

'Islam' and 'the West'

– histories and stories over the centuries

Robin Richardson

Summary and background

In relation to 'the West' and 'Islam' there is a range of competing and overlapping narratives. The inverted commas signal that both terms are shorthand for immensely complex and diverse realities. Also, the two sets of realities are inter-related and reciprocally affect each other. Picturing the world as consisting largely of two large monolithic entities with little or nothing in common with each other is part of the problem to be addressed.

A narrative, it can be said, consists of a history on the one hand and a collection of stories on the other. In a different metaphor, there is a big picture and a set of vivid details. Either way, in the current context, the subject-matter is always 'us-and-them', not simply 'them'.

Based broadly on an idea first mooted by a historian of contemporary events (Garton Ash 2005), this paper notes eight competing big pictures of us-and-them in relation to the West and Islam, and focuses on two of these pictures in particular. In relation to these two, it delineates what it calls the default position, namely the assumptions that are taken for granted unless a conscious effort is made to alter them. It refers to both inter-national and intra-national relationships – both Islam out there outside the West and also in here, within the West.

Next, the paper cites several opinion surveys conducted in western countries in recent years which show that the default position is widespread.

It draws to an end by considering the principal components of alternative narratives about the West and the Muslim world, and by considering the *form* of narratives as distinct from their content. It concludes with a quotation from Edward Said about the potential role of education systems in nurturing and sustaining communities of interpretation and enquiry.

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Histories and stories

The West's war against terror, wrote the defence correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in October 2001, 'belongs within the much larger spectrum of a far older conflict between settled, creative productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals' (Keegan 2001). On 11 September, he said, 'the Oriental tradition ... returned in an absolutely traditional form. Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid'. His words were a vivid and dramatic summary of the way the Western media both reflected and shaped how the events of 9/11 were seen.

It is frequently the case, both for those who report events and for those who read or hear about them in the media, that something seems to erupt suddenly from empty space, or as if from a desert where normally nothing happens, nothing ever grows. Always metaphorically, and sometimes – as in September 2001 – literally, such events are experienced as surprise raids. The first priority for the human mind, when confronted with a surprise raid, is to place it within a narrative, so that it is connected to more familiar experiences and begins to make sense, and so that any further such events can be better anticipated, and actions to deal with them are maximally effective.

In this instance a key element in the narrative is that 'predatory, destructive Orientals' are intrinsically violent and have no reason, other than that they are intrinsically violent, for acting in hostile or defensive ways towards the West. The narrative is about relationships and comparisons, it is important to note, not just about so-called Orientals – it is about 'us-and-them', as the term might be, not simply about 'them'.

A history, as the term implies, is an account of how we got to where we are; it explains or seeks to explain patterns of cause and effect, and who or what is to blame. It provides a stock of metaphors, analogies and vivid imagery, as in the extract about 9/11 cited above, and a recurring concern is to establish – again, as in the example cited above – the distinctive features of 'us' and 'them', self and other, insider and outsider, allies and enemies, victims and aggressors, those who 'really' belong in our society or civilisation and those who do not (Ansari 2004, Philo and Berry 2004, van Dijk 2000). Further, histories recall glories to inspire, humiliations to avenge, scores to settle, acts of heroism and martyrdom to emulate and grievances to redress. Even more significantly, they provide explanations and justifications for current policies and actions – it is not rare, as is well known, for histories to be revisited and revised, to align them to new concerns, intentions and programmes in the present (Kumar 2012).

A history is not only, therefore, about the past, for it shapes expectations of what is likely to happen in the future. In a familiar metaphor, it helps build a radar system on the look-out for anomalies and threats in the objective world. If the sense of history is inaccurate, there is a danger that practical policies in the present will be self-defeating. In the current context this has been acknowledged implicitly, and to an extent explicitly, in major speeches by western leaders (Miliband 2009, Obama 2009), by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee (2010), and by the Leadership Group on US-Muslim Engagement (2008, 2009).

Stories, in the sense the word is being used here, are individual items in newspapers and on TV and radio. They are interesting in themselves but also help to keep histories and big pictures alive. Some – most, indeed – come and go: they are here today, gone tomorrow. Some, though, run for two or three days, or for a bit longer, particularly if they move from one paper to another, and backwards and forwards between print media, TV and radio. But some stories, most certainly, are so momentous and so obviously true that they are incorporated overnight into history – 9/11, obviously, and 7/7.

But most stories are not at all as momentous as those. Most illustrate and recall history, in the manner of a vivid case-study – they revivify and reinforce history, but they do not enter it, except in the minds and memories of the individuals most directly affected, or if there's something about the story that causes particular individuals continually to return to it in their minds' eyes and ears, and to dwell on it. 'I cannot forget,' writes a newspaper columnist, 'the story of the Brownie leader in Bradford who was stoned in the street by Asian youths who snarled "Christian bitch" at her' (Hitchens 2004).

What's the problem? – eight views

Through its sense of history and its stock of vivid case-studies a narrative handles four questions:

- What's the problem?
- What's the background?
- What's the solution?
- What do we want?

The last of these is about our notion of the good life, and the kind of society that nourishes the good life.

The four questions are asked both implicitly and explicitly. With regard to the first ('What's the problem?') the historian and political commentator Timothy Garton Ash (2005) has suggested there are six principal narratives or perspectives – six big pictures – in competition with each other in relation to the West and Islam. They are not, he stresses, mutually exclusive. On the contrary, there are overlaps amongst them and in practice, for any one person at any one time, the narrative they find most plausible is likely to be complemented and qualified by at least one of the others. It is logically impossible, however, for someone to operate with all six with equal assurance. Introducing the six narratives, Garton Ash writes:

Four years after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, which were perpetrated in the name of Allah, most people living in what we still loosely call the west would agree that we do have troubles with Islam. The vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists, but most of the terrorists who threaten us claim to be Muslims. Most countries with a Muslim majority show a resistance to what Europeans and Americans generally view as desirable modernity, including the essentials of liberal democracy. Why? What's the nub of the problem? Here are six different views often heard in the west, but also, it's important to add, in Muslim countries... As you go down the list, you might like to put a mental tick against the view you most strongly agree with. It's logically possible to put smaller ticks against a couple of others, but not against them all.

Briefly summarised, and with additional brief comments, the six narratives are set out below, together with two more.

1. Religion

The problem is religion in general, which is merely ignorance, superstition and wishful thinking. The sooner human beings stop being religious the safer the world will be.

2. Islam

The problem is a particular religion: Islam. It is backward, barbaric and intolerant and supports the oppression of women. Islam is stuck in the Middle Ages. It needs a reformation, based on science and modern thinking.

3. Islamism

The problem is Islamism, namely an interpretation of Islam that has its intellectual roots in organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt after the first World War and subsequently developed by Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Maulana Maududi in Pakistan. Alternative phrases or words instead of Islamism include political, militant or radical Islam; Islamic activism; Qutbism; jihadism; salafism; extremism; and fundamentalism. Islamism is a political ideology of hate. It led to the terrorist attacks on America in 2001, and to attacks in subsequent years in Bali, Madrid, London and Mumbai.

4. The Middle East

The problem lies in the specific history of West Asia, particularly the history of Arab nations. Key events and factors of the last 100 years include the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the Balfour Declaration and in due course the creation and enlargement of the state of Israel, processes of decolonisation and globalisation, tensions and conflicts within and between Arab countries and between Arab countries and Iran, the Sunni/Shi'a rift, and the emergence of oil-rich economies.

5. The West

The problem is 'the West'. From the Crusades to colonisation, and from moral and military support for the state of Israel to the recent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, Western powers have oppressed Muslim countries and cultures, and have developed forms of anti-Muslim hostility, Islamophobia and orientalism in order to justify their own policies and behaviour. This has provoked, understandably, much bitterness and anti-western hostility in return.

6. Social exclusion and alienation

The problem lies in the alienation of young people of Muslim heritage born and educated in European countries. They are marginalised and excluded by processes of religious and racist discrimination, and demoralised and depressed by the torrent of anti-Muslim stereotypes they see in the media. Some turn to an ideology of nihilism and terrorism, intermixed with Islamism (see above), as a rhetoric of self-justification.

7. Conflicts of material interest

The problem is not in the first instance to do with differences of culture, religion, ideology or civilisation. Rather, it is to do with conflicts of material interest. Globally, the key conflicts are around power, influence, territory and resources, particularly oil. Within urban areas in Europe they are around employment, housing, health and education. Such conflicts become 'religionised' or 'culturalised' – each side celebrates and idealises its own traditions and cultural heritage, including religion, and denigrates and demonises the traditions of the other.

8. Anxieties about national identity and security

The attacks on 9/11 were a vivid reminder that the governments of nation states – even of extremely powerful nation states, most notably the United States – are unable to guarantee the security of their citizens. At the same time they cannot control, to the extent they did in the past, economic, financial, cultural and ecological borders. The resulting insecurities lead to scapegoating and moral panics, with Muslims as a convenient target, but not the real cause.

Of the eight big pictures summarised above, it is the second ('the problem is Islam') and the third ('the problem is Islamism') that are dominant in the western media as a whole, though with different nuances between and within different newspapers, programmes and channels. Garton Ash comments that sometimes what is said in so many words is not necessarily the same as what a speaker really thinks. Nor is it necessarily what they intended to say, or what is actually heard and understood by others. Of the third big picture, for example ('the problem is Islamism, not Islam') he says that this is the official view of George Bush and Tony Blair, but continues:

Well, they would say that, wouldn't they? They're not going to insult millions of Muslim voters and the foreign countries upon which the west relies for its imported oil. But do they really believe it? I have my doubts. Put them on a truth serum, and I bet they'd be closer to 2 ['the problem is Islam'].

Later, in a high-profile lecture, David Cameron explicitly and emphatically re-emphasised the UK government's official view that the problem is Islamism, not Islam (Cameron 2011). Criticisms of the lecture, however, saw it as expressing and amplifying widespread negative stereotypes about Islam in general, not so-called Islamism in particular (Insted 2011).

The default position – six recurring stereotypes

In countries where Muslims live as minorities, there are certain recurring stereotypes in the general climate of anti-Muslim opinion. Sometimes these are expressed outright. Often, however, they are simply assumed and taken for granted, part of common sense. So to speak, they are the default position which is widely assumed if it is not explicitly denied and rejected. Six of the most frequent sets of negative stereotypes in the default position are as follows (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2011, and see also Kumar, 2012, chapter 3 on the persistence of Orientalist myths).

1. All the same

Muslims are seen as all much the same as each other, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, social class, geographical location and political outlook, and regardless of how observant and religiously-oriented they are, or are not. With regard to terrorism and violent extremism for example, it is imagined there is 'a slippery slope' between moderates and extremists, with even the most moderate Muslims being potential extremists.

2. All religiously motivated

It is thought that the single most important thing about a 'Muslim' is that he or she has certain religious beliefs and engages in certain religious practices. Accordingly, it is thought that everything a Muslim does is motivated by religion. So if a Muslim engages in violence, for example, this must be because their religion advocates violence. If a Muslim-majority country is economically backward or abuses human rights this too, it is thought, must be much more due to the prevailing religious tradition of the country than to any other factor.

3. All totally other

Muslims are seen as totally other – they have few or no interests, characteristics, needs, concerns or values in common with non-Muslims, and this was as true in the past as it is in the present. In short, the values of Muslims and non-Muslims are incompatible with each other. Amongst other things, this means Muslims are not seen as possessing any relevant and valuable insights, perspectives and achievements from which non-Muslims may learn and benefit.

4. All inferior

Muslims are seen as culturally, intellectually, politically and morally inferior to non-Muslims – quick to take offence, prone to irrationality and violence, hypocritical in the practice of their religion, sexist and oppressive in their treatment of women, homophobic in their views of sexual identities, intolerant towards world-views different from their own, fundamentalist and narrow-minded, disinclined or unable to engage in reasoned debate, and hostile and hateful towards 'the West' for no good reason. It is allegedly a sign of Muslim inferiority and backwardness that the governments of certain Muslim-majority countries have little respect for democracy and human rights, and that economic and social development has been slight. The only language Muslims understand, it is said, is the language of force and violence.

5. All a threat

Muslims are seen as a threat to non-Muslims. Globally, they may attack non-Muslim countries, as on 9/11, and are a threat to the existence of Israel. Within non-Muslim countries they are a treacherous and disloyal fifth column or enemy within, in active collusion or tacit sympathy with international terrorism, engaged in a clash of civilisations and in a global conspiracy and jihad against 'the West'. In addition, they are a threat to non-Muslim cultures, societies and values, intending the 'Islamisation' of Europe and turning the continent into 'Eurabia'. Further, it is claimed they are a demographic time-bomb, and will fairly soon be a numerical majority in certain European cities and countries.

6. All impossible to work with

As a consequence of the previous five perceptions, it is believed there is no possibility of cooperation and partnership between 'them' and 'us', Muslims and non-Muslims, working as equals on tasks which require mediation, negotiation, compromise and partnership.

The six assumptions listed above are sometimes articulated entirely explicitly. A particularly vivid example came in an article published in summer 2004 under the pseudonym of 'Will Cummins' in the *Sunday Telegraph*. Cummins' principal claim was that all Muslims are the same and that all are different from non-Muslims. He chose, however, to express these claims by saying that all Muslims are the same in the sense that all dogs are the same. This example inevitably implied, even though logically it did not inherently entail, the claim that Muslims are inferior to non-Muslims, a lower order of being. Not all people who broadly share the underlying assumptions listed above would approve of the offensive and extreme form of self-expression Cummins used:

All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is not the same animal as a cat just because both species are comprised of different breeds. An extreme Christian believes that the Garden of Eden really existed; an extreme Muslim flies planes into buildings – there's a big difference.

Another strong statement that all Muslims are the same and all are different from non-Muslims is to be found in Samuel Huntington's influential book *The Clash of Civilisations*. 'The underlying problem for the West,' he writes, 'is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power' (Huntington 1997: 217-18).

A more recent and even more virulent expression of the view that there is a continuum or slippery slope between so-called moderates and so-called extremists. appeared in autumn 2009 in an article published in the United States (cited in Kumar 2010). Recalling the vivid American phrase 'going postal', describing the phenomenon of violent

rage in which a worker – archetypically a postal worker – suddenly snaps and guns down his colleagues, the author proposed a new phrase should be coined, 'going Muslim'. It would describe 'the turn of events where a seemingly integrated Muslim-American – a friendly donut vendor in New York, say, or an officer in the U.S. Army at Fort Hood – discards his apparent integration into American society and elects to vindicate his religion in an act of messianic violence against his fellow Americans'. The article continued:

The difference between 'going postal', in the conventional sense, and 'going Muslim', in the sense that I suggest, is that there would not necessarily be a psychological 'snapping' point in the case of the imminently violent Muslim; instead, there could be a calculated discarding of camouflage – the camouflage of integration – in an act of revelatory catharsis.

To repeat, such explicit and virulent expressions of anti-Muslim hostility are rare in the mainstream media. They are to be found in the propaganda of certain political parties, however, claiming that 'Western' values such as freedom of speech, democracy and rights for women are incompatible with Islam, that Islam is a cancer eating away at Western freedoms and democracy, and that there are similarities between the *Qur'an* and Nazi literature.

Explicit statements of the six themes are also widespread on websites and in the blogosphere, on radio chat-shows and phone-in programmes, on the correspondence pages of media websites, in the publications of certain think tanks, and in responses to opinion polls and surveys. They are generally implicit rather than explicit throughout the print media, and on radio and television. A Manichean view of human affairs – the notion that all of life is a cosmic battle between good and evil, heroes and villains – is celebrated in much popular fiction (Al-Shaikh-Ali 2009), and throughout comics and computer games. So are many other hard-and-fast, black-and-white distinctions and dichotomies. Such views give strength and credence to many kinds of hostility and distrust, including but not only hostility and distrust towards Muslims.

Within the context of the six themes summarised above, more specific allegations are made about British Muslims, and more generally about Muslims elsewhere in Europe. The principal allegations include the following.

Failure to integrate

Muslims do not wish to integrate into European societies, it is said, but prefer to live in separate, self-segregated communities and neighbourhoods. Failure to integrate leads to failure in the educational system and failure to obtain economic well-being. There is in consequence much bitterness and a deep sense of alienation, a victim mentality, and a false, self-deceiving perception that mainstream society is unjust and Islamophobic. These feelings and perceptions then lead to additional failure in education and employment, and the vicious spiral continues.

Unreasonable demands

Muslims are accused of making unreasonable demands on European societies, expecting the Judeo-Christian traditions of these societies to be modified, changed or jettisoned so they won't be offended or inconvenienced. Amongst other matters, the demands are about dress codes in public places (particularly the burka, which seems to symbolise antagonism to the state and to established customs of openness), the building of mosques in towns and cities, the use of community languages in public, the establishment of faith schools and after-school religious classes.

Mixed loyalties

Muslims in Europe supposedly owe their principal loyalty to the worldwide *Ummah*, not to the country where they live. They therefore cannot be depended on to support their country's foreign policies, or even its sports teams. In relation to international situations, for example in Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Afghanistan, they are a fifth column or enemy within

Support for extremism

The sense of alienation and lack of loyalty mentioned above are believed to combine to make Muslim communities in Europe a breeding ground for extremism. It is true that only a small minority of them actually engage in acts of violence but there is a general climate of tacit support and sympathy for extreme measures, whether these are committed within Europe or elsewhere. In well-known metaphors, 'ordinary' Muslims constitute the pond in which extremists swim, and the hinterland from which they emerge. All Muslims are on a single continuum at one end of which there is readiness to support, or even to engage in, engage in terrorist acts.

Obscurantism

It is claimed that Islamic theology has never gone through the kinds of critical review and reformation that were the hallmarks of the Enlightenment in Europe. Scriptures are not subjected to textual criticism; doctrines and moral teachings are not seen in historical context; multiple interpretations of a text are not acceptable; received tradition is paramount.

Incompatibility of values and interests

Islam and the West are seen as incompatible in terms of moral values and are locked in a zero-sum struggle for power and control. At the global level there is a clash of civilisations and at local levels Muslims and non-Muslims cannot live and work harmoniously and constructively together, other than in relatively superficial ways. Muslims subvert local democracy: in Britain's northern cities, for example, through manipulating *biraderi* kinship networks. They are misogynist and homophobic, use repressive educational methods in their mosques and madrasahs, and are opposed to all things Western.

Lack of Muslim leadership

Religious leaders such as imams, and secular leaders such as office-holders in Muslim organisations, are said to be out of touch with the people they are supposed to guide and represent, particularly young people. They are insufficiently vocal and proactive in condemning extremism and in encouraging integration into mainstream society. Some even glorify extremism and terrorism. All or most are in denial about the presence and growth of extremism in their communities and do not see that theirs is the principal responsibility for removing it. The few who might be inclined to speak out on these issues are in fact frightened to do so, because of the opposition they would encounter from most other Muslims.

Corroborating evidence from overseas

The perceptions listed above are about Muslims *within* Europe. They gain additional persuasiveness and plausibility, however, from how Muslims *outside* Europe are described as behaving – their hatred of the West, abuse of human rights, use of barbaric punishments, intolerance of debate and disagreement, glorification of martyrdom, antisemitism, plans to create a world-wide caliphate, obscurantist religion, and support for terrorism and insurgency. These features of Muslim societies and cultures combine with beliefs that they are culturally and morally superior to the West, which they see as corrupt, shallow, and in need of being converted to, and reshaped in accordance with, Islam.

Weak non-Muslim leadership

The threats posed by Muslims, outlined above, are made even more serious by the failures of successive European governments, and by metropolitan intelligentsias and by church leaders such as the Archbishop of Canterbury (George, 2011). In the 1950s and 1960s governments did not foresee the dangers of permitting immigration from cultures so different from their own. More recently, governments have consistently failed to police and protect their borders effectively and do not appreciate the severe dangers posed by Islam in general and Islamism in particular. They have also failed to insist on full assimilation and integration, while promoting multiculturalism, political correctness, cultural relativism and the nanny state. Some of these failures have been exacerbated by the human rights legislation which governments have introduced against the interests of Europe's majority populations. The overall effect has been to appease Muslims rather than to oppose and control them.

Opinion surveys

How widespread are these perceptions and allegations amongst non-Muslims? And in which social classes and socio-economic circumstances are they most prevalent, and with what other views are they typically accompanied? Professionally conducted opinion polls provide a useful guide to, though not a definitive and quantified description of, the climate of opinion in a society at any one time. There are inevitable sampling errors and the ways in which questions are phrased, and the circumstances in which they are asked, can make the results difficult to interpret. A further problem is that respondents may be inclined to give what they consider to be the 'right' answer rather than to say what they really think. Despite these and similar practical problems, however, opinion polls yield a valuable broad overview. A range of key findings is reviewed below.

More recently, the annual survey of British social attitudes shows widespread hostility towards Islam in Britain (National Centre for Social Research 2010). 'Social class, sex and race may be objectively more important,' it concludes, 'but religion – and particularly Islam – now appears to provoke more anxiety than these other traditional distinctions. Specific findings included:

- A large proportion of the country believes that the multicultural experiment has failed, with 52 per cent considering that Britain is deeply divided along religious lines and 45 per cent saying that religious diversity has had a negative impact.
- Only a quarter of Britons feel positive towards Muslims, while more than a third report feeling 'cool' towards them.
- People are becoming intolerant towards all religions because of 'the degree to which Islam is perceived as a threat to social cohesion'.
- This apparent threat to national identity (or even, some fear, to security) reduces the willingness to accommodate free expression.
- Respondents with no qualifications were twice as likely to have negative attitudes towards Muslims as with those who had degrees.
- There is a high level of unease regarding the UK's Muslim population, estimated at around two million, with many people considering that it poses a threat to the nation's identity.

- While 55 per cent say that they would be 'bothered' by the construction of a large mosque in their community, only 15 per cent would be similarly concerned by a large church.

Two years later (September 2012) the 29th report of the British social attitudes survey included a section on immigration and found that:

- there remains a strong overall desire for a reduction in immigration, with half (51 per cent) wanting a large reduction and a further quarter (24 per cent) wanting some reduction.
- those who view the cultural impact of immigration as 'very bad' increased from nine per cent in 2002 to 21% in 2011.
- migrants and students from Muslim countries are viewed more negatively than migrants and students from other parts of the world.

A study of 104 separate public opinion polls in Britain conducted between 1998 and 2006 came to the following conclusions (Field 2007):

- Although people in the UK were far from seeing all or most Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, the proportion inclining to this position appeared to have doubled since July 2005, standing in 2006 at around one in five. Muslims' dual loyalties to Britain and to Islam were perceived by many as in growing potential conflict, those holding this view having doubled from 2001 to reach 41 per cent in 2006. The proportion perceiving Islam to be a threat to Western liberal democracy had also climbed steeply, from 32 per cent in 2001 to 53 per cent in 2006.
- Taking a cross-section of attitudinal measures, somewhere between one in five and one in four Britons now exhibited a strong dislike of, and prejudice against, Islam and Muslims.
- Certain demographic groups were consistently prone to demonstrate more negative views towards Islam and Muslims than others. This was particularly true of men as distinct from women, the DE social class, the oldest age cohort (not least pensioners) and Conservative voters. The most positive have been women, the AB social group, the youngest age cohort (under 30) and Liberal Democrats.

A few years later, a similar study of opinion polls in Britain was made for the period 2007–10 (Field, 2012). The spread of opinion was summarised as follows:

- Up to a fifth of adults (20 per cent) are strongly Islamophobic, viewing Islam as warlike and violent conflict with it as inevitable. At the same time they are unwilling to have Muslim neighbours and say they would not vote for a Muslim politician.
- Up to a third (33 per cent) think Muslims have little in common with members of other religious traditions. Also they believe Muslims have established no-go areas, have limited feelings of loyalty towards Britain, and should not receive any concessions for their concerns and agendas.
- Up to two fifths (40 per cent) believe Islam endangers Western civilisation, and that Muslims have little to offer Britain.
- Up to a half (50 per cent) consider Muslims should do more to integrate into British society, for example by not wearing a face-veil, but also that they have excessive political power.

- Up to three quarters (75 percent) say they have limited or no knowledge of Islam, and that they are not interested in finding out more.

Both studies found that for all segments of the population negative or positive views correlate strongly with the amount of knowledge of Islam and of direct contact which people have with Muslims: the greater the knowledge and familiarity, the lower the level of prejudice, and vice versa. This was also one of the findings of a large-scale study of young people in Sweden (Bevelander and Otterbeck 2008). It is relevant in this regard to note that a study of 150 local authorities in England in 2009 showed that support for the British National Party (BNP), which campaigns not only against immigration in general but against the 'islamification' of Britain in particular, was highest in areas where there are below-average numbers of recent immigrants (Institute for Public Policy Research 2010: 2).

Also, both studies found that negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims are disproportionately concentrated amongst men, older people, the DE social class groups, the midlands and north of England, and Conservative voters. Positive views are more likely to be found, conversely, amongst women, younger people, the AB social class groups, in London and Scotland, and amongst Liberal Democrats and members of the Green Party.

The form of narratives – open and closed ways of thinking and relating

The dominant narratives outlined earlier in this paper were described with regard to their content. But also their form needs attention – the way views are formulated, presented and argued. The journalist Peregrine Worsthorne once claimed said that Islam was 'once a great civilisation worthy of being argued with' but now 'has degenerated into a primitive enemy fit only to be sensitively subjugated' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 3 February 1991). He made two distinctions in this claim, the one to do with content ('great civilisation'/'primitive enemy') and the other with regard to forms of thinking and relating ('argued with'/'subjugated'.) To see an individual or a group or a civilisation as 'worthy of being argued with' is necessarily to be open-minded towards them. The hallmarks of open-mindedness include:

- readiness to change one's views, both of others and of oneself, in the light of new facts and evidence
- not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts
- not caricaturing the views of people with whom one disagrees
- not over-generalising
- not being abusive when arguing, for example not claiming that one's opponents are evil or insane or sub-human
- not using double standards when comparing and contrasting others with oneself
- seeing difference and disagreement as a resource for understanding more about oneself, not as a threat
- seeking to understand other people's views and standpoints in their own terms, and where they are coming from – the narratives and stories with which they interpret events

- not claiming greater certainty than is warranted
- seeking consensus or, at least, a *modus vivendi* which keeps channels of communication open and permits all to maintain dignity.

Milton Rokeach's (1960) distinction between the open and the closed mind was concerned with developing attitudes and inclinations such as those listed above. His open/closed distinction was used by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997) in its discussion of views on 'the West' and 'Islam', and subsequently revised by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000) to evaluate all representations of self and other. The key issues include:

- whether the other is seen as monolithic, static and authoritarian, or as diverse and dynamic with substantial internal debates
- whether the other is divided into two broad categories, good and bad, moderate and extreme, or whether multi-faceted complexity, both in the present and the past, is recognised and attended to
- whether the other is seen as totally separate from the self, or as both similar and interdependent, sharing a common humanity and history, and a common space
- whether the other is seen as an aggressive and devious enemy to be feared, opposed and defeated, or as a cooperative partner with whom to work on shared problems, locally, nationally and internationally
- whether the other's criticisms of the self are rejected out of hand or whether they are considered and debated
- whether double standards are applied in descriptions and criticisms of the other and the self, or whether criticisms are even-handed.

At an admittedly high level of abstraction, these are key questions for consideration of all media portrayals of the 'Muslim world' and 'the west' and, more especially, of relationships between them.

Concluding note

'There is a difference,' wrote Edward Said in a the 2003 preface to his magisterial *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, 'between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge – if that is what it is – that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination' (Said 2003: xiv).

The difference to which Said referred corresponds to the distinction outlined here earlier between open and closed ways of relating and engaging. He continued by urging 'that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America', 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilising power.'

Said concluded with words which are particularly relevant to the role and responsibility of the media in modern societies, and to analysis of the narratives, histories and stories which they tell, and the big pictures and daily details which they set forth:

Rather than the manufactured clash of civilisations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and sceptical inquiry, supported by communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.

The task of responsible media, as also of responsible education systems, is to sustain what Said here calls communities of interpretation, committed to patient and sceptical inquiry.

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PLEASE NOTE

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