

Media Reflections: Ignorance of a Hegemonic Imagination

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Basically, I'm going to use the media's representations of Islam and Muslims as a point of departure to make three claims:

- First, that these representations reveal a deep-seated ignorance about Islam;
- Second that the ignorance stems from a long-standing and willful politics of misrecognition that has its roots in medieval Christian history, and specifically in an epistemic *failure* to make sense of religious diversity; and
- Lastly, that if knowledge underwrites power so can power underwrite an absence of knowledge; more specifically, U.S. hegemony generates *ignorance*.

Using Islam as an example, I will argue that this failure and ignorance are in fact *related*.

At the outset, I should warn you that my critique is meant only to be suggestive and if you find it too catastrophically simple-minded, do take me to task for it!

The reason I'm using the media as a point of departure for my comments and not as their focus is that I view it as being embedded in a larger social formation and as such, exemplifying prevailing social attitudes and indeed even latent historical tendencies.

I should also clarify that by hegemony I mean a form of dominance that is based in both force and consent, and by imagination the conceptual political universe from within which most U.S.-Americans make sense of the world. In fact, I see the political imaginary as the quintessential Occupied Space and in saying this, I don't mean to detract from the horrific reality of the military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by the U.S. and of Palestine by Israel.

Ignorance

A few observations about ignorance. I think it's become manifestly clear since 9/11 that most U.S.-Americans know abysmally little about the basic teachings of Islam.; what is less immediately clear are the sources of their ignorance given that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are all part of a single Abrahamic and monotheist tradition and for at least 1,400 years Muslims, Jews, and Christians have lived in what some scholars of religion call "intertwined worlds."¹

Yet, every day in little ways we disavow these interconnections sometimes

¹ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

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merely by using phrases like “Islam and the West,” or “the Islamic world” which not only make it seem that one billion Muslims live in a single world, but also that they live in a world *apart* from and hostile to the one everyone else inhabits.

Several consequences flow from this oppositional framing of Islam and the West—in other words from conceptualizing the world in terms of binaries—and one of the most notable is the destructive idea that civilizations cannot coexist peacefully and are in fact destined to clash with one another.

Many Muslims also embrace this idea but I today I’m going to examine its historical and epistemological roots in Western thought, and more specifically in medieval Christianity’s failure to make sense of Islam because I believe this failure also makes possible this secular theory of civilizational clashes.

Here, I want to draw on the work of R.W. Southern² who argues that early Christian attitudes towards Islam were shaped by two types of ignorance: the ignorance of a confined space and the ignorance of a triumphant imagination.

The ignorance of a confined space arose from the fact that when early Christians first came to know of Islam, they were spatially distanced from it and were thus obliged to rely on what they knew best to explain it which was Biblical exegesis.

Although interpreting Islam by way of the Bible and Christian history gave it “a niche” in that history, it also allowed medieval Christians to read into Islam “the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity” and, indeed, even that “total negation of Christianity which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist” (25). In fact, according to Southern, even those Christians who lived “in the middle of Islam” (i.e., Muslim Spain) believed this to be true which then makes me wonder how spatial distance alone could have given rise to the first mode of ignorance.

In any event, the success of the First Crusade brought about a shift in Christian views but this time, it was the “ignorance of a triumphant imagination” that, says Southern, led them to paint a picture of Islam that was “only accidentally true” (14). 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 . . . [changing] very little from generation to generation” (28-29).

It was not until Bacon that Europeans engaged Islam philosophically and then too mainly for the purposes of refuting it. However, even as Bacon denigrated Islam as being “wrapped up in many lies” he held that Muslims were “near to the Christian faith and not far from the path of salvation” (60; 62).

By the end of the 13th century, then, Christian attitudes towards Islam had gone through three phases according to Southern: “the first Biblical and unhelpful, the

² R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. Harvard University Press, 1962.

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second imaginative and untruthful, the third philosophical and . . . for a short period, extravagantly optimistic" (67).

Why have I reached into such a distant past to bring all this up?

I want to suggest that Islam has *always* posed a problem of "a deeper comprehension" to Westerners for reasons having to do with readings of their own sacred texts and with their own psyches and epistemologies of Othering.

I also want to suggest that the distant past isn't in fact all that distant as Mr. Bush's use of the word "Crusade" for "the war on terror" quite clearly showed. I know many people wrote that off as gauche and ignorant on his part but I see it as a calculated gesture towards the fears and legends that not only made a history of Crusading against Muslims possible, but which also render its memory—no matter how repressed—evocative and meaningful even today.

I'm not saying that Muslims were not complicit in that history of conflict and nor do I want to suggest that U.S.-American fears of 9/11 were unjustified. My point, simply, is that the reason those fears took the form they did, which was to cast 9/11 in terms of a civilizational clash between good and evil, Islam and the West, had to do with what was *already* there in their collective psyche. And what was already there were the two modes of ignorance that bedeviled medieval Christian encounters with Islam. In other words, even modernity and secularism have not been able to fully dislodge these two modes of ignorance.

Hegemony

I'd like to shift focus now and speak about current U.S. attempts to define Islam and the overall response of U.S.-Americans to 9/11.

For the moment, I will leave aside the issue of whether we should regard the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as a secular form of Crusading or not. I will even ignore the torrent of apocalyptic literature that has flooded the U.S. following 9/11 and whether one can explain its resonance outside a political imaginary that has its roots within Christianity's earliest encounters with Islam.

Instead, I want to draw attention to how Islam itself has now been bifurcated into a moderate and a militant Islam—like a pair of good and evil twins conjoined at the hip—and to the willingness of a large number of people to see in militant Islam "the signs of a sinister conspiracy against the West," to amend Southern's phrase.

How is this secular fear of conspiracy any different from medieval Christian fears of Islam a thousand years ago?

I'm not sure it is other than that the secular fear is the product of U.S. hegemony which is why I refer to this latest mode of ignorance about Islam as the ignorance of a hegemonic imagination. Today, most U.S.-Americans turn to

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what *they* know best to define Islam and this is their own hegemonic power whose very scale has freed them from the need to negotiate their place in the world with Muslims or with anyone else and indeed, even from the *desire* to know Others.

So, even as they naturalize the U.S.'s location in the center of world, most U.S.-Americans also celebrate their geographical boundedness by pointing to the two oceans on either side of this continent that isolate them from that world.

To me, this view of the U.S. as a confined space reflects an internalized alienation that lacks even a yearning for connectedness. Hence the increasingly constricted political imaginary that brooks no counter-narratives and preemptively shuts down debate and doubt and dissent.

That is why I view U.S. hegemony as a failure for its own citizens and why I regard the continuing ignorance about Islam as a failure of imagination as well.

The Occupied Space turns inwards upon itself and grows ever more barren.