

Ignorance of a Hegemonic Imagination

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That most non-Muslim Americans are abysmally uninformed and misinformed about the basic teachings of Islam is certain; what is less clear, however, is why. After all, Islam is as integrally a part of Western history as it is of Abrahamic monotheism; indeed, since its advent some 1,400 years ago, Muslims, Jews, and Christians have lived in what some scholars of religion refer to as “intertwined worlds” (Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*. Princeton University Press, 1992).

I have argued elsewhere that American ignorance is cultivated, not unintentional, and that it stems from a long-standing and willful politics of misrecognition of Islam in and by the (non-Muslim) West. Among others, R.W. Southern offers compelling insights into how this ignorance and absence of recognition were constructed historically (*Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

His view is that medieval European attitudes towards Islam were shaped by two types of ignorance: the “ignorance of a confined space” and the “ignorance of a triumphant imagination.” The first characterized earliest European attempts to understand Islam and resulted, says Southern, from their spatial distance from Islam which obliged them to rely on Biblical exegesis to explain its origins and, more importantly, its ends. Even though this mode of ignorance gave Islam “a niche in Christian history,” maintains Southern, it also put a permanently apocryphal stamp on its representations by medieval Christians.

Interestingly, however, even those Europeans who lived “in the middle of Islam” (i.e., Muslim Spain) were able to locate in it “the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity. They thought they saw in all its details—and they knew very few—that total negation of Christianity which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist,” and thus of end times (p. 25). If this is so, however, then, clearly, both distance from and nearness to Islam occasioned the same sorts of responses on the part of Europe’s Christians, leaving one to wonder why Southern attaches so much importance to the idea of spatial distance.

The success of the First Crusade brought about a shift in European attitudes, but this time it was the “ignorance of a triumphant imagination” that painted a picture of Islam whose “details were only accidentally true” (p. 14, 28). Thus, “legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe. But, as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own . . . [and] changed very little from generation to generation,” persisting for centuries (p. 29).

Not until Bacon, notes Southern, did Europeans engage Islam philosophically and then, too, for the purpose of “refuting it.” However, even as Bacon disparaged Muslim beliefs as being “wrapped up in many lies and decorated with fictions,” he also held that they were “near to the Christian faith and not far from the path of salvation” (p 60; 62). In Southern’s view, then, European views of Islam until the end of the thirteenth century

were “first Biblical and unhelpful, the second imaginative and untruthful, the third philosophical and, at least for a short period, extravagantly optimistic” (p. 67).

To me, Southern’s work is significant for at least two reasons. First, it reveals that Islam always has posed a problem of “a deeper comprehension” (p.4) to Westerners for reasons having to do with their own psyches, epistemologies, and modes of Othering. Second, it illustrates not only medieval European Christian attitudes towards Islam, but also those of many non-Muslim Americans today, both Christian and secular. Thus, one can discern in current Western discourses on Islam, specially post 9/11, the legends, fears, and fantasies of medieval Christians, raising questions about whether modernity in fact has brought about any sort of meaningful epistemic shift in how non-Muslim Westerners view Islam (excerpted from my paper, “Jihad = Holy War = Terrorism: The Politics of Conflation and Denial,” forthcoming in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*).

It seems that a thousand years and some centuries after non-Muslim Westerners attempted to engage Islam, they are—for the most part—still mired in the two modes of ignorance that Southern proposes. Thus, while the US is hardly a confined space, most Americans continue to see themselves as being disconnected and separate from the rest of the world, often giving as a reason that there are oceans on either side of the continent. It seems not to strike them that the US lies in the middle of two inter-connected continents full of all manner of Americans: North, Central, South, not just from the US. The spatial distance—or imagined geography, as Edward Said called it—is more of an internalized remoteness, a function, in large measure, of a triumphant imagination that now is hegemonic and sees no need for getting to know Others.

And yet triumphant imaginations can be self-delusional and self-destructive. Every year, my students struggle with debilitating confusion when they discover how much their own ignorance of Islam mirrors that of medieval Europeans. Most are baffled since they are not believers of any faith and feel no imminent threat from Islam (at least prior to 9/11); most can’t figure out why the many debts that “Western” civilization owes to the Muslim have been wiped so clean from the history books so as to make it appear as if their paths never even crossed; and none can see the benefits of being tutored into ignorance as denizens of the most powerful nation; after all, they know that knowledge is power.

In the end, some begin to wonder if it is the narcissism of minor differences that accounts for Western ignorance of Islam; i.e., the theory that we most fear those who are most like us because they threaten our sense of self. Perhaps by disavowing knowledge of Islam, non-Muslim Westerners can continue to claim the distinctiveness that might be eroded by embracing more egalitarian modes of “knowing one another,” to use a Qur’anic phrase.

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