Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections
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A Book Review by

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As the world contemplates the consequences of a global "war on terror" that often positions predominantly Judeo-Christian Western societies against their Muslim counterparts, and as social and mass media bring to our collective consciousness horrific murders committed by terrorists purporting to act in the name of Islam, *Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections* (2014) is a timely and welcome intellectual intervention.

Edited by Canadian academics Mahmoud Eid and Karim H. Karim and featuring a collection of thought-provoking chapters written by well-known critical scholars, the book is informed by the position that a "clash of ignorance" rather than a "clash of civilizations" thesis better explains contemporary conflicts between Western and Muslim societies, which increasingly find expression in violence and social exclusion. This argument develops a thesis that Eid and Karim advanced in a 2012 article.

For Eid and Karim, the clash of ignorance accounts for the contemporary meta-narratives motivating how Western and Muslim societies view each other. Othering in these societies, therefore, are consequences of social constructions that can be dismantled through informed discourse grounded in historical facts. That is the unstated goal of this book.

The editors are strongly influenced by the work of Edward Said. As a response to Samuel P. Huntington's (1996) "clash of civilizations" thesis, Said (2001, October 22) proposed the concept of a "clash of ignorance" in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Huntington argued that in the post-Cold War era, "the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future" (1993: 22). This thesis is widely believed to have inspired some Western policymakers to adopt an antagonistic posture toward Muslim societies after the end of the Cold War. In his rebuttal, Said argued that the labels of "West" and "Islam" are social constructs that essentialize and privilege notions of inherent antagonism, perpetuating ignorance about complex societies and ethnic identities.

But it is not only in terms of the clash of ignorance thesis that the editors (and indeed, the contributing authors) have borrowed from Said. Said's (1978) concept of "Orientalism" has also influenced the entire text. Said argued that notions of the "Orient" and "Occident" are all ideological constructs. According to Said, "Orientalism" is a product of colonialism and Western imperialism, and consequently, of the historical Western socio-economic dominance that has

permitted hegemonic misrepresentations and othering of the "Oriental" by people in the Western world. In regards to contemporary discourses of terrorism, the dominance enjoyed by Western cultural industries has translated into the predominance of pejorative images and constructions of Islam, often generating moral panics around what Karim (2002) previously described as the "Islamic peril".

Where Huntington (1993) sees cultural characteristics and differences between civilizations as primary causes of the inevitable clash, the editors and authors whose work appear in *Re-Imagining the Other* see historical commonalities that can be invoked and harnessed to re-articulate a more progressive discourse on Western-Muslim relations. In furtherance of this goal, the editors organize the chapters in the book under three broad categories. The first category is historiographical, tracing the evolution of Western and Muslim societies to expose the fact that these societies have in the past enjoyed rich and fruitful cross-fertilizations. Particularly, Jews, Muslims, and Christians have historically enjoyed mutually respectful and beneficial relations. These religions share several foundational beliefs. A clash of religions or civilizations that positions Muslim societies against their Judeo-Christian Western counterparts is therefore not a matter of course. As well, the historical narrative in this category helps explain the origins of the more antagonistic discourse that today dominates understandings of the relationship between Muslim and Judeo-Christian societies. Chapters by Jack Goody, Nabil Matar, Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, and John Hobson are located in this category of the book.

The second thematic category in *Re-Imagining the Other* focuses on how contemporary media discursive practices, such as the conceptualization of honour killings in the popular Western imaginary, perpetuate the clash of ignorance, especially in the West. Mahmoud Eid, Yasmin Jiwani, and Karim H. Karim have contributed chapters to this second thematic category.

The third thematic category deals with future paths for sustainable coexistence by the Western and Muslim Other and the Self, drawing on the positive ideals of past interrelationships. This category includes chapters written by Richard Rubenstein, Salah Basalamah, and the final chapter jointly authored by Karim and Eid, reiterating their thesis.

Readers will find that while all the chapters are connected to the core thesis, they are self-contained and can be easily incorporated into course packs. As well, in substance, the book is multidisciplinary, with input from academic fields including architecture, communication, conflict resolution, education, international relations, Islamic studies, law, literature, Middle Eastern studies, politics, social anthropology, theology, and translation.

The contributions in this volume are critical interrogations by Western-based scholars mostly analyzing hegemonic discursive practices in Western societies. But what about contemporary hegemonic discursive practices of groups in Muslim or non-Western societies that result in the marginalization or victimization of the Western(ized) Other? Groups such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) come to mind here. At the time of writing, for example, Boko Haram, which rejects practices associated with Western civilization including Western education (Onuoha, 2012, February 29), has abducted more than 200 females in Nigeria because they were receiving Western education (Peters, 2014). While historically Western societies enjoyed the power to direct asymmetrical information flows to the developing world, this is not the reality of the contemporary media ecosystem. Purporting to act in the name of Islam and the interest of Muslims, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and ISIL are not solely dependent on mainstream media, leveraging social media to disseminate violent anti-Western (as well as implicit and explicit anti Judeo-Christian) messages. The ideologies of these groups fall into the category of "Occidentalism", a term that Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit

(2005) use to describe the opposite of Said's Orientalism. In Occidentalism, the pejorative discourse is directed at Western civilization, and the Western(ized) Other is dehumanized. The imperialism implicit in Said's thesis is what I will label "Imperialism 1.0", carried out by nation states. This is the era of "Imperialism 2.0", in which a loose group of individuals can leverage the power of social and alternative media to project political dominance beyond national borders. This is the imperialism of groups like al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and ISIL. To that extent, a future companion volume to this book could discuss ways in which the clash of ignorance thesis finds manifestation in non-Western societies.

Yet, *Re-Imagining the Other* speaks eloquently to the deep structure of the clash of ignorance and its ramifications for Western-Muslim relations; that is its strength and why it is a must-read. Without the understanding offered in the chapters, the clash of ignorance will continue to manifest itself in what Jiwani terms "a clash of discourses" (2014: 121), and potentially, a clash of civilizations. Rather than using religious discourse to stoke the fires of intolerance, religion can be an instrument to promote understanding and social justice. As intolerance increasingly finds expression in what Rubenstein calls violent "sacralized conflict" (2014: 179), *Re-Imagining the Other* makes a significant contribution to critical scholarship on Western-Muslim relations, especially how mass mediatized narrative (re)productions inform these relations. Accordingly, this book is strongly recommended especially for graduate and senior undergraduate critical media studies courses.

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