which attitudes of curiosity and even enthusiasm are coupled with a residual sense of inauthenticity or scandal. Overall, Western civilization is seen as an example to be copied; but when Muslims of the Middle East examine Western culture through the lens of television and cinema, they see cultural decadence in the forms of sensuality, individualism, and materialistic disregard for religious values. From a Middle Eastern perspective, Western families have become atomized and fragmented because there are too few brakes on individual self-interest. Muslim societies, in contrast, are seeking to meet the hardships of economic transformation while maintaining the family as the cornerstone of their social system.

While Muslim critics look to the West and see moral decay and a disintegration of family values, Western pundits accentuate the value of individual freedom in their critiques of contemporary Islam. In the Islamic world, they suggest, the individual is subordinate to the collective and to clerical and charismatic leadership; in the West, freedom of the individual from political, religious, and cultural coercion is enshrined in a social system that limits arbitrary abuses of personal power (Lewis, 1993). In response to such criticism, contemporary Muslims locate freedom at the level of the community and

argue that the West has become estranged from itself, placing expediency ahead of all other values. These critiques of the “other” are deeply intertwined with political conflict and the politics of ideological self-justification, in which the ideal that is invoked matters more than the effects of the act undertaken. Western rhetoric on freedom and democracy, for example, has often accompanied support for repressive leaders, just as invocations of Islamic spiritual and community values have been used to defend actions that constitute their antithesis (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2002).

Although there is not a single, static image of the West in the Muslim Middle East, adversarial images move from the background of awareness to the foreground when political disputes become acute. For example, most Arab Muslims differentiate between America as a land of technological accomplishment, political freedom, and economic opportunity, on the one hand, and America as a great power that exercises hegemonic influence over the Middle East, on the other. Whereas the former is a country worthy of admiration and respect – perhaps even a country that relatives living abroad claim has treated them well – the latter is a source of frustration, humiliation, confusion, and righteous indignation. When relative calm prevails, positive images of America circulate widely. At times of tension an image born of political dissent emerges, and all things American and Western – from English courses at the local American Language Center to the latest Hollywood release – lose much of their appeal. Memories of religious wars and of colonialism are awakened and cited as a basis for distrusting Western motives. As images depicting the deep suffering of Arabs and Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims circulate, a climate of defensiveness and moral outrage builds. America becomes a great power that must be courted by politicians but which cannot be influenced, resisted, or even understood as it formulates policies that appear to favor an inequitable political and economic status quo: oil flows freely from the wells of wealthy regional monarchs, Israeli settlers build new compounds on Palestinian land, and advocates of change fear for the safety of their families and loved ones. Political resentment feeds a generalized disenchantment with the West, reinforcing fears that foreign influences will induce Muslims to sacrifice not only their rights but also their faith.

Such is the climate in which the militant groups that Westerners describe as “fundamentalist” have become established and achieved greater or lesser degrees of popular sympathy for assertions that change in the Middle East can only be accomplished by confronting a politically overbearing and morally suspect West. The categorical “anti-West” or “anti-America” refrain of these movements, which purveys the idea that “Western” and “Islamic” are incompatible terms, tends to be heard much more loudly in foreign capitals than condemnations of specific political and military policies that evoke Muslim images of modern-day “Crusaders.” The idea that the source of Muslim problems is the West does, however, find an audience, and helps to close off the ability to hear nuances in what Western countries and cultures are communicating.

Whereas most middle-class Muslims encounter the West in multiple ways – through education, images of popular culture, and news of politics – the average

Westerner or American experiences the Middle East and the Islamic world primarily through scattered media reports on political, military, and terrorist events. He or she is not routinely exposed to Islamic culture and is easily influenced by decontextualized images of radicalism, which predominate over all other images of Islam that circulate in the popular media. These images are conjoined with messages of anger, which cause Westerners to retreat into defensiveness rather than seek the reasons for passionately held Muslim views. In effect, the West hears only the loudest voices, and these are the voices of those who reject and profess to despise them. On the basis of the most readily available (albeit superficial) information, it becomes plausible to believe that Islamic and Western cultures are irreconcilable.

Because the media tends to focus on extremism and terrorism, moderate and peaceful Muslims rarely make the news. In effect, Islam is portrayed through a lens of intolerance and violence, to such an extent that many of those who seek to add complexity to ideas of an “Islamic threat” end up staking out a simplistic “good Muslim” (secular, moderate, pro-American)/ “bad Muslim” (militant, backward, anti-American) dichotomy. The governments of Muslim countries often play into this idea when soliciting economic and military support.

The dominant image of Islam in the West conveys the idea that the religion of approximately one fifth of humanity is an intolerantly ideological and prone to violence. Instead of taking critical analyses of Western attitudes toward Islam and the Middle East seriously, many who claim knowledge of the Islamic world focus overwhelmingly on threads of hatred and fear articulated through religious discourse, without reflection on the complex and deeply conflicted situations in which these sentiments emerge. This reinforces a background of deep suspicion against which Muslims must acquit themselves in order to be heard in policymaking circles.

To a considerable extent, Islam has come to represent the “irrational” for Westerners – a symbol for that which cannot be understood, and must therefore be distrusted and controlled. The Muslim world is reduced to a set of forms and images that appear in essence to be antithetical to Western ideals, goals, and values. This generates a temptation to recoil from all things Islamic, and to project a self-image of superiority in which material strength and moral authority are inseparably wedded. Insofar as dialogue with the “other” is embraced, it is regarded as a means of mollifying an aggravated adversary, to manage conflict rather than resolve it (conflict being viewed as inevitable so long as cultural differences persist), and to establish the rightness of existing positions. The goals of such an approach to dialogue are propagandistic and oriented toward conversion and public relations rather than mutual understanding and respect.

The idea that the “other” is noteworthy first and foremost as a threat to cherished values and interests is now firmly established in relations between Western and Muslim cultures. America’s War on Terrorism, for example, reflects both a reasonable concern to provide safety for U.S. citizens and a deeply rooted conviction that the existence of hatred for America has more to do with Islam itself than with the tragic history of

America's relationships with Arabs and Middle Eastern Muslims. In the aftermath of September 11, many columnists interpreted the shocking acts of al Qaeda militants as a confirmation of the "clash of civilizations" thesis, and mainstream journalistic opinion emphatically denounced any reflection on the possibility that the attacks on American civilians and servicemen might have constituted a misguided retaliation for "American sins" in distant lands.

Like the American response to September 11, the Muslim response has been more emotional than imaginative. Indeed, many Muslims have been more concerned to deny guilt by association than to transcend an increasingly ominous pattern of mutual recrimination and political opportunism. While the common Muslim tendency to view the War on Terrorism as a pretext for their own political subjugation and defeat is understandable given the hegemonic overtones within American "for us or against us" foreign policy discourse, it also must be recognized that the pronouncements of Middle Eastern leaders and intellectuals often manifest a sense of "learned powerlessness" through which options for constructive action are rejected.

### *Why Do They Hate Us... Or Do They?*

Why do they hate us? Ironically, this question, which has been raised with increased frequency in America since the events of September 11, 2001, echoes what any visitor to the Islamic Middle East is likely to hear from a wide cross-section of Muslim interlocutors – from taxi divers to college students, accountants, and bazaar merchants. In the dominant approach to framing Islamic-Western relations, the actions of the "other," whether Western or Islamic, are explicable only in terms of an antipathy that is not shared by the "self." The problem is not miscommunication or misguided policies of governments and insurgents, but rather the innate hostility of the adversary, whether it is conceived as an entire culture or as a set of manipulative agents within an opposing social and political system. The problem, in other words, has nothing to do with *what we are doing*, and everything to do with *who they are* and what motivates them – for example, hate, greed, and antipathy to our values. They are *different* from us; we value reasonable, peaceful approaches to problems while they seek to impose their own culture by force. The conflict is about identity, not policies – about opposed values but not about concerns, interests, and needs that often overlap.

Such selective and biased perceptions are undoubtedly self-serving. "Others" are "useful," after all, not only because they provide material for sensationalistic journalism and opportunistic domestic politics, but also because they allow us to preoccupy ourselves with sins that are not our own and help us to live with blessed illusions concerning our own conduct: "Immorality and imperialism are the specializations of the West," "Americans have become targets because their enemies hate freedom." The frequency with which such statements are expressed reveals strong psychological and cultural dynamics of conflict, in which the "self" is defined through narratives that use

the “other” as a foil. In-group/out-group boundaries become pronounced, with the “other” embodying the cultural shadow, the antithesis of humane “in-group” values.

When the story of intercultural confrontation dominates popular thinking, Westerners and Muslims fall back on atavistic ways of framing conflict, evoking mythic narratives of light and darkness, together with metaphors from “the last war.” Elements within the West evoke Cold War paradigms of containment and “roll back,” as well as World War II imagery of a war against an axis of evil and crusader-era visions of clashing religions or civilizations, while Muslim partisans revive their own visions of a world divided into a “zone of peace” (*dar al-Islam*) and a “zone of war” (*dar al-harb*). The Western idea that Islam is violence-prone finds its Muslim counterpoint in the notion that the West is inherently oppressive; both views are rooted in particular ways of construing history – ways that are intended to legitimize warfare.

The story of intercultural rivalry organizes historical images and metaphors in the service of policies characterized by double standards: one standard of morality may be applied for in-group members, and another for relations with dehumanized out-group members, be they “Muslim fanatics” or “Western hypocrites.” The “authentic other” has become a security threat or an insult to one’s dignity and may be treated accordingly unless converted to in-group values and standards. Such are the implications of the dominant narrative frame for conflict between the Muslims and the West.

## **The Story of Intercultural Compatibility**

### *Affirmation of Shared Values*

Fortunately, alternatives to narratives of confrontation exist, and have found expression in Western and Middle Eastern Muslim consciousness alike. The most common manifestation of these inclusive narratives is what we may characterize as a “second story” of intercultural compatibility. According to the narrators of this story, whose numbers include academicians and diplomats more often than editorial page commentators, value differences between Western and Islamic civilizations do not predispose Muslims and Westerners to inevitable conflict. Insofar as both the West and Islam partake in a common human heritage of “civilization,” they share many values which provide a basis for understanding and cooperation. These values include respect for learning, desire for peace, esteem for toleration, and partisanship on behalf of human dignity.

Though narrators of the story of compatibility seldom fail to note the shared status of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Abrahamic monotheist traditions, they often place greater emphasis on the fact that both Islam and the West have drawn heavily upon the Greek cultural heritage as well. Classical Islamic civilization, after all, was constructed out of Arab, Biblical, and Hellenic cultures, and cast an even wider net by integrating

Persian and Central Asian as well as Indian components within its cultural synthesis. Culturally and intellectually, Islam formed a bridge between East and West, and Europeans were willing recipients of much that it had to offer. Islamic civilization, in turn, profited from trade with Europe.

Islam's Hellenism was mediated primarily through Eastern Christian intellectual circles, and Muslim philosophical and scientific thought still remains an understudied field linking Late Antiquity with the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> Islamic contributions went far beyond mere preservation of the classical legacy, as is testified by the efforts which Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun made to tutor an Andalusian prince after the model of Plato's *Republic*, or by the Heliocentric planetary theories that entered the scientific milieu of Copernicus by means of Arabic manuscripts. So narrators of this story of compatibility may assert with much justification that Islam as a civilizational force should be perceived as an integral part of the Western tradition.

In addition to pointing out bases for mutual appreciation and intellectual collaboration, the second story also warns against polarizing misapplication of simple labels such as "Islamic" or "Western." "Islam" and "the West" are heterogeneous categories; the diversity of each cultural region means that conflicts within civilizations are as significant as conflicts between them, and that conflicts between particular Muslim and Western states or groups need not escalate to draw in entire civilizations. In a very real sense, Islam is present in the West through large immigrant communities, and the West is commercially and culturally present in the Islamic world. Western models for higher education have been widely disseminated in the Muslim world, and many Muslim elites have been educated at Western universities.

Because Islam and the West partake in common bonding cultures, they can coexist if a clash of symbols is not mistaken for a clash of substances. Preventing this cognitive error is possible, provided that spokespersons for Muslims and Westerners act to demystify conflicts and emphasize cultural commonalities while accommodating differences, and differentiate between constructive and destructive means of redressing grievances. Many existing problems between Muslims and Westerners have much less to do with religion or culture than with nationalism, gaps in levels of development, historical disadvantages of Muslims countries, and protracted conflicts over territory and natural resources (Halliday, 1996). Such gaps can be bridged through goodwill, dialogue directed toward understanding, and practical problem solving (Ansari and Esposito, 2001).

Advocates of this second story, the story of compatibility, seek to place a check on forms of cultural hubris and fanaticism that exaggerate differences, instill fear, and inflame conflict (Esposito, 1999). With regard to dangers of cultural triumphalism, narrators of this story are particularly attuned to the dangers of foreign policies that humiliate or antagonize adversaries, giving rise to religious nationalism. While acknowledging that, from a historical perspective, Middle Eastern Islamic and Western cultures are both guilty of totalistic pretensions, they propose that present tensions are

complicated by the highly asymmetrical nature of relations that have produced a dominant and a subordinate culture (Falk, 1997).

Whereas the first story seeks to trace the roots of conflict overwhelmingly to cultural differences, the second story attempts to combine cultural and political analysis. It proposes that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Middle Eastern Muslims and Westerners find themselves enmeshed in a complex, multidimensional conflict. On the one hand, the West remains unrivaled in terms of political, economic, and military capability. In the absence of a superpower competitor, the United States has become more deeply entwined in the politics and culture of the Middle East than ever before, alternately supporting or marginalizing various regimes and peoples while also generating foreign satellite television images that are beamed into middle- and upper-class households on a daily basis. On the other hand, the increasingly pervasive American role in the region has engaged the political passions of Muslim activists; many of these activists hold the United States responsible, through sins of commission and omission, for the status of the Palestinians and the Iraqi people as well as for the corruption and incompetence of regimes that defer to Washington while resisting democratic participation and accountability.

According to the second story, cultural contact in a global context of unequal political and economic relations blemishes the exchange between Islam and the West, leaving the latter arrogant and insensitive and the former defensive and insecure. Contemporary Muslims feel deeply threatened by what they perceive as an attitude in Western civilization that melds Hebraic messianism with Hellenic rationalism, and that holds out the European and North American experiences of economic, political, and cultural development as universal models for the entire world. While most Muslims accept the idea that Western innovations in technology and in the rationalization of administrative systems can be a source of great benefit for Muslim societies, many do object to what they view as the pretentious notion that the essential substance of democratic governance, development, human rights, and cultural enlightenment are embodied in the practices of Western states and in the international norms they have played a disproportionate role in shaping. Above all, they bristle at what they view as a condescending attitude that favors and reinforces Western cultural values and styles and produces a displacement of Islamic culture.

By controlling symbols of legitimacy and status through the media and educational institutions, Western culture offers its dreams as universal aspirations and shapes the way in which the world is run. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the assimilation and diffusion of Western technology within the Islamic world has begun to redress the balance between these two cultures, even as the inability or unwillingness of Western great powers to preempt or resolve outstanding conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya, and other regions has created a sense among Muslims that the Western world is not sympathetic to their interests. This confluence of technological and political factors, combined with a determination not to submit any

longer to the cultural humiliation of judging oneself by Western standards, has contributed to the growth in a tide of greater self-consciousness as Islamic peoples in the Middle East and other regions have sought to rediscover the inherent worth of their own cultures. Probably the most dramatic example is the Islamic revival that is called Islamic fundamentalism by Westerners.

### *Differentiating Between Revivalism and Terrorism*

While the first story attributes the political attitudes of Muslim militants to primordial religious norms, the second story draws attention to the degree to which mundane, political inspiration drives much that is done in the name of Islamic or Western values. Contemporary Islamic movements, for example, have assimilated the modern anti-imperialist discourse pioneered by socialists and early nationalist movements in colonized countries. While a religious vocabulary for justice and injustice has been revived as well, the widespread appeal of Islamic movements depends heavily on political issues such as governmental corruption, autocracy, and apparent subservience to foreign masters. Likewise, Western policies have drawn more inspiration from the Cold War than from the Crusades, and have cast purportedly illiberal Islamic ideologies and movements in the same mold as the communist insurgents of previous decades. Such perceptions underlie the increasingly popular idea that the Islamic world is gripped by a uniformly intolerant and militant ideology that must be contained and forcibly defeated.

In addition to highlighting the contemporary, political context within which the drama of Islamic-Western relations is unfolding, narrators of the second story actively seek to differentiate between moderates and extremists in each cultural system (Moussalli, 1999). With respect to Islam, they point out that those who argue for containment of Islamic activism often fail to differentiate between *Islamic revivalism*, a movement to renew the Muslim communities from within through public reaffirmation of Islamic values, and *terrorism*, the use of indiscriminant violence for political purposes. Whereas Islamic revivalism manifests a constructive concern with matters of social justice, political participation, and cultural authenticity – that is, the practical challenge of constructing an *Islamic future*. Terrorism channels feelings of crisis, besiegement, and despair into acts that are intrinsically destructive in character.

As narrators of the second story observe, Islamic revivalism is a broad-based social and political movement. First and foremost, it is a response to a widely felt malaise that has left Muslim societies weak and unable to meet the modern world on their own terms. Although its manifestations are remarkably widespread, Islamic revivalism is not a monolithic movement, nor is it equivalent to the militant fundamentalism and terrorism that capture the attention of the media. Among the world's historical powers, only the Muslims, as a people, have not reversed the decline in their global status. The Japanese, the Chinese, and the Europeans have all regained their world influence. Beset by a failure of secular nationalist movements to restore a sense of dignity and self-respect

to the Islamic world, Muslim peoples of diverse nationalities have turned to Islamic revivalism as a way of defining who they are. Under conditions of cultural, economic, and political marginalization, large numbers of people have returned to deeply embedded religious discourses as they search for authentic values and alternative means of responding to their problems (Voll, 1994).

The issues that motivate Islamic revivalism are similar to those that provide impetus to popular revival movements in other religious and communal contexts. In fact, the tension between secular nationalism and alternative religious solidarities in the Islamic world bears a similarity to splits in Israel and in India. Everywhere there is a latent dissatisfaction with what materialist, consumer-oriented society offers, and with the failures of national governments to offer their peoples more than a medley of technical “fixes” which amount to tinkering with inefficient political, social, and economic institutions (Juergensmeyer, 1993).

Adherents of the second story propose that contemporary Islamic revivalism is better understood as an attempt to “Islamize” modernity than as a backward-looking rejection of the modern world (Euben, 1999). Instead, revivalists frame their advocacy as a strongly felt expression of cultural identity and as an ideological critique of domestic as well as international political orders. Representing Islam as a deeply embedded aspect of culture, they emphasize that it is natural for the idiom of politics in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim regions to bear the imprint of Islamic symbols and values. Islam provides a language that addresses politics as well as social relations and worship; Islamic revivalism equips Muslims with a vocabulary through which they may affirm their identity, project themselves politically, and protest conditions that they recognize as root causes of instability – social exclusion, maldistribution of resources, and absence of legitimate, accountable, and participatory governance. In this respect, the role of Islamic revivalism in the modernization process in predominantly Muslim countries lends itself to comparison with the role of religious movements such as Calvinism in the West (Weber, 1930; Walzer, 1965).

Extremism in the Islamic world should not be viewed as an autonomous phenomenon, but rather as a reaction to genuine political, economic and cultural contradictions. Many contemporary Muslims feel that they are adrift in the modern world, cut off from the past by colonialism and yet also devoid of a hopeful future toward which they might confidently aspire. Many Western observers, unsettled by the broad appeal of Islamic slogans and failing to grasp the context of political action, have made the mistake of tarring all Muslim political movements with the same brush.

When policymakers fail to discriminate between Muslim movements or recognize possibilities for them to play a positive role, there is a danger of sanctioning repressive actions that exacerbate conflict and radicalize opposition. This drives the impulse of revivalism into narrower channels born of pain, frustration, and hopelessness. Particularly in the Middle East, the lack of political space for the expression of dissident views is a leading source of radicalization; often the only “safe” space for dissent is the

mosque. Opening political space and taking actions that ameliorate key grievances can help to correct this problem by providing a sense of political efficacy that inspires creative thought and action. The primary barrier to democracy in the Middle East is not an absence of desire for it, but rather a lack of opportunities for democratic practice.

### *Fundamentalism as a Shared Problem*

From the standpoint of the second story, Islam and the West are dangerously out of touch with each other, and misperceptions and mistrust have led to an ever-deepening estrangement. Each civilization has transformed symbols of the “other” into receptacles for their own fears. A form of psychopathy is operating at this symbolic level, in which self-referential systems of meaning are constructed around symbols of “otherness.” These systems of meaning operate independently of larger understandings of the material conditions that heighten conflict, and without reference to common spiritual aspirations that unite members of seemingly distant cultures. The result is a relationship based on competition for power and control, accompanied by cultural insularity, retreat, and the negativistic tendency to define the “self” in relation to an adversarial “other” rather than in relation to autonomously defined values.

In this relationship, a “clash of symbols” is being waged between Islam and the West: Westerners are finding headscarves, turbans and other symbols of Islamic religious expression repellent; similarly fundamentalist Muslims see blue jeans and other manifestations of Western culture as explicit anti-Islamic statements. Belief systems are being simplified into images to be either rejected or absorbed in their entirety, resulting in deeply impoverished notions of both Islam and the West. Muslims are failing to recognize such subtle manifestations of Western morality as regulations to accommodate the handicapped; Westerners are reducing Islam to a set of fundamentalist practices that denigrate women and reject religious tolerance. In the post-September 11 media drama, Taliban and al Qaeda extremists have been portrayed as “strict” (i.e., observant and authentic) Muslims, yet the beliefs and practices of non-militant Muslims have been left virtually unexplored. This leads the uninformed viewer to conclude that so-called “moderates” are compromisers, and that Islam as a religion is uniquely susceptible to the contagion of militant fundamentalism. Middle Eastern Muslim media commentary, in turn, does little to correct the misguided ideas about Western culture that viewers pick up while watching satellite television.

Under the stress of conflict, people react by reducing their own beliefs to a small, workable subset in order to fight and protect themselves, assuming a form of fundamentalism that reads preprogrammed symbolic meanings into all forms of intercultural contact. While fundamentalism is usually understood to have an exclusively religious denotation, we have found it more analytically useful to define fundamentalism as a cultural pathology of intergroup conflict in which the ability to hear and communicate with others shuts down. Fundamentalism consists of a politicization of

group values and symbols, in which a community takes a subset of basic tenets of a tradition and, either under pressure of insecurity or in the pursuit of political dominance, uses them to seal off others or maintain control. For Muslims, fundamentalist tendencies take on an explicitly religious coloration (religion being the indigenous framework of choice, in light of past frustrations with Western liberalism and socialism) that rejects compromise with foreign intrusions and constitutes a form of defensive, puritanical religious nationalism that seeks to redress offenses committed by outsiders. For Westerners, the fundamentalist impulse may be seen in a hegemonic outlook that equates order with military dominance, and frames dominant liberal approaches to the practices of democracy and free market economy as the “last word” on the subjects in question. Both tendencies deny any responsibility for humiliation or suffering that others have experienced and reject the possibility that the meaning of their basic precepts might be expanded. In each case, the world is divided into two opposing camps, with both sides dogmatically representing their own practices as righteous and authoritative (Ali, 2002; Euben, 1999, p. 19).

Significantly, both Western and Islamic fundamentalisms are triumphalist. It is arguable though that Western thinkers should be particularly concerned that their own ideological tendencies place non-Western cultural traditions on the defensive, pushing Muslims and other groups to make a false choice between “authenticity” and adaptation to practices that cannot fully embody their cultural values. This also negates the possibility that non-Western cultures may yet have something creative to contribute to the advancement of peace and human solidarity.

Narrators of the story of compatibility suggest that rivalry between Islam and the West is not the result of cultural essences but rather of fundamentalist political excesses on both sides. Although obsession with viscerally evocative symbols and slogans at the expense of disciplined analysis has led to a polarization of identities, the present impasse need not be understood as inevitable or final. If Muslims were to hold themselves accountable to their tradition of ethical monotheism and Westerners were to adhere to democratic values at home and abroad, there would be no cultural and political clash. Moreover, if dialogue were preferred to coercive measures, areas of convergence might be found.

As they manifest in the story of confrontation, attitudes of fundamentalism project the idea that goodness, truth, and beauty are scarce and unevenly distributed commodities that a particular privileged community has a comparative advantage in producing. From this assumption it is only a short step to the conclusion that those who are not allies are in fact enemies. Because the virtue of the in-group is presumed to be manifest and self-evident, reflective self-examination becomes unnecessary and listening to sift through the surprising and uncomfortable claims of others becomes superfluous (what is the use, after all, of engaging a “barbarian” in dialogue?). The complexity of global politics is reduced to a morality play.

The story of compatibility questions the comfortable assumptions of the story of confrontation, and seeks to counteract misperceptions and double standards. This means replacing moral “self”-images and immoral “other”-images with images that are closer to the complexity of reality and also requires putting brakes on habits of contrasting one’s own cultural ideal (be it “freedom” or “faith”) with the “other’s” practice. One need not abandon particularism or preference for the value system of one’s own community; all that is necessary is recognition that developing a realistic and constructive relationship with the “other” is impossible without cultural empathy and a desire to know the ideal and the existential reality of the “other” on their own terms.

In addition to reconsidering perceptions of “self” and “other,” the second story speaks of a need to critically reconceptualize areas of divergence and convergence, in order to impose limits on conflicts and prevent the provocations of militants from expanding them. When groups in conflict respond to provocations with unprocessed emotion, they allow a narrow contradiction to define an entire relationship. To avoid such an outcome, both words and deeds must communicate cooperative and constructive intent to deal with shared problems on the basis of common standards. Fundamentalism implies a closing off of the ability to listen to the “other.” Yet a return to the larger frame of a culture and its humane values, always present if sought for, can open up the space for understanding, cooperation, or at the very least, mutual respect.

The story of confrontation narrows options to conquest/resistance and conversion/assimilation; the story of compatibility focuses attention on ways of coping with areas of conflict more effectively. The first story – the dominant story in political and strategic analyses – informs us of tensions that do in fact exist, but it neglects the truths of the second story: sufficient areas of compatibility and deep resonance between Islamic and Western civilizations exist to provide a basis for political accommodation. Where the first story portrays dialogue between the West and Islam as an exercise in futility, the second story provides a hint of what might be gained from moving beyond facile, stereotypical language and judgments.

### **The Need for a New Story of Intercultural Complementarity**

Although the second story provides hope and a less culture-bound frame of reference for understanding conflict, its appeal to shared values and aspirations may not be adequate to overcome the present impasse. As we have seen, conventional discourse on “Islam and the West” is deeply laden with presuppositions of irreconcilable “otherness,” and tends to reinforce the idea that “we” cannot work with “them” until “they” become like “us.” “Islam” and “the West” are regarded as exclusive, static categories; cultural and religious factors are obstacles to peacemaking, not resources. A “clash” is inevitable, and can only be managed.

From both humanistic and practical standpoints, the current estrangement between Islam and the West is unsustainable. The events of September 11 and the subsequent American military campaigns have left Muslims and Westerners increasingly distrustful both of each other and of the more humanistic and life-affirming values within their traditions. At the same time, Westerners are finding that they cannot retain a fully “Western” way of life without peaceful relations with Muslims – insofar as the term “Western” is intended to evoke respect for democracy, human dignity, and human rights. Likewise, many Muslims are discovering that they cannot fully realize the potential of their faith tradition as long as they find themselves locked in antagonistic relations with a “Western other.” Such relations empower extremist factions that are willing to jeopardize the rich and diverse heritage of Islamic civilization in their pursuit of an elusive ideal of cultural purity. To remain true to their own values, Muslims and Westerners must achieve some form of reconciliation that provides scope both for differences and for mutual learning. They need a new story.

The possibility of a new story of peaceful coexistence between cultures is a function of deep changes in the character of global politics. The inexorable dynamics of modern history rule out pretensions by any one group of establishing a “separate peace” through worldwide hegemony. We have moved from a humanity that experienced its collective life as fragments of the whole to a humanity that must experience itself as whole – a humanity that must come to terms with realities of interdependence in the spheres of economics, ecology, culture, and politics. Security is no longer the private good of a particular state and nation that may be purchased at the expense of others, but a public good that can only be achieved through the cultivation of consensus, collaboration, and reciprocity within a framework of dialogue and mutual engagement. In the twenty-first century, security cannot be attained through insularity or through political and cultural dominance; porous boundaries and the increasing power of human technology insure that there can be no escape from “others.” An inability to establish a basis for transactions that is considered “just” by all parties will subject those who implement “unjust” policies to great risk.

While interdependence provides the powerful with new sources of leverage over the weak, it also increases the potential costs of exercising that leverage without consent. To become more secure, Westerners and Muslims must recognize that they need to establish a positive, proactive basis for coexistence. In other words, they need to find a way not only to tolerate each other’s presence on the international stage, but also to discover ways in which their cultures may actually benefit from each other.

Individuals on both sides of the cultural divide have much to gain from moving beyond preoccupation with tired images, symbols, and postures, and toward genuine openness to a new experience of the “other.” Narrow attachment to preconceived images, inflexible doctrines, and fixed political positions prevents dialogue. Most important for both communities at this time is the need to move beyond reactionary impulses triggered by symbols (turbans, flags, the presence or absence of veils or beards).

To fixate on symbols that trigger an “us versus them” mentality is to endure a psychopathic condition. This confusion of symbolic form with substance is precisely what drove the terrorists who struck at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon: the United States is not a series of buildings that can be brought down, and destroying external forms does not necessarily damage the spirit that built them. Similarly, Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the United States and U.S. foreign policy cannot be transformed simply by eliminating leaders such as Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein. Preoccupation with defeating adversary leaders can lead to a self-defeating foreign policy – no matter how deserving of condemnation the leaders in question may be. Only active engagement through sustained dialogue can help us to discover the common humanity concealed by symbols and obscured by fear, anger, and insecurity.

Moving beyond reactionary attitudes and symbolic positions requires that the West and Islam know one another. Retreating from the challenges of active engagement only serves to strengthen the position of fundamentalists in both communities. In the modern world, retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group – be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu – is not only a denial of the rich diversity of the contemporary cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. Instead of retreating into deep subjectivity, we need to develop a process of communication capable of generating new insight. Such a process should involve active listening and a commitment to sustained dialogue. It should not rush to achieve immediate rewards, a quick end of conflict, or complete understanding. Rather, it should seek to help each side understand how the other community expresses its basic concerns, while encouraging both sides work together in the discovery and creation of shared meanings and priorities. This would challenge Westerners and Muslims to better understand their own values and ideals as they learn to share them in new ways.

Because the present world affords no scope for authenticity in isolation or security through empire, Muslims and Westerners need to experience themselves “in relationship” rather than “out of relationship.” They must find meaning in the common tragedy of their estrangement as well as in the possibility of reconciliation. They must also reconsider traditional ways of construing the values that divide them in dichotomous terms – i.e., “individualism versus community,” “reason versus passion,” “science versus faith,” “materialism versus spirituality,” “efficiency versus hospitality,” “freedom to do versus freedom to be.” When cultures view these sets of values as polarities rather than as complementarities, they are more likely to find themselves locked into adversarial relationships with those who have different priorities. Recognizing that seemingly opposed values can actually reinforce each other opens new possibilities both for intercultural relations and for full development of the human personality.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Peacemaking**

Establishing peace in the present climate of mutual recrimination and renewed claims of inherent cultural superiority will not be an easy task. Dominant American and Middle Eastern narratives are remarkably similar in the ways they construct enemy images through selective appropriation of history. Such narratives may be regarded as alternate versions of the story of confrontation. As this story suggests, war appears natural when parties to conflict remain mired in a reactive and defensive state of awareness. Peace, in contrast to war, is proactive and requires deliberate effort to move from the superficial to the essential, from morbidity to creativity, from defensiveness to openness, from a competitive focus on the negative to a cooperative affirmation of positive possibilities, and from the politics of fear and projection to the politics of hope. Positive change requires full engagement of the “self” with the “other,” together with an awareness that Islamic and Western cultures bear within themselves not just the burdens of past conflicts but also resources for peacemaking in the present.

Whereas the story of confrontation plays an integral role in the perpetuation and intensification of conflict between self-appointed representatives of “Islam” and “the West,” the story of compatibility and the proposed story of complementarity offer discursive options for agents seeking to transform conflict. Exploring these narratives and their relation to political action provides valuable insight into how advocates of peacemaking might counter the claims of dominant, confrontational narratives more effectively and act as cultural and political mediators.

An affirmative approach to relations between Islam and the West must underscore peace as a shared ideal of both civilizations and draw attention to the ever-present possibility of choice. Muslims and Westerners share many similar ideals, and yet follow cultural traditions that formulate and apply these ideals in unique ways that are not fully commensurable. The West, for example, has come to understand peace largely as an “absence” of particular conditions, while for contemporary Muslims the word peace has no real meaning unless it signifies a “presence.” For the West, peace means an absence of war, terrorism, and gross violations of human rights. For Muslims, real peace signifies a presence of justice, self-determination, and social equilibrium or harmony. These, at least, are central tendencies of thought within Western and Islamic cultures; differences in value articulation and formulation *within* civilizational discourses are every bit as significant as differences between civilizations. Like the West, Islam possesses multiple paradigms of thought and action on matters pertaining to peace (Said, Funk, and Kadayifci, 2001), and it is only by recognizing the internal diversity of civilizations that we will be able to construct narratives of intercultural peacemaking.

The time has come for Muslims and Westerners – especially Middle Eastern Muslims and Americans – to place their cultural understandings of peace at the center of cross-cultural dialogue, so as to gain deeper understanding of their respective conceptions of “the good” and of the instrumentalities through which the protection and production of positive social values can be furthered. We need new ways of relating to one another, on

the basis of what we might create together and not merely on the basis of that which we fear and desire to avoid.

Islam and the West are truly between stories – between the stories of the past, and the story that they must now create together. All who identify with Islam and with the West can become coauthors of this new story. We are all heirs of the story of conflict. If we leave aside tired generalizations and seek to know one another, we can become the architects of a truly new order of cooperation.

### Notes

1. For analysis of how images of “self” and “other” affect intergroup conflict, see Kelman (1997) and Stein (2001).
2. In reality, only about one sixth of the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims are Arab, and the Middle East has long hosted indigenous Christian and Jewish populations as well as Muslims. Nonetheless, the Middle East is the traditional heartland of Islam, to which millions of pilgrims travel each year to the Arabian peninsula for the rites of the *haj* in Mecca. Muslims around the world monitor political events and ideological trends in the Middle East closely. While one should be careful not to over-generalize the Middle Eastern experience, the region plays a leading and crucial role in Muslim relations with the West.
3. As the Cold War waned, the historian Bernard Lewis (1990) proposed that Islam would become the next major rival of America and of Western civilization in general. He predicted a “clash of civilizations” – “the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (p. 60). Political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993) embellished on this prediction in his much-debated article, “The Clash of Civilizations.”
4. Huntington’s credentials as a Harvard University professor and an advisor to past U.S. administrations led many to view his thesis as indicative of American perceptions more generally.
5. Western political theorists of liberty and limited, constitutionalist governance, for example, found in Islam examples of that which they opposed in Europe. Montesquieu (1977, pp. 145-146), writing on failures of despotic states to accommodate peaceful succession to executive power, chose to focus particularly on the practices of Turkish, Persian, and Mogul aspirants to supreme authority.
6. The contributions of Avicenna, Averroes, and other Muslim thinkers to the scholastic tradition of the West are notable in this regard, particularly in such fields as medicine, chemistry, and philosophy.

### References

- Ali, Tariq. 2002. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Ansari, Zafar Ishaq and John Esposito, eds. 2001. *Muslims and the West: Encounter and Dialogue*. Washington, DC: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.
- Armstrong, Karen. 1991. *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Cohen, Anthony P. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. New York: Routledge.

- Daniel, Norman. 1993. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications.
- Eickelman, Dale F. 1998. *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Esposito, John L. 1999. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Euben, Roxanne L. 1999. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Falk, Richard. 1997. "False Universalism and the Geopolitics of Exclusion: The Case of Islam." *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 7-23.
- Goldberg, Jonah. 2001. "A New Cold War – With a Twist." *National Review Online*, October 26. <<http://www.nationalreview.com/goldberg/goldberg102601.shtml>> Accessed August 25, 2003.
- Halliday, Fred. 2002. *Two Hours that Shook the World: September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences*. London: Saqi Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. New York: I. B. Taurus & Co.
- Hodgson, Marshall G. S. 1974. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. 1*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Huntington, Samuel. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 22-49.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 1993. *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kelman, Herbert. 1997. "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict." In I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen, eds., *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques*, pp. 191-237. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Lewis, Bernard. 1993. "Islam and Liberal Democracy." *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 271, No. 2, February, pp. 89-98.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. "The Roots of Muslim Rage." *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3, September, pp. 47-60.
- Maalouf, Amin. 1984. *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Baron de. 1777. *The Spirit of the Laws: A Compendium of the First English Edition*, edited by David Wallace Carrithers. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Moussalli, Ahmad S. 1999. *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Neumann, Iver B. 1999. *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Northrup, Terrell A. 1989. "The Dynamic of Identity in Personal and Social Conflict." In Louis Kriesburg, Terrell A. Northrup, and Stuart J. Thorson, eds., *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation*, pp. 55-82. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Ross, Marc Howard. 2002. "The Political Psychology of Competing Narratives: September 11 and Beyond." In Craig Calhoun, Paul Price, and Ashley Timmer, eds., *Understanding September 11*, pp. 303-320. New York: New Press.
- Said, Abdul Aziz, Nathan C. Funk, and Ayse S. Kadayifci, eds. 2001. *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Stein, Janice Gross. 2001. "Image, Identity, and the Resolution of Violent Conflict." In Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, eds., *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, pp. 189-208. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. 2002. "Frontline Mysticism and Eastern Spirituality." *ISIM Newsletter* (from The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World), January, pp. 13, 38.
- Voll, John O. 1994. *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1965. *Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1930. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Winslade, John and Gerald Monk. 2000. *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Zakaria, Fareed. 2001. "How to Save the Arab World." *Newsweek*, December 24, pp. 22-28.