

## 'Islam' and 'the West' – competing narratives in the UK media

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### Introduction and summary

1. This paper is based on experience and work in one country, the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Its arguments, perspectives and proposals may not, in certain important respects, be relevant in other European countries. Significant differences between the UK and other European countries in connection with Islam, Islamophobia and Muslims are connected with approaches to anti-discrimination legislation and citizenship rights; memories and experiences of colonialism; degrees of closeness to the United States; recent experiences of terrorism and urban unrest; and demographic patterns.
2. With regard to demography, it is relevant to mention that a high proportion (about 70 per cent) of people of Muslim heritage in the UK have their origins in the countries of South Asia – mainly Pakistan and Bangladesh but also to a certain extent India. Migration from South Asian countries occurred principally in the 1950s and 1960s. All people from these backgrounds have had full citizenship rights since the day they arrived. More than half of British Muslims in 2007 were born in the UK.
3. The paper begins by recalling the concept of **narrative**. Each narrative has two aspects – (a) **a sense of history** and (b) **a set of stories**. In both these aspects, a narrative asks and answers four key questions:
  - What's the problem?
  - What's the background?
  - What do we want?
  - What should be done?
4. Focusing on the first of these questions ('What's the problem?') the paper then discusses seven different ways of describing relationships between 'the West' and 'Islam'. Six of these are derived from a newspaper article by the historian and commentator Timothy Garton Ash.
5. Next, the paper describes and discusses the principal narrative about the West and Islam in the UK media. The word *Islamophobia* is a shorthand (and, incidentally, not very satisfactory) way of referring to this narrative. The components of the dominant narrative are then contrasted with the components of an alternative narrative.
6. Islamophobia is seen not only in the **content** of the dominant narrative but also in the **form** in which it is usually expressed. In this connection the paper distinguishes between **closed** and **open** ways of expressing opinions, and thinking, engaging and relating.
7. The concluding section of the paper discusses briefly some of the principal things which need further talk and consideration in relation to challenging and reducing Islamophobia in the media. By extension, this last section is relevant to many other areas of social life as well, including education and politics, and the making and interpretation of law.

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<sup>1</sup> Publications about Islamophobia in the UK include *Islamophobia – a challenge for us all*, published in 1997, and *Islamophobia – challenges, issues and action*. 2004. The latter can be downloaded from the web pages of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia at <http://www.insted.co.uk/islam.html>.

## **Big pictures and daily details: text, talk and imagery**

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.'<sup>2</sup> 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 about them in the press, or hear about them on radio, or watch images about them on television, that something seems to erupt suddenly from empty space, or as if from a desert where normally nothing happens, nothing grows. Always metaphorically, and sometimes – as in September 2001 – literally, such events are 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. Text, talk and imagery are directed to these three ends, making sense, being better prepared, taking more effective action

In relation to 'the West' and 'Islam' there is a range of competing and overlapping narratives. (Inverted commas signal that both terms are shorthand for immensely complex and variegated realities. Also, the realities are inter-related and merge with each other. Picturing the world as consisting largely of two large monolithic entities with little or nothing in common is arguably part of the problem.) A narrative, it can be said, consists of (a) a history and (b) a collection of stories. In a different metaphor, there is (a) a big picture and (b) a set of vivid details.

### **Histories**

A history, obviously, 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.<sup>3</sup> Further, histories recall glories which inspire, humiliations to avenge, acts of heroism and martyrdom to be emulated and grievances to redress. Further, 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.

A history is not only about the past. Also, it shapes expectations of what is likely to happen next. In a familiar metaphor, it helps build a radar system on the look-out for anomalies and threats in the world out there.

### **Stories**

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

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<sup>2</sup> John Keegan, 'In this war of civilisations, the West will prevail', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 October 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in their study of media reports from Israel/Palestine in recent years (2004), Philo and Berry devote a third of their pages to discussing what they call 'histories of the conflict';.

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 (for all of us in the UK, at least) 7/7. But most are not as momentous as those. Most illustrate and recall history, in the manner of a vivid case-study. In these ways 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 to continually return to it in their minds' eyes.<sup>4</sup> '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.'<sup>5</sup>

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 questions are asked both implicitly and explicitly. With regard to the first of these questions ('What's the problem?') the historian and political commentator Timothy Garton Ash 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 adopt 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. Garton Ash's article was written in September 2005. Introducing the six narratives, he said:

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 in Box 1, together with a seventh.

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<sup>4</sup> This account of histories and stories is drawn, though in a simplified form, from the writings of the Dutch scholar Teun van Dyck. See in particular *Racism and the Press*, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'I'll say it while they still let me: Islam is a threat to us all', *Mail on Sunday*, 11 July 2004.

## **What's the problem? – seven views of 'Islam' and 'the West'**

### **1. Religion**

The problem is religion in general, which is superstition, self-delusion and the abandonment of reason. The deplorable influence of religion is seen throughout the world, and in all cultural traditions – in Christianity and Judaism, for example, as well as in Islam.

### **2. Islam**

The problem is a particular religion, Islam. Unlike western Christianity, it does not allow the separation of religion and politics. With its systematic discrimination against women, its barbaric punishments for homosexuality and its intolerance of other world-views, Islam is stuck in the middle ages. It needs a reformation, based on integrating religion with science and rationality and re-interpreting traditional texts in the light of modernity.

### **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; extremism; and fundamentalism. Islamism is a political ideology of hate.

### **4. West Asia/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 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 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 behaviour. This has provoked, understandably, much bitterness and anti-western hostility in return.

### **6. 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 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 the traditions of the other.

*Source: adapted and developed from an article by Timothy Garton Ash, The Guardian, 15 September 2005*

Garton Ash's distinctions are a helpful start for considering the narratives about the West and Islam that are articulated in the western media, sometimes explicitly but often simply taken for granted, part of common sense. He suggests that the second ('the problem is Islam') and the third ('the problem is Islamism') are dominant in the media as a whole, though with different nuances between and within different papers, programmes and channels.

In saying this he recalls that sometimes what is said in so many words is not necessarily the same as what the speaker really thinks. Nor is it necessarily what they intended to say, or what is actually heard and understood by others. Of the third narrative, for example ('the problem is Islamism, not Islam') he says that this is the official view of George Bush and Tony Blair,<sup>6</sup> 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'].

### **The dominant narrative in the West**

The dominant narrative in the Western media and in Western consciousness is arguably a mix of Garton Ash's second and third big pictures – 'The problem is Islam' and 'The problem is Islamism' It is often implied or simply assumed, or expressed in code, rather than stated in so many words. It contains five underlying assumptions:

- All Muslims are much the same.
- All Muslims are essentially different from all non-Muslims.
- Muslims are morally and culturally inferior to non-Muslims.
- Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims.
- There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies.

To repeat, these are usually unspoken. But sometimes they are expressed 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's 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.'<sup>8</sup> A similar claim is made by the columnist Peter

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Tony Blair's lecture 'The Duty in Integrate', *The Runnymede Bulletin*, December 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Will Cummins, 'Muslims are a threat to our way of life', *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 July 2004

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations* (1997), pp 217-8,

Hitchens: 'Soon it will be illegal to say this, so I had better do it now. Islam, yes even "moderate" Islam, threatens our freedom and civilisation.'<sup>9</sup> Such statements assume there is a continuum or slippery slope between so-called moderates and so-called extremists.

The five assumptions underlying the dominant narrative sketched above can be contrasted with assumptions which underlie alternative narratives, as in the tabulation in Box 2.<sup>10</sup>

Box 2

**Contrasts between basic assumptions in different narratives**

<b>Points of contrast</b>	<b>Dominant narratives</b>	<b>Alternative narratives</b>
<i>Uniformity/diversity</i>	Muslims are all much the same	There is great diversity amongst Muslims
<i>Difference/similarity</i>	Muslims are significantly different from non-Muslims	There are many commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims
<i>Inferiority/equality</i>	Muslims are morally and intellectually inferior to non-Muslims	There is both good and bad everywhere – both in Muslims and non-Muslims
<i>Threat/trust</i>	Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims	There are both real and perceived threats on both sides
<i>Conflict/cooperation</i>	There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies	It is both possible and urgent that Muslims and non-Muslims should work together on solving or managing shared problems and on building mutual confidence

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

6.1 The dominant and alternative narratives outlined above are described with regard to their content. But also their form needs attention – the way views are formulated, presented and argued. The journalist Peregrine Worsthorne has 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.' He makes 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

<sup>9</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'I'll say it while they still let me: Islam is a threat to us all', *Mail on Sunday*, 11 July 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted and simplified from the first report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997.

- 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.

### **Concluding notes: (1) The definition of Islamophobia**

In relation to the media, the word *Islamophobia* is a useful shorthand term for referring to text, talk and imagery that:

- present the dominant narrative about Islam and Muslims outlined above, at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives
- do so with closed not open ways of thinking, talking and relating
- are likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims
- are likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims
- are unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims
- are unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing multicultural, multi-faith democracy.

### **Concluding notes: (2) Responsible journalism**

A key issue is anxiety rather than phobia, and the key professional responsibility of journalists and political leaders is to promote informed debate, as distinct from pandering to anxiety and to being alarmist.

There are six principal topics which opinion leaders need to give sustained thought to:

- Managing anxiety
- Principles of freedom of speech
- Codes of professional practice
- Religious literacy
- Critical literacy
- The making of complaints

In March 2007 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the UK, Ruth Kelly, declared that 'we urgently need a new approach to tackling the violent extremism that seeks to undermine our society'. She said further a new approach 'must be based as much on winning hearts and minds as on security measures'.

There 'must put a new emphasis on local solutions', she continued, and declared that 'our aim must be not just to stop people committing violence but also to challenge the ideologies that drive them'. She acknowledged that successive governments, including the present

one, 'have not always got this balance right'. Governments have 'put too much faith in action,' she added, 'not enough in debate'.

The purpose of the debate would be to challenge, isolate and neutralise 'ideologies of hatred' amongst 'a tiny minority' of Muslims. She drew an analogy with the far right extremism of political parties such as the British National Party (BNP). 'The British public,' she said, 'rejects their ugly message.'

The stress on debate as well as action was and is welcome. The mainstream media – not just the Muslim media – will have a major role to play in it. The debate in the mainstream media will be disingenuous, however, if it assumes that hostility and suspicion towards Islam and Muslims are to be found only amongst a small minority of non-Muslims, the so-called far right.

There needs also to be substantial debate about the prejudices, anxieties, sometimes amounting to panic, amongst non-Muslims. This will have to include consideration of how the mainstream media are by no means always responsible in the ways in which they treat competing narratives about 'Islam' and 'the West'.

If they are to contribute constructively to the debate, the mainstream media must put their own house in order. They need to be supported, encouraged and empowered in this by their readers, viewers and users.

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Please note: this lecture is based on material due to be published later this year by the Greater London Authority