

Islam between Acceptance and Rejection in Media and Literature

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Towards Religious Interfaith

Edited by

Abdelaaziz El Bakkali

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INTRODUCTION

ABDELAAZIZ EL BAKKALI

MEDIA AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ASU, US

In mainstream media and literature, the engendering impulse of the perception of religion disengages most complex imageries. These varying portrayals are often rooted in historical, political, and cultural factors, which can result in biases and cultural misunderstandings and influence how meanings are reproduced in literature and other forms of media. Within this interplay, Islam is consumed in a complex and multifaceted issue that often reflects broader societal attitudes through instances where the religion faces rejection, ranging from simplistic and one-dimensional portrayals of Muslims as fanatics to more subtle forms of discrimination and marginalization, thus perpetuating harmful stereotypes but also contributing to Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslim communities. Occasionally, however, Islam is seen through examples of acceptance and positive lights, where it is depicted as a diverse and rich faith tradition with values of peace, compassion, and social justice, wherein Muslim characters are shown as individuals with enough strengths, flaws, and experiences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the religion and its followers.

As religious interfaith should surmount various constructs, new portraits persist as significant hubs for generating both conflict and peace. To deconstruct such literary and media images, this book, *Islam Between Acceptance and Rejection in Media and Literature: Towards Religious Interfaith*, examines the circulation of these constructs, explaining their existence by analyzing their possible impact on the public. Studying some of the damaging misperceptions resulting from their circulation and consumption, this book fills a much-needed research gap by delving into how the circulation of these images reproduces issues of Islamic fear, identity, and culture. Additionally, it tries to discuss the issue of reception, representation, and consumption by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, relying specifically on relevant research designs to reveal alternative possibilities of some of the existing perceptions. The book shows how religious topics have been widely debated and circulated in various accounts

in the Western discourse, and that Islam has been conceived as one of the major concerns for many critics and writers, taking it as a reason behind violent troubles in the West. Islam is mainly reported with hostility and often viewed as a motto to echo threat and terror in the Muslim collective consciousness. As religion is encountered across various contexts, many portraits remain significant venues for generating both conflict and peace through demeaning constructs of ideology. To deconstruct the literary and screen images of Muslims in the West, this book examines the circulation of these constructs, explaining their existence by analyzing their potential impact on the public.

Although Islam's relationship with the West has been overburdened with rivalries and marred by conflicts, the religion is still reported as being sometimes "evil," while some other religions are mostly looked at as bringing welfare to the world. Allen Palmer (2001) contends that, from the Middle Ages' Christian crusades to the fatwa on Salman Rushdie at the millennium's close, the predominantly Christian communities of both Western Europe and North America have been suspicious and fearful of Muslims, whom they found antithetical to their traditions. Edward Said (1978) asserts that negative images of Islam have been created with the idea to transmit various Orientalist flashes about an inherited hatred against Islam. Much in current representations of Islam, Keskin argues, is designed to show the religion's inferiority to the West, which Islam is supposed to be hell-bent on opposing, competing with, resenting, and being enraged at. Likewise, Keskin (2018) asserts that, conceptualizing a global discussion of Orientalism based on a theoretical approach to the concept, many scholars have offered criticisms of the Western academic discourse, in which Orientalism (1978) "produced a sea change and provided the theoretical foundations for critical studies of colonialism, imperialism, and other subaltern studies (2)." Islamic systems and ideas are reported as unfit for the West, and, therefore, its believers are considered "strangers" to Western culture. These images are found at the heart of Western visuals, which have long subjugated and maligned Islam and Muslims. Misconceptions about Islam, El Bakkali (2026) argues, penetrate all forms of the visual reach out to mass audiences, transmitting fictitious images that go beyond the real faith and doctrine of Islam. Hippler and Lueg (1995) contend that "Clichés and stereotypes about Islam have held fast over centuries in all societies, and have been passed on from generation to generation and become deeply rooted (p.26)." People in the West receive misconceptions about Islam and, by repetition, they associate Islam with false generalizations and create religious boundaries between the Orient and the Occident. Following this Western conception, Hippler and Lueg assert that "Islam nonetheless

terrifies us as a religion-- and it is precisely through these religious elements, to which we restrict our perception, that the rift between the Orient and the Occident is made even deeper (p.21).” With such perceptions and imageries, Islam stands as a lasting trauma to the West.

Following the tradition of literary production, this book shows how the use of visual motifs to circulate new constructs for different peoples and cultures has often been at the heart of the media’s concerns to articulate new ideas and ideologies. Shohat and Stam (2003) argue that different media representations show people’s cultural identities within the affiliated community, which the Western project aims to de-orientalize. By facilitating a mediated engagement with distant places, they contend, the media partially de-territorialize the process of imagining communities. For them, while media can fashion spectators into atomized consumers or self-entertaining monads, they can also construct identity and alternative affiliations, just as media can exoticize and otherize cultures; thus, they can also reflect and help catalyze multicultural affiliations and transnational identification. Thus, Western media, according to Stephenson (2017), have continued to portray other identities, mainly Muslim individuals, as a geographically centered and ideologically homogenous racial group, constructed as non-white, non-Christian “others” that are incompatible with the dominant society. These various acts serve to put a frame whereby other cultural frames, including religious identities, are prone to the manipulating process of media forms, where cinema, for example, appears very relevant to lead the catalyzing operation of mass representation.

In conclusion, the book *Islam Between Acceptance and Rejection in Media and Literature* attempts to enrich advanced academic research on Islam to critically engage with notions of an Islamic state, interfaith, religious freedom, peace/violence, acceptance and rejection, and non-religious forms of interdisciplinary perspective. The book tries to open enough room for writers, film critics, digital lives, as well as faculty and students to delve into a constructive dialogue about the very nature of rhetorical styles of Islam.

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PART I:

**RELIGIOUS INTERFAITH:
PEACE AND CONFLICT**

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE POLITICS OF APOCALYPSE: TOWARD CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

YOUSSEF EL KAIDI

Abstract

Religious and interdenominational differences have long fueled sectarian conflicts, often manifesting as violence and terrorism. Diverging theological principles shape contrasting worldviews on divinity, prophecy, and eschatology, complicating reconciliation efforts. The Abrahamic faiths, for instance, share apocalyptic prophecies envisioning the destruction of perceived adversaries- seen in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic narratives like Armageddon, the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple, and Al-Malhama al-Kubra. These eschatological discourses, widely accepted as truth, have influenced global politics, fostering prejudice, exclusion, and conflict. This paper examines and compares such religious narratives, exploring their impact on political landscapes and their role in obstructing cross-cultural understanding. When competing apocalyptic narratives in Abrahamic religions are politicized, they exacerbate interfaith conflict and jeopardize world peace. The paper suggests that religious prosocial values such as altruism, empathy, and justice offer a path to global peace through demythologized dialogue.

Keywords: Armageddon; apocalyptic; eschatology; religion; Christianity; Islam; Judaism; dialogue.

1. Introduction

When Samuel P. Huntington introduced his "Clash of Civilizations" thesis in 1993, he envisioned a world characterized by inter-civilizational antagonism, where cultural and civilizational fault lines would erupt into violent confrontations and conflicts. "In the post-Cold War world," he asserts, "the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural" (1993, 21). Huntington conceived

civilizations as being fundamentally different, and this difference serves as the culprit for inevitable inter-civilizational clashing. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York breathed new life into Huntington's thesis, which had previously been dismissed by esteemed scholars and political theorists (Edward Said, Naom Chomsky, Amartya Sen, Tarik Ali, and Fred Halliday, to name a few) as simplistic, reductionist, inaccurate, misleading, and destructive. The dramatic assault on the World Trade Center and the subsequent US-led "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan seemed to many as the prelude to what Huntington referred to as the Clash of Civilizations, particularly when U.S. President George Bush invoked the term "crusade" to describe the retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan.

In this discussion, I will not delve into the theoretical premises of Huntington's thesis or attempt to disprove them as overly simplistic, for these endeavors have already been exhaustively and brilliantly undertaken by renowned scholars who have produced seminal works on the subject over the past three decades. However, I believe that Huntington deserves some credit for admonishing the world about the perilous repercussions of inter-civilizational conflict. Despite the scathing criticism his hypothesis has received for its "oversimplification of world order", it is widely accepted that distinct civilizations do indeed exist, characterized by fundamental differences that, if emphasized, could trigger conflict and violence. In his essay, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," Bernard Lewis argues that if civilizations clash, it is usually because their distinct cultural and religious values are perceived not merely as different, but as incompatible and threatening. Therefore, such perceptions can easily be manipulated, turning misunderstanding into antagonism and hostility. (1990). Similarly, Edward Said, who scathingly criticized Huntington in an essay entitled "The Clash of Ignorance," recognizes the fundamental differences between cultures and civilization in the sense that cultures and civilizations, as historical realities, do indeed differ profoundly; yet, to him, the problem arises when these differences are essentialized, exaggerated or weaponized to justify confrontation or oppression (1993). Religious extremists and political bigots exploit cultural differences to propagate discourses of fear, hatred, and xenophobia, thereby endorsing Huntington's theoretical framework, which resonates with them on ideological and emotional levels.

For instance, evangelical Christian Zionists, some of whom hold influential political positions, make fatalistic declarations about the future of civilizations, fervently believing in the supremacy and validity of their biblical prophecy that the gathering of Jews in Palestine and the establishment of their independent state there are prerequisites for the

second coming of Jesus Christ. Their beliefs are rooted in dispensationalism¹ and they tend to “interpret Bible prophecy more or less literally,” firmly believing that “the nation of Israel will play a central role in the unfolding of end times events,” as Timothy T. Weber states (2004, 9). These people make up one third of America’s forty or fifty million evangelical Christians, according to Weber. Now that the state of Israel is established, many such evangelicals believe that their Biblical prophecies are materializing. Mike Evans, for instance, affirms in this respect that “those who have compared biblical prophecy with current world events have become convinced that ‘the last days’ spoken of by the prophets are upon us now” and that “the Middle East crisis will continue to escalate until it threatens the peace of the whole world,” eventually bringing all the nations to “the precipice—to Armageddon” (1983, 104). Likewise, Muslim jihadists, through (mis)interpretations of core Islamic texts and their call for a “holy war” against the West, follow a similar Armageddonian path that ultimately leads to inter-civilizational confrontation and destruction. In his 1996 fatwa (religious edict), Oussama Ben Laden called for global jihad against the US and its allies, stating “We-with God’s help-call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.” (1996). Such religious rhetoric, which exercises significant political influence today as ever, risks fanning the flames of a clash of civilizations in a religious sense. Nationalist revivalism, both within Judeo-Christian and Islamic contexts, expresses discontent with the socio-political present and seeks to resurrect a ‘utopian past,’ at times resorting to ‘divinely sanctioned’ violence against those perceived as the fearful Other. As religion assumes a central role in the lives of hundreds of millions of individuals across the world, “the political power generated by this commitment will either lead to a more peaceful world or a more violent world, depending on how that power is wielded,” as aptly stated by Marc Gopin (2000, 35). In an increasingly interconnected world, the imperative for intercultural dialogue to avert any potential clash between civilizations has never been of more urgency.

The diversity of cultures, religions, and beliefs on the global stage offers both opportunities and challenges for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. However, amidst this global tapestry of diverse perspectives, religious fundamentalism, exclusivism, and dogmatism have emerged as

¹ Dispensationalism is a theological framework within Protestant Christianity that interprets the Bible as a series of distinct “dispensations,” or periods of time, during which God interacts differently with humanity. It is most associated with evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant traditions.

significant barriers to intercultural dialogue. Religious fundamentalism, characterized by a strict adherence to specific religious doctrines and a perceived inerrancy of scripture, often clashes with the principles of intercultural dialogue, which emphasizes mutual understanding, respect, and the recognition of diverse perspectives (Imam et al., 2017). The belief in an impending Armageddon, a final battle between good and evil, can exacerbate these tensions, creating an environment where compromise and understanding are seen as signs of weakness or betrayal of religious principles. This eschatological framework can lead to a rejection of secular values and a resistance to engaging with those who do not share the same religious beliefs, viewing them as either misguided or actively aligned with the forces of evil (Pratt, 2020). However, the prosocial and peace-oriented elements within religions, such as compassion, forgiveness, and altruism, can be invested in intercultural dialogue to establish a common ground of shared commitments and goals. These positive religious tenets can serve as a foundation for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths, transcending the divisive forces of religious fundamentalism. By emphasizing the shared values of peace, empathy, and goodwill that are central to many religious traditions, intercultural dialogue can help bridge differences and promote a more harmonious and inclusive society. In what follows, I begin by examining the theological bases and historical roots of apocalyptic prophecies in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, highlighting how literalist or exclusivist readings can fuel religious fundamentalism. I then explore specific instances- both historical and contemporary- where these end-time beliefs have intersected with politics, often intensifying interfaith tensions and legitimizing conflict. Building on these examples, I consider how the religionization of politics and the politicization of religion can undermine efforts to nurture and promote intercultural understanding. Finally, I turn to the more constructive dimensions of religious teachings, proposing that an emphasis on prosocial values and demythologized interpretations of sacred texts offers a path toward genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and sustainable peace across cultural and religious boundaries.

2. Apocalyptic Eschatology and Religious Fundamentalism

Religious conflicts have often served as catalysts for destructive wars and conflicts, shaping civilizations and redirecting the course of history in many subtle ways. Prominent examples include the Crusades from the 11th to 13th centuries, the Thirty Years War between Protestants and Catholics in

Europe from 1618 to 1648, the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990, the Yugoslav War from 1991 to 2001, and the Sudanese Civil War from 1983 to 2005, among others. According to Marc Gopin, there is an abundance of historical evidence pointing to religious violence, particularly emanating from Western religions or Abrahamic monotheistic faiths. He states: “We need not deny the damage that has been done in history by Abrahamic religions that other and exclude or incriminate. The evidence is clear, and the danger of recurrence should be obvious to anyone familiar with the range of religious actors today” (2002, 59). In fact, many of the most stubborn tensions in today’s international relations can be traced back to religious factors. The Arab-Israeli conflict serves as a prime example. Israel’s claim to ‘its ancient land’ is not solely based on nationalistic and political aspirations but is deeply rooted in religious convictions. John Hagee, the founder and National Chairman of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), the largest pro-Israel organization in the United States, affirms in this respect:

Israel belongs to God Himself. As Creator of heaven and earth, God had the right of ownership to give the land to whomever He chose. God gave the title deed for the land of Israel to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants ‘forever.’ Ishmael, father of Arabs, was excluded from the title deed to the land in Genesis 17:19-21. Therefore, modern-day Palestinians have no Biblical mandate to own the land. (2006, 196)

Similarly, the unwavering attachment of Muslims to the city of Jerusalem is undeniably motivated by religious beliefs. The city is considered the third holiest site in Islam, home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock Mosque, “the spot from which Mohamad had ascended to heaven, as can be seen by his footprint left in the Rock” (Weber, 2004, 162). Just as religion has shaped the past and present, the prophecies within the three Abrahamic religions also indicate that religion will continue to play a significant role in future transformative events that mark the end of the current era. The Christian belief in the Rapture², the Jewish messianic age, and the Islamic concept of the Mahdi all point to apocalyptic scenarios where the forces of good battle the forces of evil. These competing end-times prophecies, coupled with the deep religious significance of Jerusalem for the three Abrahamic religions, heighten the potential for clashes between civilizations as each faith seeks to assert its own vision of the world’s final

² “Rapture” is a belief held primarily within evangelical Protestantism, particularly in dispensationalist theology, concerning the end times. Rapture refers to the event when faithful Christians, both living and resurrected, are believed to be caught up into the sky to meet Christ before a period of tribulation on Earth.

days. This eschatological framework can further inflame religious tensions and make compromise or peaceful coexistence more difficult, as adherents to these beliefs see their religious teachings as paramount, regardless of the consequences. Hence, navigating these complex and overlapping prophecies will be a critical challenge in promoting interfaith dialogue and avoiding the descent into devastating religious conflicts. Given the growing interest in apocalyptic eschatology among followers of the three Abrahamic religions, along with the troubling rise of religious fundamentalism, there is a sense that the world is moving closer to the fateful battle of Armageddon. Some believe that this cataclysmic event will bring about the ultimate destruction of those considered enemies of God, often identified as followers of other religions based on respective beliefs. Parallel to these visions is the notion of salvation for the faithful few who remain true to the one God, regardless of the name by which that God is known.

Apocalyptic eschatology encompasses the beliefs and teachings within the three Abrahamic religions regarding the end times, final judgment, and the ultimate destiny of humanity and the world. While common themes exist, there are also distinct differences in eschatological beliefs among these religions, rendering them fundamentally irreconcilable. In Judaism, the concept of an end-time is not as prominent as in Christianity and Islam. However, references are made to the coming of a messianic figure, known as the Messiah, who will bring about a time of peace and redemption referred to as the “Messianic Age” or the “World to Come.” The current planetary turbulences are seen by many evangelicals as the birth pains of that Messianic era, as John Hagee contends:

The world and Israel are now having contractions (wars, rumors of wars, acts of terrorism, bloodshed and violence around the globe) that will produce a new Messianic Era. [...] We are racing toward the end of the age. Messiah is coming much sooner than you think. (2006, 98-99).

Jewish eschatology focuses more on the establishment of God’s kingdom on Earth after the rebuilding of the third temple, rather than a specific end of the world. The intriguing question here is: where will this prophesied third temple be built? According to longstanding Jewish beliefs, the temple should be rebuilt on the Temple Mount, or Al-Haram al-Sharīf as Muslims call it, exactly where the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock mosque currently stand. This central location in Jerusalem holds immense spiritual significance for both Judaism and Islam, leading to complex and often contentious disputes over the future of this holy site. The potential for conflict stems from the competing claims of each faith to this sacred ground.

While Jews see it as the rightful place for the restoration of the Jewish temple, Muslims consider it their first Qibla (direction of prayer) and home to some of their most sacred shrines. These divergent beliefs and assertions of religious legitimacy have created a fragile environment where any disruption to the status quo is interpreted as an attack on religious identity. Consequently, the tension between Jews and Muslims is on a knife-edge and could easily tip into violence.

In Christianity, Armageddon symbolizes the climactic and decisive conflict between the forces of good and those of evil. It represents the final confrontation between God and the powers of darkness, or the Beast and his followers, who will meet their complete and horrifying destruction. This event is seen as the precursor to the second coming of Jesus Christ and the culmination of God's redemptive plan for humanity. As the New Testament states in the book of Revelation, "And they gathered them together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon" (Revelation 16:16). This reference to the battlefield of Armageddon underscores the magnitude and finality of the upcoming clash between the righteous and the wicked. According to Christian theology, this decisive battle will mark the end of the current world order and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on Earth. As the religious scholar Tim LaHaye (2009) explains, Armageddon represents the final great battle between the forces of good and evil, with Christ and his armies defeating the Antichrist and his followers, ushering in the millennial reign of Christ on Earth. This apocalyptic vision instills a profound sense of urgency and the need for spiritual preparedness among the faithful as they await the culmination of this cosmic conflict.

In Islam, the "Great Battle" or *al-Malhama al-Kubrā* is derived from various hadiths and Islamic scriptures. It portrays a monumental and intense conflict between the forces of good and those of evil. It is believed that a messianic figure known as the Mahdi will emerge to lead the believers in the fight against evil forces. Following divine intervention, the forces of good (Muslims) will emerge victorious to establish justice and righteousness. This will lead to the renewal of the earth, where peace and prosperity will prevail, ushering in a new era of Muslim triumph. The notion of the Mahdi archetype, as exemplified in various cultural expressions like the film *Dune* (2021), shares notable thematic parallels with the Islamic figure of Imam Mahdi (Vedadi, 2023). The prophesied Imam Mahdi is expected to arise and lead an army of righteous individuals in a decisive battle against the forces of evil, bringing about a triumph of justice and peace on Earth. In addition, the prophecies often mention specific signs and events that will precede the arrival of the Mahdi and the Great Battle, which some interpret as global

conflicts, natural disasters, and moral decay. (Ernst, 2012). The current geopolitical turbulence in the Middle East, manifesting in cycles of violence and counter violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the planetary ecological decline are interpreted by various Muslim clerics as signs of the imminent Final Battle. Viral videos of people claiming to be the Mahdi continue to circulate on social media and attract millions of views and comments, bespeaking the rootedness of eschatological discourse and its effect on the masses.

The notion that divine triumph is bestowed exclusively upon the followers of each faith, while disregarding those of other beliefs, is both remarkable and paradoxical. In this vein, Karen Armstrong observes that the Abrahamic religions, stemming from Abraham's family, crystallized into three distinct religions- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet, their "histories and versions of the story have been contentious, bitter, violent" (Armstrong, 2006, xiv). Each of the three Abrahamic faiths believes that it alone has a monopoly on the truth and that the others are in error. This sense of divine favor, where salvation is granted as a reward for faithfulness, creates a fundamental contradiction, as each religion claims exclusivity in receiving this divine reward or salvation, leaving followers of other faiths excluded or condemned. For instance, the Christian belief in the "rapture" envisions the righteous being "caught up" to heaven, while the unbelievers are left behind to face the tribulations of the apocalypse (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Similarly, in Islam, the concept of the Mahdi and the "Final Battle" between good and evil emphasizes the victory of the faithful over the forces of unbelief. These divergent eschatological visions, rooted in the sacred texts and teachings of each faith, serve to intensify inter-religious conflicts, leading to antagonism, disagreement, and hostility, as each group "seeks to assert its own vision of the world's final days" (Haddad & Smith, 2010).

Religious fundamentalists interpret apocalyptic and end-times prophecies literally, using them to advance their agendas by emphasizing their urgency and significance. They exploit the idea of an impending end times scenario to rally support, mobilize followers, and instill a sense of unity and purpose (Rashid, 2024). A striking example of this phenomenon can be observed during the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 when numerous international jihadists flocked to Syria, viewing the events as a precursor to the prophesied "Great Battle." ISIS systematically incorporated end-time motifs and rhetoric into their propaganda campaigns, utilizing a wide array of apocalyptic elements and references to recruit new jihadists. Believing in the imminent arrival of the end times, ISIS constructed a narrative to position itself as the vanguard of an impending apocalyptic battle. They

claimed to be fulfilling prophecies and heralding the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate as a precursor to the final eschatological events. The atrocious acts of violence they perpetrated against those they deemed “*kuffar*” (infidels/enemies of Islam) were justified as part of a cosmic struggle prophesied in Islamic texts. Similarly, Christian Zionism, both as a theological doctrine and a fundamentalist religious movement, employs biblical literalism in its interpretation of apocalyptic eschatology. It asserts that Old Testament prophecies regarding the Jewish people are being fulfilled in the contemporary state of Israel. This literalist approach is justified on the basis that “the prophets of the Bible did not peddle vague and general predictions that could be adjusted to any situation. The prophecies recorded in the Bible are detailed and intricately interwoven,” as articulated by John F. Walvoord (1990, 21). Consequently, Israel’s occupation and settlements in the West Bank, Golan, and Gaza are considered justified according to biblical premises. In this context, Grace Halsell rhetorically questions, “What is the message of the Christian Zionist? Simply stated, it is this: every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God and should be condoned, supported, and even praised by the rest of us” (1988, 31). The ultimate objective of Christian Zionism, as expressed by Rabbi Shlomo Avenir, is the construction of the Temple. He states “We should not forget that the supreme purpose of the ingathering of exiles and the establishment of our state is the building of the Temple. The Temple is at the very top of the pyramid.” (qtd. in Sizer 2006, 17). The rebuilding of the third Temple, as depicted in the Old Testament, is believed to signal the end of the time of the Gentiles in Jerusalem and is perceived to be “only years away” (Walvoord 1990, 44) after the emergence of Israel and the ensuing struggle for international power in the Middle East.

In examining religious fundamentalism more broadly, several scholars offer nuanced perspectives that highlight both doctrinal and sociopolitical underpinnings. For instance, Karen Armstrong argues that “modern fundamentalism is not simply a return to the past; it is a reaction against the perceived godlessness of the modern world,” (2000, 177) emphasizing that fundamentalist currents often arise in response to sweeping social changes, economic uncertainty, and a quest for identity. Similarly, John L. Esposito underscores the complexity of Islamic revivalism by pointing out how many Muslims- rather than being driven purely by eschatological motives- respond to “real or perceived political and socioeconomic grievances” (2002, 69). Emmanuel Sivan, in his study of radical movements, likewise draws attention to the interplay between medieval theological constructs and “modern political frustrations and aspirations” (1990, 18), underscoring that today’s fundamentalist discourse frequently repurposes historical

symbols as rallying cries for contemporary struggles. By comparing diverse scholarly perspectives with more literalistic interpretations, it becomes evident that fundamentalist understandings of apocalyptic prophecies thrive in environments where issues of identity, power dynamics, and resistance intersect. These political and cultural forces significantly shape how believers apprehend both the present reality and the anticipated end times scenarios. This is not to say that interreligious polemics is the sole factor but to show that messianic beliefs may at times owe more to socio-religious concerns than to religious polemics (Taghavi, 2019). They may also be rooted in sociopolitical and psychological factors. Periods of political instability, economic hardship, or perceived injustice frequently create a climate of fear and uncertainty, prompting individuals to gravitate toward more rigid ideologies that promise certainty and communal identity. When people feel disenfranchised, under threat, or stripped of agency by external powers- be they occupying forces, oppressive regimes, or distant global institutions- they may interpret religious teachings through a lens of resistance, retribution, or nationalistic fervor. Similarly, the quest for a clear sense of self and purpose can draw individuals toward fundamentalist groups that offer a strong collective identity and a unifying narrative of cosmic struggle. These underlying conditions attest to the fact that fundamentalism cannot be reduced to theology alone. Rather, it is often the product of intersecting social, economic, and political currents that transform religious belief into a vehicle for confronting perceived grievances and validating collective aspirations. The complex interplay of these factors warrants recognition in any effort to foster effective and respectful interfaith dialogue.

3. The Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics

The theological visions of conflict in the end times exert a significant influence on contemporary politics, and the intersection and intertwining of theology and politics can contribute to interfaith and sectarian conflicts and hinder intercultural dialogue. Various religious groups strive to assert their influence or challenge the status quo, leading to the politicization of religion which frequently results in exclusionary policies, discrimination, or the marginalization of specific religious communities. This dynamic is deeply intertwined with political agendas that utilize religious identities and symbols to consolidate power, create in-group cohesion, and simultaneously marginalize perceived out-groups. Discussing the idea of “The Chosen People of God” as a Jewish belief, Hide contends that this “specific

viewpoint enables them [the Jews] to legitimize a vast range of extreme acts, even the use of terror to achieve their objectives, as long as they coincide with God's guidelines" (2014, 185) Such practices foster environments where religious minorities are systematically disadvantaged or even explicitly targeted by state policy. Liow further emphasizes that religious nationalism often leads to exclusionary and discriminatory practices as it emphasizes purity and homogeneity within the nation-state, inevitably marginalizing minority religious groups who do not fit neatly into the dominant religious identity. He states in this regard:

Religious nationalism [...] is premised on the idea that religiosity and patriotism can weave together in a manner that gives rise to a narrative which articulates a confessional perspective of nationhood. At its extreme, however, [...] a heightened religious discourse potentially results in identity diffusion within the nation-state along religious lines, where confessional claims engender the creation of in-group and out-group identities (2016, 135).

The implication here is that political movements or regimes grounded in religious nationalism inherently define national belonging in restrictive terms, thereby embedding exclusion into the fabric of political governance. This phenomenon illustrates how religious politicization transcends ideological discourse, directly influencing policies that materially affect the lives and freedoms of marginalized communities. Policymakers and political elites exploit religious sentiment to establish and reinforce societal hierarchies, fundamentally shaping socio-political landscapes in ways that disadvantage and marginalize particular religious groups. One illustrative example of this phenomenon is evident in US policies in the Middle East, particularly concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many American politicians perceive Israel as having a divinely ordained mandate to occupy Palestine. Colin Chapman (2002) observes the exceptional entanglement of politics, the 'dirty business' as Edward Said calls it, and religion in the Israeli-Palestinian context, noting that scriptures have a profound effect on political action. Echoing this point, the late American President Jimmy Carter astutely remarks on the political ramifications of scriptural teachings. He states: "Tragically for 'the People of the Book' who profess to worship the same God, the scriptures are a source of more difference than agreement, inspiring more hatred than love, more war than peace" (p. 4). President Ronald Reagan, for instance, strongly believed in prophetic eschatology and the Armageddon battle. He was quoted in the San Diego Magazine in 1971 saying "Libya has now gone communist, and that's a sign that the day of Armageddon is not far off... For the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ." (qtd. in

Sizer 2006, 110) Reagan expressed his convictions about the imminence of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ on multiple occasions (Hummel, 2016). Reagan's presidency substantially boosted Christian Zionism and its cause, with prominent figures like Attorney General Ed Meese, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, and Secretary of the Interior James Watt subscribing to futurist premillennial theology and Christian Zionism (qtd. in Halsell 1986, 47). President Donald Trump also declared his pro-Zionist stance and solidified his support for the movement through several decisions during his first mandate, including recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, supporting Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, which had faced strong opposition from Israel. The influence of these political leaders reflects the deep-rooted connections between Christian eschatology, Zionism, and the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Believing that Jerusalem is "the city of God" where the Armageddon Battle will be fought, John Hagee vehemently argues that "Jerusalem is not to be divided, again, for any reason, with anyone" (2006, 25-26). This perspective underscores the profound significance that apocalyptic beliefs hold for some Christian and political leaders, shaping their policies and strategies in the region. Thus, when examining the complexities of the Middle East, it is crucial to acknowledge the ways in which religious narratives, particularly apocalyptic beliefs, may inform and influence political decision-making, thereby contributing to conflicts and shaping the dynamics of intercultural interactions.

The religionization of politics and politicization of religion have significant implications for international relations, intercultural dialogue, and world peace. Jacob Wiren is critical of some theologians who distort some religious concepts like the Kingdom of God for "intra-worldly concerns," concluding that seeing this concept as political "ruins it" (2018, 72). "The Kingdom of God," he argues, "is not a political norm of political activity, but it is a moral norm of that activity" (2018, 72). When religion becomes inextricably entangled with politics, it transforms into a divisive political tool that exacerbates tensions, conflicts, and animosity between nations and religions. The instrumentalization of religion for political ends creates polarization, pushing individuals toward more extreme positions and ideologies, thereby creating fertile ground for radicalization and extremism. The entanglement between religious and political objectives can also foster an environment conducive to the systematic marginalization, persecution, and even violent repression of minority communities and dissident voices that do not align with the prevailing religious or political orthodoxy.

4. Religion's Prosocial Values for World Peace

In our current times, intercultural and interfaith dialogue holds immense importance to counter the rising tide of religious fundamentalism. Religious texts, including the Qur'an, often employ figurative language and symbolic elements that can be easily misinterpreted by extremist individuals to align with their ideological agendas. Therefore, it is crucial to approach religious beliefs and practices with extreme caution, recognizing that the actions of a few should not be used to condemn entire faiths. The Qur'an, as the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Talib, eloquently stated "carries different faces," emphasizing the inherently multifaceted and polysemous nature of religious texts that allows for diverse interpretations and open readability. This principle of interpretative pluralism holds true across religious scriptures. While individuals with fundamentalist agendas may selectively extract portions to rationalize destructive actions, there exists an abundance of arguments within the world's religions that advocate for peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity. As Golebiewski states, "though having fixed texts, the major world religions do not have fixed beliefs, only fixed interpretations of those beliefs, meaning their beliefs can be rediscovered, reinvented, and re-conceptualized" (2014, 27). Thus, promoting the constructive prosocial elements of faith through re-engagement with and re-interpretation of religious beliefs is essential to countering the divisive forces of religious extremism.

In fact, religion possesses the significant potential to play a pivotal role in peacemaking and intercultural dialogue. Religious scholar Miroslav Volf dismisses the idea that "religion is a major and independent source of violence," arguing instead that "Historically, religions have contributed both to social discord and to social harmony, and they have inspired and legitimized both violence and peacemaking." (2015, 184). To him, the problem lies in human nature which, because of self-interest, twists that which is holy and makes it demonic (2015). Religious traditions often emphasize values such as compassion, forgiveness, and altruism, which can serve as a foundation for building mutual understanding and bridging divides between diverse communities. Dismissing the widespread simplistic conviction that "religion has been the cause of all major wars in history," Karen Armstrong asserts instead that religions have "historically attempted to "propose a different path to demonstrate kinder and more empathetic ways for people to live together" (2014, 7) When religious beliefs and practices are oriented towards these constructive, prosocial elements, they can counteract the divisive forces of religious fundamentalism and extremism. Therefore, emphasizing the shared values and common ground

among religions, interfaith dialogue and cooperation can foster an environment of respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, ultimately contributing to the resolution of conflicts and the promotion of global harmony.

Moreover, such an approach can facilitate interreligious dialogue and collaboration, enabling people of different faiths to find common ground and address shared challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and social injustice (Bensaid & Machouche, 2019). Cultivating compassion within societies and organizations transcends the notion of individual virtue, becoming an integral component of organizational culture and a key indicator of spiritual depth (Delbecq, 2010). It is, therefore, essential for scholarly and academic efforts to focus on demythologizing religious narratives and exploring the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of religious stories. This approach enables a more informed understanding of the psychological, social, and ethical dimensions of religious experience, moving beyond rigid literalism and essentialized interpretations that can often lead to dogmatism and intolerance.

The goal is not to undermine or diminish the significance of religious narratives, but rather to approach them in a manner that encourages critical thinking, empathy, and an appreciation for the richness and diversity of religious traditions. The Qur'an, for instance, is aware of the uniqueness and greatness of each religion and insists that the world's beauty lies in its racial and religious pluralism; otherwise, God would not have created it so (10:99, 5:48). By emphasizing the universal values that religions share, we can bridge divides and cultivate an environment of dialogue and mutual respect. Interdisciplinary studies, comparative religious studies, and interfaith initiatives play crucial roles in facilitating these processes, enabling individuals from different religious backgrounds to come together, learn from one another, and work towards common goals of peace, justice, and harmony.

Conclusion

In conclusion, engaging in intercultural and interfaith dialogue is essential for addressing the complexities and challenges posed by fundamentalism in our interconnected, globalized world. Religion, often misused as a divisive tool, holds immense potential as a catalyst for peace, but this potential can only be realized when we approach it with sensitivity to its diversity and openness to its multifaceted interpretations. By recognizing the inherent diversity within religious traditions, we can dismantle reductionist narratives

that fuel prejudice, ignorance, and intolerance. Emphasizing religion's prosocial dimensions, such as compassion, justice, empathy, and mutual respect, can help us find common ethical ground across faiths. Critically and constructively engaging with religious teachings, exploring their contexts, and reevaluating interpretations in the light of contemporary challenges is crucial. This nuanced approach encourages us to demythologize religious narratives that perpetuate division, fear, and conflict.

Furthermore, intercultural and interfaith dialogue provides vital opportunities for personal and collective intellectual growth, fostering environments where empathy and mutual understanding can thrive. These dialogues build bridges of trust, reduce misconceptions, and cultivate a collective identity grounded in shared human values rather than divisive ideological barriers. Through intentional, ongoing engagement, individuals are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones, challenge entrenched stereotypes, and expand their moral and ethical horizons. Ultimately, sustained and sincere dialogue has transformative potential, nurturing spiritual and ethical maturity while promoting collective social harmony. It positions religion as an instrument of reconciliation and collaboration, rather than contention. As we commit ourselves to these meaningful exchanges, we lay a foundation for societies that are more inclusive, resilient, and peaceful. In this pursuit, intercultural and interfaith dialogue becomes more than just a conversation; it becomes a profound, transformative practice essential for shaping a just, compassionate, and interconnected global community.

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BECOMING THE OTHER: WESTERN WOMEN, ISLAM, AND THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONAL IMAGINARIES

HAMZA BEKKAOUI

Abstract

The conversion of white Western women to Islam lies at the crossroads of national identity, gender, and religion, shaped by the historical and ideological clash between the Orient and the Occident. These conversions are viewed not just as personal decisions but as symbolic acts that challenge cultural and civilizational boundaries. In Western thought, the "Orient" is seen as the exotic and inferior "Other," while the "Occident" stands for modernity and reason. When white women, symbolizing Western values, convert to Islam, a religion tied to the "Orient," it unsettles this binary and raises issues of identity and loyalty. Gender adds complexity, as these women are often seen as either victims of patriarchy or as betraying their culture. This article applies a discourse in conflict approach to analyze how Western newspapers portray these women and how such portrayals reflect broader debates about Islam's position in the West and the persistent East-West divide.

Keywords: Western women's conversion to Islam; Conversion to Islam; Islam in the West; White women's conversion to Islam.

Introduction

Primarily driven by immigration, along with conversion, Islam has become the fastest-growing religion in both Europe and the United States. It ranks as the second-largest religion in France and the third in Britain, Germany, and North America. The interaction between Muslim and Western perspectives has led to new interpretations and applications of Islam, highlighting the necessity of reassessing Islamic sources when addressing legal matters and adapting religious practices to a different cultural setting.

For second and third-generation Muslims, as well as converts, the challenge lies in contributing to a “pioneering endeavor”—the development of a distinct “European Islamic culture” (Ramadan, 2002, 163). A growing body of research has explored the question of why Western women, raised in liberal societies, choose to convert to Islam. This inquiry extends beyond academic discourse, as converts have increasingly become the focus of intense scrutiny in European mainstream media in recent years.

Although conversion occurs across various religious traditions, it tends to attract heightened attention from both journalists and scholars, especially when the faith in question is Islam and the convert is a woman (Soutar, 2010, 4). Public discourse frequently represents women as symbolic carriers of national identity, reinforcing the significance attributed to their religious choices (Vom Bruck, 2008). The conversion of women to Islam in the West can provoke a range of sensitive issues, as crossing religious and ethnic boundaries often challenges societal norms and may lead to hostility. The widespread fascination with women converting to Islam can be understood within a broader tendency to depict Islam as inherently oppressive to women, positioning it in opposition to Western culture, which is often framed as a driver of female emancipation (Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021). White female converts can experience public scrutiny, such reactions stem from the perception that they have betrayed their racial background (van Nieuwkerk, 2006). This narrative, which constructs Western secular society as inherently liberating while portraying religion—particularly Islam—as restrictive, has been widely challenged (Cady & Fessenden, 2013).

In a recorded message, Osama Bin Laden claimed that following the 9/11 attacks, more Dutch people had converted to Islam than in the previous eleven years, with similar rumors circulating in the United States regarding increased conversions (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). These assertions, along with the claim that women convert to Islam at a significantly higher rate than men—estimated at a 4:1 ratio—are evidently part of an ideological discourse (see also Allievi 1998, 241). While some academic studies suggest that the proportion of female converts may not be as high as four-fifths, they still indicate that approximately two-thirds of converts are women (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999b; Wagtendonk 1994; Haleem 2003). However, the general validity of these figures remains uncertain due to the lack of reliable statistics, particularly in distinguishing between native converts and second-generation Muslims. What is evident, however, is that gender plays a central role in discussions surrounding conversion to Islam, whether from a statistical, ideological, or symbolic perspective.