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Two Disconnected Discourses of Disconnection: Anti-West and Anti-Islamic Discourses

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Abstract

Narratives like paradigms offer explanations of some aspects of life which are largely self-contained, self-sustaining, self-validating, and impervious to disconfirming evidence. Anti-Islam discourses in the West and anti-Western discourses among Muslims are two such discourses. That such discourses can legitimate violence is clearly evident in the rhetoric, actions and rationales given for violence among such groups as the Islamic State, Boko Haram, The Lord's Liberation Army, The Spanish Inquisition, and Anti-Islamic movements in Europe and other parts of the West. Narratives of difference, of negative disconnection from some 'other', persist for centuries with minor variation as there is no real contact between those maintaining them. Real encounters would lead to disconfirmation while violent acts by some members of the 'other' group are taken as proof that the stereotypes held about them are true. In each age it must be asked, 'Who Benefits?'

Keywords

Islamophobia, Anti-west, narratives, 'othering', *cui bono*.

Background

This paper grows out of the current context of conflict in the Middle East, the movement of millions of mainly Muslim refugees, and a rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiment expressed by politicians. Moreover, when he

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invited me to give the 2015 Charles Strong Lecture at the Australian Association for the Study of Religions with the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religions in Queenstown, Norm Habel, chair of the Charles Strong Memorial Trust, said, 'Say something about Islam'. In my academic and professional work focussed on promoting healthy inter-religious relations I am continually confronted with demands to 'explain', 'fix', or otherwise deal with the issue of Christian–Muslim relations (Bouma 2011a). What amazes and concerns me is the readiness on both sides to produce and accept negative images of the 'other' uncritically and without reflexive thought, as well as the effort required to get so many to move beyond their initial suspicions and negativity. This paper addresses one aspect of this negative relationship—the source and persistence of negative discourses of disconnection.

The Western media of the last few years has presented a rising crescendo of negative opinion regarding Islam and Muslims. This focus on negative 'othering' and fear-mongering reflects a general trend in the media over the last decades to be more oriented toward 'outrage' and the dominance of reporting of violence (MEF 2005). We see this particularly in the right wing media, with other outlets also following the pattern. Fitting into this pattern, United States Presidential Candidate Donald Trump calls for Muslims to be barred from entering the country. Similarly, just try building a mosque in many places in Australia, or at 'Ground Zero'. The Reclaim Australia Party argues that 'Islam is violent' and that the Qur'an promotes violence (Whitford 2015). When politicians speak negatively about Islam and Muslims, acts of violence toward them rise dramatically as their comments produce fear and anger. On the other hand, among Muslims we hear from ISL and others in the Middle East that the West is evil, calls to kill the infidel, and other negative claims about the West. As with Western vilification of Islam and Muslims, acts of violence follow from the vilification of the West and Christians by some Muslim leaders.

The readiness to view Islam in a negative and uncritical light is reflected in historical and current affairs accounts that depict the spread of Islam as being 'by the sword' when careful historical accounts describe Islam being spread largely by way of trade and commerce. By contrast the spread of Christianity through the Spanish, British, Dutch, Portuguese, and American empires is often described in entirely irenic terms neglecting the violence involved. These contrasting discourses reflect a narrative proclaiming that 'They' are violent, while 'we' are peaceful and bring good things.

The easy acceptance of negative images of the 'other' on both sides is a serious problem obscuring our capacities to see and hear each other, to deal fairly and honestly with each other, and to shape policy and

international relations in productive ways. Efforts to promote healthy intercultural and interreligious relations and to develop intercultural competences (UNESCO 2013) are hampered by these ready-to-hand negative discourses which prevent genuine encounter and engagement across group lines. One way to understand this issue is to examine the problem as two disconnected discourses of disconnection.

How to Understand Discourses

Cultures make available resources to support and enable, or make difficult, certain patterns of thought and action (Swidler 1986). Cultures do not so much determine as shape, or shift the probabilities of certain actions being taken or lines of thought engaged. Cultures can be seen to be comprised in part of discourses which are created, recreated, and sustained through human interaction but when created they exist prior to interaction and serve to shape it. Discourses are recreated in each instance of shaping such that the emergence of new, and the continuity of prior, work together to produce both the now and the next iteration of the discourse.

Discourses are elements of culture that act rather much like paradigms which offer explanations for some aspects of life and, like paradigms, are largely self-contained, self-sustaining, self-validating, and impervious to disconfirming evidence. Thomas Kuhn (1970) wrote about how paradigms proposed theories which so defined the problem and the methodologies suited to research it as to be impervious to disconfirming evidence. Similarly, narratives are stylised stories, in this case of relationship between groups—told and retold by groups—and which both explain and shape those relationships. These paradigm-like discourses are difficult to disconfirm as they produce the evidence needed for confirmation and ignore contrary evidence.

Some discourses also serve to bolster identity by answering the question, ‘Who are we?’ Often the answer provided is, ‘Well, certainly, not them!’ Clothing, dietary restrictions, and symbols may serve to indicate membership in a particular group. Blue jeans and bikinis are as much symbols of Western identity as hijabs, niqabs, and burkhas are emblems of Muslim identity. In discourses of disconnection incidental ‘differences’ become essentialised and stereotyped as well as filled with meaning not necessarily held by the wearer. Wearing jeans or a bikini does not mean the wearer has loose morals any more than covering for a Muslim woman indicates subservience to males. The sight of these symbols of difference may provoke responses as varied as violence or adopting more extreme forms of identification. For example, the sight of

hijabs worn by some women in Paris may lead some other Parisians to re-assert their Christianity through church attendance, or seeking to ban the symbols of the other.

Cui bono? Negative discourses of disconnection are often used to benefit, or disadvantage, particular groups. Kuhn (1970) also argued that various investments in the benefits of certain paradigms such as career and academic position made scientists likely to ignore disconfirming evidence. The media and particular groups are committed to using these ‘othering’ discourses because they are integral to their career and organisational success, or because it is simply editorial policy. Negative ‘othering discourses’ are seldom disinterested, although they may claim to be independent, unbiased, and objective. Anti-Islam discourses in the West and anti-Western discourses among Muslims are two such discourses. Other similar discourses include ideas of British/White superiority, or Protestant vs Roman Catholic stereotypes used in sectarian conflict, and the current Evangelical anti-gay discourse of vilification. Negative discourses are often promulgated in times of war to legitimate killing the other. Sometimes they last.

In each age it must be asked: ‘Who benefits from this discourse of negative “othering”?’ Today it is often the politically marginal who seek to gain votes through fear-mongering, who scare people into voting for them by threatening them with the violence of the other while promising protection through vigorous battle. Donald Trump is iconic here. He was politically completely marginal. However, his success in becoming the presumptive Republican candidate for President of the United States demonstrates the power of negative, indeed angry and hateful discourses to attract a following. Indeed his successes may legitimate the use of these discourses among the political mainstream and key media outlets. Other marginal parties like Rise up Australia or Reclaim Australia use Anti-Muslim rhetoric as a scare tactic. These efforts mirror those of IS and Hizbut-Tahrir which are marginal groups among Muslims.

These negative discourses of disconnection operate to provide scapegoats to societies and groups. Societies target scapegoats to deny responsibility for their own violence, to turn attention away from their own evil. In scapegoating some other is lumbered with the blame for what is wrong within the society or group. Some groups wishing to divert attention from their own violence find these discourses useful. This includes patriarchs, corporations, and churches—people as well as groups use scapegoating to distance themselves from responsibility. Armstrong argues that much negative discourse about the religious ‘other’ involves scapegoating to distract attention from their own failings (Armstrong 2014).

Americans can be made to be very fearful of Muslims who might engage in violence. But this is using Muslims as scapegoats for the much more likely threat of being shot in a mass shooting or by an irate neighbour. The spectre of terrorist attack is raised when a group seeks to build a mosque and Islamic school in Australia where the likelihood of being the victim of terrorism is greatly exceeded by domestic violence, automobile accidents, or lightning strikes.

These negative discourses of disconnection operate as cultural elements available to anyone to use, while often in the background they serve to shape what is acceptable, what is expected, and what is thinkable about the 'other'. They come into action in times of conflict, uncertainty, or stress. That they are powerful is evidenced by the amount of effort and defence required to state a position that contrasts with them compared with a position that agrees with them. For example, Donald Trump gets a ready acceptance while those noting the error of his thinking are dismissed.

It must also be remembered that these negative discourses are not the dominant themes in either culture (Hassan 2015; Akbarzadeh, Bouma, and Woodlock 2008). They are there, but are not the core narratives. Narrative discourses promoting and motivating justice, peace, mercy, and other values that promote sustainability rather than belligerence dominate or the cultures would not have survived. For example, while the media are given to extremes, research among young Australians found that negative attitudes toward Muslims were not only mixed with but dominated by a 'guarded optimism' about relations with Muslims and the role of Muslims in Australia (Halafoff 2011; Lentini, Halafoff and Ogru 2011). Similarly, Woodlock (2011) reports that Australian Muslims far from holding negative views about the West strongly value both Australian and Muslim identities. Yet, though not dominant, these negative discourses do exist and are used to divide and diminish.

This paper is not an argument in favour of the culture wars theory of Huntington (1996). These cultures are not at war in the global sense put forward by Huntington. War requires interaction, engagement, and confrontation. These cultures are not even in interaction, for the most part. They do not meet, address each other, or communicate. They are disconnected discourses of disconnection. They are distinct, self-maintaining sets of cultural elements—slogans, memories, and orientations—ready to be used to the advantage of particular persons or groups within the cultures and do not even seek to serve the good of the culture within which they are located or the society that sustains them. They maintain conflict only in so far as it benefits their sub-group within the culture.

These features of disconnected negative discourses also point to the approaches needed to overcome them. Genuine encounter in which each learns of the other is critical to overcoming negative sentiments (Jackson 2004; UNESCO 2013). The disconnection is critical to the maintenance of negative discourses as actually meeting and engaging with the 'other' provides contradictory evidence. This fact is reflected in the oft heard statement, 'I do not like or approve of X, but my friend/neighbour/relative who is an X is perfectly alright'. Far from breeding contempt, familiarity dispels fear, misconceptions, and stereotypes.

This paper does not engage in a detailed theological examination of the claims in these negative discourses nor does it engage in a detailed intellectual history of their development. It is rather a sociological consideration of the role of cultural elements in social conflict with a view to understanding current sources of strife. Such an understanding may also help in supporting the efforts of those who seek peace in a time of war.

The Anti-Western/Anti-Muslim Discourses

The mirrored, but disconnected negative discourses available in Christian and Muslim cultures have been active since at least the time of the Crusades (Lyons 2012; Tyerman 2006). Prior to the Crusades the focus for the 'West' was more often Saracens, or other national groups. With the Crusades the focus on 'religious' difference was highlighted and became central. These were not just wars between nations, or federations, but between religions. Both Christian and Muslim forms of this negative discourse developed and promoted highly emotive colourful apocalyptic visions, hopes, and fears (Fenn 2006).

Muslim cultures maintain the image of the West as the Great Satan, the source of all evil and things going wrong. The West is seen as immoral, seeking to undermine and destroy Muslim nations. The West has done us great damage and has insinuated itself into politics in Muslim countries, for example, in the Middle East. Every bomb dropped in Syria or Afghanistan gives more evidence in support of this discourse. The same is true of negative political rhetoric engaged in by Western leaders.

On the other hand, Western mistrust of Islam takes the form of Islamophobic discourses promoting fear, dread, and hatred of Islam and Muslims (Pratt and Woodlock 2016; Hassan 2015). This negative discourse depicts Islam as a violent religion, cruel to women, and intent on taking over in the West. This discourse can also be seen as a case of projection (Lyons 2012), where the West sees in the other the image of its own evil. Of course, events like 9/11, or suicide bombings, and other violence feeds this negative discourse with supporting evidence. Excesses by minorities are treated as applicable to all.

Having already studied islamophobia and reviewed Islamophobic literature (Bouma 2011b; Lyons 2012), in order to get a clear sense of contemporary anti-Western discourses I consulted several Muslim colleagues regarding the anti-Western discourses among Muslims. In doing this I discovered that the anti-Islamic and the anti-Western discourses have very similar structures. Funk and Said (2004) observe that both discourses ask 'Why do they hate us?'. The mirrored (they are not shared) basic narrative structure of these discourses can be outlined in this way. The Western or Muslim 'Other' is:

- Religiously wrong—each 'other' is accused of worshiping idols, or a wrong god, or of being a polytheist, or of not being a religion at all but a political ideology, part of a political conspiracy.
- Accused of unjustified intrusion in 'Our' affairs, or territory: They are illegally on our land. They have violated X by stationing troops there. They should not be here. They are taking our jobs. They are likely to undermine our way of life, engage in terrorism.
- Accused of having a double standard regarding their leaders: They have immoral leaders, they are violent, they are corrupt, and they lie to secure their goals and cannot be trusted.
- Accused of being morally lax and or/ incredibly strict: They wear bikinis. They promote the bellydance. They wear hijabs. They marry off their children at very early ages. They beat their wives.
- Demonised in conspiracy theories which abound: They faked the 'Twin Towers Collapse'. They seek to undermine our way of life. They want to overthrow our government.
- Blamed for our violence: 'If it were not for you we could be at peace'. 'We' view any instance of violence committed by any 'other' as evidence about the violent nature of each and all of the 'others'.
- Required to change (not us): They need a 'reformation'. 'We' think that each and all of 'them' have to change on account of the actions of a few. They need to be more religious/less religious. They need to be more accepting of us. They need to learn about us.
- Of the view that the media are against 'Us', paint an unfair picture of us, cast us in a bad light, and are unwilling to be sharply critical of 'them'.
- Feels under attack: 'We' are victims of their violence, plots, terrorism, and territorial ambition and as a result 'We' consider our attacks on the 'other' as justified self-defence.

Discourses of disconnection and 'othering' often emerge to legitimate war or denigrate an enemy by dehumanising 'them' in order to legitimate violence against humans. 'They' become 'enemies', threats, and less than human. 'They' engage in horrific acts, while we fight fairly. Such

discourses are clearly evident in the rhetoric, actions, and rationales given for violence among such groups as the Islamic State, Boko Haram, The Lord's Liberation Army, The Spanish Inquisition, and Anti-Islamic movements in Europe, Australia, and the USA. For some, 'othering' persists for centuries (Armstrong 2014).

A Way Forward

The legacy of these discourses of disconnection includes the fact that many Muslims and Christians have an inbuilt readiness to distrust the other; a willingness to believe the worst about each other; a resistance to hearing good news about the other; an armoury of horror stories about the other and few uplifting and positive stories; a blindness to their own faults and a profound resistance to disconfirming evidence. All of this can only be undone by real and respectful encounters which can build up layers of new experiences that provide the basis for building trust, healing wounds, and finding peace.

Narratives of difference and disconnection are maintained through being used for vested interests, by politicians looking for a vote, and by groups feeling deprived or denied access seeking a scapegoat. Each time negative discourses of disconnection are invoked they are recreated and renewed. Hence the particular ugliness of Trump and his ilk. These discourses are maintained with minor variations over long periods of time because there is no real contact between the groups involved. Neither group meets, nor listens to the other. The way forward lies in promoting genuine encounters which are shown to lead to disconfirmation and to more realistic and nuanced views. There is a pressing need for education about religions (Bouma 2011b; Bouma and Halafoff 2009; Jackson 2004; Engebretson et al. 2010) that is delivered through and grounded in respectful encounters in which each person is allowed and encouraged to be and express their religious self, to listen to the other respectfully, to save judgement for another time. Even as there are groups using these discourses, efforts to counter them are found at all levels of society in interfaith groups, cultural awareness training sessions for professionals, and service providers and schools.

In short we need education to develop intercultural competences. 'Intercultural competences are abilities to adeptly navigate complex environments marked by a growing diversity of peoples, cultures and lifestyles' (UNESCO 2013: 5). Intercultural competences include: Respect, Self-awareness, being able to see from the perspective of the 'other', Listening, Adaptation, Relationship building, and Cultural humility (2013: 24). Education designed to develop these competences is being promoted

in the European Union (Jackson 2004, 2014), and Australia through new national and state curricula, and through in-service cultural sensitivity and anti-bullying campaigns. Through research-grounded efforts like these, disconnected negative discourses of disconnection are being dismantled.

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