The Domestication of Dissent:
Pundits' Contributions to the War on Terrorism[1]

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Abstract

Using as an example a workshop on Islam sponsored by his own university, the author argues that the search for the essential heart of any social movement is a political endeavor insomuch as it is a form of classification that dehistoricizes complex mass social movements, representing them in ways that further the interests of those who carry out the classification.

In January of 2003, my university sponsored a one-day workshop on Islam, prompted by the widespread interest that quickly became evident throughout the U.S. soon after the September 11 attacks. The planning committee carefully considered how to structure this event, entertaining that we would present Islam as a social movement – or in common parlance, as a "civilization" – rather than as a "religion". Made by a professor who happened also to be Muslim, this suggestion echoed a distinction commonly found in the current literature on Islam. A well-known representative of this position is the former Princeton University Near Eastern studies professor and the now

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oft-cited pundit, Bernard Lewis, as in when he attempts to define Islam in the opening chapter of his recent book, *The Crisis of Islam*. "To begin with," he writes,

> the word [Islam] itself is commonly used with two related but distinct meanings, as the equivalents both of Christianity and of Christendom. In the one sense it denotes a religion, a system of belief and worship; in the other, the civilization that grew up and flourished under the aegis of that religion. (Lewis 2004, 3.)

Religions are therefore concerned with matters of private faith expressed in public behaviors that, collectively, constitute things we call traditions and cultures – which can, in turn, animate people's organized political behaviors, what amounts to their civilization. This distinction between religion and civilization, much like the distinctions between private and public or faith and tradition, is pretty much a truism of the modern world. But I would argue that it has become a truism for the most practical of reasons.

Case in point: the utility of these pairings became apparent while planning our workshop on Islam. For my colleague's suggestion to represent Islam as a civilization seemed to have been prompted by a desire not to affront the sensibilities of local Southern Baptists, by helping them to realize that the workshop was not competing with their own beliefs. For not long before we began our plans in the autumn of 2002, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had been thrust into the national headlines for having their incoming undergraduate students read an annotated selection of excerpts from the *Qur'an* (Sells 1999) – a curricular decision that was troubling enough to some North Carolina residents that a lawsuit was filed against the school by the conservative, Virginia-based Family Policy Network (http://www.familypolicy.net/) on behalf of three anonymous students who apparently felt that the school was proselytizing. (The case was thrown out by a U.S. Federal court.) Perhaps approaching our topic as the study of a "civilization", or so the reasoning went, might help to prevent some of the misunderstandings that arose in North Carolina.

Representation of Islam as a Religion

Despite this suggestion, our workshop was on understanding the "religion of Islam", with students preparing by reading such standard authors on religions as Huston Smith and John Esposito, and with two scholars of religion speaking (one of whom was myself) along with an historian and a political scientist. And, contrary to some planning committee members's concerns, it turned out that representing Islam as a religion was a useful move for, shortly before the event, a small group of politically-engaged, pro-Israeli students – members of a group called Friends of Israel – voiced concern regarding the possible tone of the event and whether such topics as, for example, the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict would be discussed. If so, then they argued for their representation at the event so that – as it was put to me by a rather impassioned young lady who came to my Department to complain – the workshop could be "balanced".

This anecdote has surprising relevance for the topic at hand. Inasmuch as the mass movement once known across Europe as Mohammadism, and now known as Islam, was portrayed as a religion – which is, as Bernard Lewis has reminded us, a matter of deeply personal beliefs expressed in forms of private behaviors that we call ritual and worship – potential critics were quite comfortable with the event, for its obviously exotic and private content would, they must have reasoned, necessarily be far removed from contemporary politics, studying instead disembodied sets of beliefs, pristine origins, theological doctrines, and esoteric practices. However, if Islam was classified as a social movement, as a "civilization", then this would make the event necessarily political and thus controversial due to its potential conflict with other civilizations – notably Israeli, or so the young lady who complained led me to believe.

At the heart of this debate over naming lies our topic: the political utility of the modern taxon "religion" and the discourse on faith.

For example, consider how Islam was portrayed in an introductory book that was suggested for students in our workshop to read:

> If the *principles of Islam* were followed, every Muslim would treat every other
> Muslim like a brother; in fact, they have been attacking one another almost
> since the founding of the faith. (Lippman 1995, ix; emphasis added.)

Apparently, a stable, authentic, and thus supremely normative, originary
point exists – the principles or heart of Islam, as many writers refer to it
– communicated across history through the mediation of disembodied mean-
ings encoded within scripture and commentary (in a word, that thing we
call "tradition"), all of which – when read closely and interpreted correctly,
of course – serves as a criterion by which to judge contemporary practices
that, inevitably, risk deviating from tradition. In this way, one can distinguish
peaceful and authentic faith from its dangerous, contemporary aberrations
– or so the pundits would have us think.

As this well established viewpoint was phrased not long ago in an is-
sue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the widest circulating publication
devoted to issues within U.S. academia:

> Religion, it must be remembered, is not faith. Religion is the *story* of faith.
> It is an institutionalized system of symbols and metaphors (read: rituals
> and myths) that provides a common language with which members of a
> community of faith can share with each other their numinous encounter
> with the Divine Presence.... The clash of monotheisms occurs when faith,
> which is mysterious and ineffable and which eschews all categorizations,
> becomes entangled in the gnarled branches of religion. (Aslan 2005a, B7;
> see also 2005b, xvii–xviii.)

If I did not know better I'd say that this passage came from William James,
writing a hundred years ago, or perhaps, that it dated to an even earlier
period – say, to almost any of the sixteenth-century European critics of Ro-
man Catholicism who relied on this very effective rhetoric of origins and
degradations, encoded in the distinction between faith and tradition, to pri-
oritize newly emerging institutions distinguished from those they sought to
replace. Little wonder, then, that despite this contemporary author's opinion
that those "who wish to return Islam to some imaginary ideal of original

purity must be once and for all abandoned" (Aslan 2005a, B8), the rhetoric of an originary faith prone to corruption by institutionalization nonetheless makes its way into his writing; after all, he is but one of many North American-trained, and politically liberal scholars of Islam advocating for its "reformation". His rather traditional "roots and branches" metaphor therefore flies in the face of his assertion that "[t]he notion that there was once an original, unadulterated Islam that was shattered into heretical sects and schisms is a historical fiction" (Aslan 2005a, B8). Despite such cautions, there apparently *was* an original; it's just that it doesn't lies behind us, in the fictional mists of history, but, instead, is lodged deep within us, in our hearts and minds.

Despite the inability to categorize the mysterious and the ineffable that animates this so-called community of faith, there's surprising agreement among the scholars I've been reading as to what lies at its roots. As stated clearly in the preface to a standard introductory book, one must distinguish the inclusivist and quietist principles of Islam conceived as a faith from the common "misconceptions and misinformation" (Lippman 1995, x), so as to counter the daily images we see in the U.S. of so-called militants, guerrillas, terrorists, and extremists. And the other book students read clearly advocates recovering Islam's original and unambiguous drive toward a similarly liberal, inclusive tradition that outlives all so-called parochial, and literal-minded, differences – the "Islamic ideals of pluralism and human rights", as phrased in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s article on the Islamic reformation in which we are now apparently in the midst. As phrased by yet another commentator: "The challenge of the future can only be faced by an Islamic worldview that embraces diversity, equality of the sexes, and the freedom, not only to be right, but also to be wrong" – so writes Vincent Cornell, himself a Muslim and the Director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas, in a post-September 11 essay collection entitled *Dissent from the Homeland*. "Failure to meet the challenges of a diverse, multicentered, and religiously pluralistic world", he adds, "will ultimately lead to an Islam that is irrelevant to contemporary

life, and might even herald the decline of Islam as a world religion" (Cornell 2003, 93). After all, as he concludes: "People who appear uncivilized do not get invited into the community of nations" (p. 92).

Because our workshop seems to have called its object the right thing – a religion or, to put a finer edge on it, a faith – it went off without a hitch. In part, this was likely because, like the authors just surveyed, the presenters all utilized the well known distinction between timeless *principles*, on the one hand, and the sadly degraded forms of subsequent *practice*, on the other – what amounts to the old essence/manifestation distinction long favored by phenomenologists of religion. In this way a specific sort of "civilized" Islam, one conducive to our audience's interests, was presented as normative while all others were easily relegated to the status of either aberration or degradation.

Authorization of Classification

One of the tasks for those who presume these pristine centers is to account for the existence of their peripheries. One well known strategy is to assert that they are the inevitable product of historical, human existence. William James told us as much: the originally pure experience of charismatic religious genius is prone to deteriorate once it is articulated, reproduced, and institutionalized. This is none other than the problem of faith becoming entangled in "the gnarled branches of religion", as one of our authors has phrased it – which amounts to an anti-historical and highly individualistic approach to doing social theory. Another explanation for dissenting behaviors proposes that, for example, the September 11 highjackers, "behave[d] according to very different rules of rationality than those who are profit or power maximizing in a cost-benefit calculus of a political or economic sort" (Strenski 2002, 429). This explanation presupposes that so-called fanatics operate by means of a different form of rationality than you and I – a rather uncontroversial assumption among many of the experts who populate the media's airwaves. However, when this is served up by scholars in the human sciences I am left utterly puzzled, for I do not understand how any human

behavior is *not* part of a practical calculus concerning how actors understand negotiations over power and privilege to be connected to the manner in which they negotiate clashes between systems of value, exchange, and organization. To my way of thinking, one need have no affinity whatsoever with an actor's motives or actions to be able to understand that attributing his or her actions to "different rules of rationality" is merely a form of obscurantism that – much like the "roots and branches" imagery – side-steps, rather than examines, how consent and dissent, how similarity and difference, and how affinity and estrangement, are negotiated in daily life.

Instead, why not shift the ground and study social conflict in terms of how historically-situated groups draw on competing sets of discursive markers to authorize their all too practical and obviously conflicting socio-political interests? Such a shift entails seeing such classificatory tools as sacred/secular, faith/tradition, private/public, or Church/State as tools some groups use to demarcate and delimit membership, all of which are some of the many ways that human beings make habitable cognitive and social worlds within a competitive social economy. I am suggesting nothing more radical than what the well-known anthropologist, Mary Douglas, presumed in her own study of purity rituals: classification systems, she argued (1991, 4), "have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience". Perhaps, then, we could be so bold as to study how it is that our own group "tidies things up" by means of our own cherished classifications – the faith/practice distinction being foremost among them.

Although my example of what is at stake in how Islam is classified makes the point rather nicely, let me present an additional example of how historically-situated relationships of contest and difference are easily minimized by means of this rhetoric of individual belief and experience that permeates our field. So, consider the opening pages of a recent textbook, *World Religions Today* (Esposito & Fasching & Lewis 2002). In a section of the Introduction entitled, "Understanding Religious Experience and its Expressions", the authors request their readers to picture themselves time-traveling to ancient Rome and asking someone on the street: "What religion are you?" Although

the spirits of some authors might be dampened after having acknowledged that people in antiquity did not speak English, these scholars are undaunted and press on with their speculative conversation with an ancient Roman: "Frustrated, you try rephrasing your question and ask: 'Are you religious?' Suddenly their faces light up and they smile and say, 'Of course, isn't everyone?'" (Esposito & Fasching & Lewis 2002, 5).

Despite this example striking me as having something remarkably in common with my own behavior while in Tokyo (at the IAHR Congress where this paper was first presented), where I assumed that if I just spoke loudly and slowly enough, while bowing deeply enough, everyone would understand me, there is something more that we can take away from this story of time travel. For in the process of recognizing the inevitable historicity, contingency, and thus contestability of their own terminology, these authors nonetheless presuppose that the adjectival form of the modern word "religion" is a universal signifier. For, in concluding that "people did not think of what they did as 'a religion' – a separate reality one had to choose over against another" (Esposito & Fasching & Lewis 2002, 5), these authors yet presume that their words signify some deeply human(e), interior disposition that predates history. Moreover, it is not just any old disposition but, quite possibly, the most authentically human thing of all. For, as they conclude:

> Religion as a form of human experience and behavior, therefore, is not just about purely "spiritual" things. Religion is not just about gods or God. People's religiousness is as diverse as the forms of power they believe govern their destiny, whether it be the gods as forces of nature, or wealth, or political power, or the forces of history.... [W]hatever powers we believe govern our destiny will elicit a religious response from us and inspire us to wish "to tie or bind" ourselves to these powers. (Esposito & Fasching & Lewis 2002, 7.)

Apparently, everyone is religious – much as everyone apparently understands English if spoken slowly enough – whether they know it or not, and whether or not "religion" is part of their conceptual tool box.

Much like the author who chastised his colleagues for clinging to out-dated, fictional accounts of pristine origins but then paraded out a rhetoric of roots and branches to minimize inconvenient elements within a social world he seeks to rehabilitate, the trick being accomplished in this textbook's open-ing pages is akin to what hucksters once called the old "bait and switch"; for in the midst of acknowledging the historicity of their terminology, these authors nonetheless assert that behind the changeable word their lurks an enduring, universal presence that transcends time and place (is this not what also animates discourses on human nature?). What they offer with one hand (i.e., careful scholarly attention to the historicity of our objects of study) is swiftly removed by the other (i.e., the presumption that words correspond to timeless concepts and universal meanings); their readers are therefore left confident that behind the merely transitory appearances of their mundane, daily lives there resides an enduring permanence that is not only theirs, for it is lodged within the immutable confines of trans-human experience.

Due to their philosophically idealist presumptions, such writers do not take seriously that words *and* concepts (i.e., signifiers *and* signifieds) are both contingent, and thus contestable, historical artifacts; such authors therefore give the lie to the historian of antiquity, Peter Brown's thoughtful words: "A little history puts one firmly back in ones place." For in their case, doing only *a little history* apparently frees them significantly *from* their place, enabling them to portray their locale as the ground beneath everyone. However, as Brown goes on to remark, taking history seriously

> counters the amiable tendency of learned persons to think of themselves as if they were hang-gliders, hovering silently and with Olympian ease above their field, as it has come to spread out beneath them over the years. But real life, one knows, has not been like this. We are not hang-gliders. We are in no way different from the historical figures whom we study in the distant past: we are embodied human beings caught in the unrelenting particularity of space and time. (Brown 2003, 3.)

That the terrain mapped by high-flying pundits ends up looking an awful lot like what they assumed it would look like long before donning their flight

suits is therefore not a coincidence. Such writers would therefore be wise to consider the caution of Daniel Dubuisson (2003), writing on the history of the classification "religion":

> Although it is fortunate that cultures mutually translate themselves and try in this fashion to understand one another somewhat better, we should not conclude that what we translate into European languages, and because we translate it without any too great difficulty, refers back to universals to which we have the key.

Somewhat reminiscent of Jonathan Z. Smith, who advises scholars of religion to be "relentlessly self-conscious" of their choices and analytic tools – going so far as to suggest that "this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study" (Smith 1982, xi) – Dubuisson concludes: "All scientific study today ought to have as its sine qua non the critical uncompromising study of its own language" (2003, 197).

Scholarship as Crisis Management

And it is this critical, uncompromising attitude that prompts us to question whether one can ever mount a persuasive argument concerning the fact that certain elements of some people's conceptual frameworks are universal or that certain elements of some mass movements constitute their authentic, original, and thus authoritative heart. Failing to recognize that one can never get outside language and conventions, many authors are playing with a loaded dice, since they set up their argument by presupposing that English is a universal language, that time travel exists, that unseen and enduring roots of deep significance feed the contingent branches of the tangible world, that we can read our subjects' minds and guess their intentions, or that one aspect of a complex mass movement is any more authoritative than another – all of which are forms of reckless hang-gliding that bypass taking history, difference, and contest seriously. They are all forms of scholarship *qua* crisis management, diligently working to fix a social world in a very particular manner – a manner in step with but one among a host of views on what it ought to be like in the first place.

Yet as troubling as such forms of argumentation are – if "argumentation" is even the right word to describe them – it was precisely this metaphysic of enduring presence that helped to make our workshop in Tuscaloosa a success. And because it is effective, it is a rhetoric found in virtually all contemporary commentaries on the role played by Islam in current world politics – whether written by authors on the political left or right. Its success is the result of its ability to naturalize everyone's and anyone's presumptions concerning the priority of their own world and the exoticness of those with which they have limited affinity – an exoticness that, depending on your vantage point, can either be alluring, merely curious and thus tolerable, or dangerous and in need of eradication.

Pick-up virtually any of the post September 11 books on Islam, listen to virtually any pundit on television, or examine almost any introductory world religions textbook, and you will likely find the high-flying rhetorics of faith and origins doing this handy little trick, providing a treat for those who are looking for an authentic heart that does not collide with their own group's interests. Rhetoric therefore constitutes but one more front at which the so-called War on Terror is being waged.

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