

## Clash of Ignorance

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***Abstract:***

The clash of ignorance thesis presents a critique of the clash of civilizations theory. It challenges the assumptions that civilizations are monolithic entities that do not interact and that the Self and the Other are always opposed to each other. Despite some significantly different values and clashes between Western and Muslim civilizations, they overlap with each other in many ways and have historically demonstrated the capacity for fruitful engagement. The clash of ignorance thesis makes a significant contribution to the understanding of intercultural and international communication as well as to the study of inter-group relations in various other areas of scholarship. It does this by bringing forward for examination the key impediments to mutually beneficial interaction between groups. The thesis directly addresses the particular problem of ignorance that other epistemological approaches have not raised in a substantial manner. Whereas the critique of Orientalism deals with the hegemonic construction of knowledge, the clash of ignorance paradigm broadens the inquiry to include various actors whose respective distortions of knowledge symbiotically promote conflict with each other. It also augments the power-knowledge model to provide conceptual and analytical tools for understanding the exploitation of ignorance for the purposes of enhancing particular groups' or individuals' power. Whereas academics, policymakers, think tanks, and religious leaders have referred to the clash of ignorance concept, this essay contributes to its development as a theory that is able to provide a valid basis to explain the empirical evidence drawn from relevant cases.

***Keywords:*** Civilization; Clash; Conflict; Ignorance; Intercultural Communication; Islam; Knowledge; Orientalism; Power; the Other; the Self; the West; Western and Muslim Societies

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**Résumé:**

La thèse du choc des ignorances présente une critique de la théorie du choc des civilisations. Elle met en question les présuppositions selon lesquelles les civilisations sont des entités monolithiques qui n'interagissent pas et le Soi et l'Autre toujours opposés. Malgré de considérables différences de valeurs et plusieurs chocs enregistrés entre les civilisations musulmane et occidentale, elles se chevauchent cependant de plusieurs façons et ont démontré par le passé leur capacité d'interagir de manière fructueuse. La thèse du choc des ignorances propose une importante contribution à la compréhension de la communication interculturelle et internationale ainsi qu'à l'étude des relations inter-groupales dans divers domaines de recherche. Notamment par l'examen des obstacles les plus significatifs à l'interaction positive entre les groupes en question. Cette thèse s'intéresse particulièrement au problème de l'ignorance que d'autres approches épistémologiques n'ont pas suffisamment soulevé. Alors que la critique de l'Orientalisme s'occupe de la construction hégémonique du savoir, le paradigme du choc de l'ignorance élargit l'espace de son investigation pour inclure divers acteurs dont la distorsion des connaissances respectives promeut le conflit de manière constitutive. Ce même paradigme développe également le modèle pouvoir-savoir en vue de proposer des outils conceptuels et analytiques pour comprendre l'exploitation de l'ignorance aux fins d'accroître le pouvoir de certains groupes ou individus. Là où chercheurs, législateurs, experts et chefs religieux n'ont fait que référer au concept du choc des ignorances, cet essai tente en revanche de contribuer à son développement comme théorie en vue de proposer un fondement valide pour expliquer les données empiriques réunies des diverses études pertinentes.

**Mots-clés:** Choc; Civilisation; Communication Interculturelle; Conflit; Connaissance; Ignorance; Islam; L'Autre; L'Occident; Orientalisme; Pouvoir; Sociétés Occidentales et Musulmanes

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

“Dover Beach”—Matthew Arnold (1867: 114)

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century began with a violent confrontation that will probably continue for a long time. The *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*'s September 2011 issue carried out a review of the ten years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It noted that the significant amount of research conducted on the global conflict had yielded little understanding about the relationship between Western and Muslim societies (Eid & Karim, 2011). Indeed, it has been ignorance on both sides that appears to have fuelled the ongoing clash.

This essay builds on the previous issue by exploring this “clash of ignorance”<sup>1</sup>, a term which is increasingly used around the world to denote conflict that arises from the failure of intercultural communication and understanding. Whereas academics, policymakers, and religious leaders have referred to this concept, it has yet to be developed as a theory that is able to provide a valid basis to explain the empirical evidence drawn from relevant cases. The clash of ignorance critique of the clash of civilizations thesis offers a unique epistemological potential for multidisciplinary research on intercultural and international interactions. This essay seeks to strengthen the concept’s theoretical foundation by reflecting upon some of its key ideas; it does this primarily by examining the particular context in which it has been formulated—that of conflicts between Western and Muslim societies.

Contemporary humanity’s vaunted claims to knowledge have not lifted it from irrational behaviour. Fear, loathing, and, above all, ignorance, influence the terrorist and military actions that continue to cause mayhem. Whereas many in Western and Muslim societies seek peace and co-operation, “religious illiteracy” (Asani, 2003) and cultural ignorance about the Other lies at the basis of continuing clashes between them. Influential academics and policymakers have chosen to put aside the vast store of knowledge about the many productive interactions between the two civilizations over hundreds of years. The common Abrahamic roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as of contemporary Western philosophy offer the basis for mutual understanding at a profound level (e.g., Arkoun, 1994; Lorca, 2003; Neusner, Chilton & Graham, 2002). However, the myopic vision and short-term goals shaped by narrow self-interest prompts ideologues and propagandists to magnify differences and forgo the exploration of commonalities.

It would be incorrect to disregard the historical series of conflicts between Western and Muslim societies, but they have come to occupy an inordinately large space in collective memories about the centuries-long relationship. Despite having some significantly different values, Western and Muslim civilizations overlap with each other in many ways and have demonstrated the capacity for fruitful engagement (Goody, 2004; Hobson, 2004). It is unfortunate that our time is marked by an escalation of the clash to a global scale, in spite of a mountain of academic research produced on the shared Abrahamic heritage and the long history of collaborative relationships. Much of the interaction between Western and Muslim societies is characterized by a mutual lack of awareness regarding history and culture. Ignoring the store of gathered knowledge has enhanced the state of ignorance. Even as humanity trumpets its achievements in science and technology, it remains mired in what some believe is a necessary contest between good and evil. Weapons wrought with technical knowledge are used to wage wars conceived in cultural ignorance.

The clash of civilizations thesis, developed by Samuel Huntington (1993; 1996) and adopted as a primary framework for foreign policy formulation, disregards the complexity of human identities and relationships. To present the hugely pluralist “West” and “Islam” as static, monolithic entities is to misunderstand the dynamics of culture. Evolving relationships between sections of different civilizations produce shifting parameters of belonging. There exist widely-held, albeit vague, notions of what constitutes a civilization and what conglomeration of groups a particular civilization contains. Close scrutiny reveals many unresolved questions about who is to be included or excluded in a civilization; the internal debates on what sets of identities comprise the Self and the Other often give rise to some of the most bitter quarrels. Therefore, a thesis that presents a world neatly divided into well-defined and discrete civilizational blocs and then pits them against each other is dangerously simple-minded. It is a view of the world shared with the ideologues who wilfully ignore intercultural links to pursue a path of conflict. Several

commentators (e.g., Aga Khan, 2002, June 23; Al-Nahayan, 2005, April 8; Ferrero-Waldner, 2006, March 27; Said, 2001, October 22; Tauran, 2012, March 17) have noted that the clash of civilizations thesis does not provide an informed way to analyse the conflict between segments of Western and Muslim civilizations. They suggest that its causes can be understood as stemming largely from ignorance rather than being inevitable and endemic outcomes of cultural or religious difference. Left unchallenged, the prevailing cultural ignorance will continue to cloud the analysis of unfolding events and most likely perpetuate senseless conflict.

This essay explores some of the fundamental causes behind the clashes born of ignorance. It challenges the assumption that the Self and the Other are inescapably and always opposed to each other. This widespread notion has shaped the imagining of interactions between the two as being inexorably conflictual, despite the primary relationships between them that tend towards productive engagement. The essay also examines how the clash of ignorance is supported by a terminology that presents complex social formations in monolithic categories. For example, the terms “the West” and “Islam” generally tend to connote civilizational entities that are culturally sealed off from each other. We argue that clashes are often produced by ignorance of one’s historical and cultural relationships with others. There appears to be in contemporary academic, governmental, educational, media, and public discourses a sidelining of the vast body of evidence demonstrating harmonious and productive interactions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Despite the fundamental weaknesses of the clash of civilizations thesis, it has been widely accepted as correctly identifying the inevitability of conflict between Western and Muslim societies. As if in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the maiming and killing of hundreds of thousands of people, tearing apart of families and communities, destruction of property on a vast scale, and expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars. The causes are not to be found in an unavoidable clash of civilizations but in ignorance.

## **Self and Other**

It is human tendency to divide the world into Self and Other. Such concepts operate in the mind as primary organizing ideas that influence frameworks of discourse about social relationships (van Dijk, 1980). They are mental containers for a series of images that range from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic: the Self can be thought of as the first person subject or as the entire universe and, similarly, the Other as the second person object or as nature. The worldview of each culture and the circumstances of its particular discourses at a given time shape the specific identity of the entities that are placed within these cognitive frameworks. At different times, the Self can be I, my family, my football team, my neighbourhood, my culture, my ethnic group, my religious group, my country, or humanity. Similarly, the Other can be a spouse, an adjacent community, a neighbouring state, another civilization, or nature. An entity that is viewed as an Other in one context comes to be seen as part of the Self in an alternative placement; for example, a rival state is incorporated into the larger Self in the situations where one identifies with all of humanity.

Engagement with the Other occurs in the terms of how it is imagined by the Self. It is common to think of the former as a threat to the latter, but this is not fundamental to their relationship. The Bible exhorts: “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus, 19: 18) and the Qur’an encourages nations to “know one another” (49: 13). The work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was important in initiating the contemporary discussion on radical Otherness. However, he does not favour the idea of the Other as a rival or an enemy, which has come to

prevail in dominant discourses. Levinas (1969) raises the notion of the ethical demand that the appearance of the Other poses to the Self: “The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness” (1969: 150). This would reflect the relationship of the religious believer to God, the context in which Levinas primarily wrote. However, it is true of other situations as well. In many cases, the Other is the foil that enhances the existence of the Self (Kristeva, 1986). Whether hostile or not, the former is usually the entity in relation to which the latter defines itself wholly or partially, depending on the context of interaction. Human existence is filled with the tension of differences. But this tension is often a creative force that is a vital source of life’s dynamism. The Self, in some cases, may seek to unite with the Other, seeing its destiny as the fulfilment of such coming together. Unions of the male and the female and of the human worshiper and the divine are among the primary themes in art, music, and literature.

At the beginnings of individual consciousness, a baby begins to realise that she is distinct from her mother—with whom she has shared an intimate sense of Self. The infant becomes aware of her own characteristics in relation to Others, and in this develops the conception of a separate identity. Her gender and age become pertinent features in relationships with members of her family. She mentally integrates individual and collective notions (stereotypes) of the Self in relation to Other entities: she is taught that she belongs to an extended Self based on gender, kinship, culture, ethnicity, religion, class, and nationality—social categories that may or may not overlap with each other. She learns to deal with the apparent contradictions in which certain people may be considered part of the extended Self in some contexts but not in others.

Conflict is integral to the human condition (Girard, 1979) and every relationship holds the possibility of a clash. It can reach the most dangerous and destructive stage (i.e., a crisis or a war) if it is escalated or gets out of control (Eid, 2008a). Severe stress situations differ in characteristics from one another (Ibid); however, they all include a form or a state of confrontation or clash. The avoidance, management, or resolution of a clash provides a movement forwards. But a clash can also lead to the deterioration of relations. When the Other is viewed in a hostile manner, the Self tends to take up an aggressive stance towards it. Groups usually adopt belligerent positions against the Others whom they view as a danger to their own existence. Their goal tends to become the reduction or the destruction of the threat, which sometimes can mean elimination of the people who are seen as posing the menace. In many cases, the opposing parties who view the Other as a threat to the respective Self continually feed on each other’s fears, giving rise to a growing spiral of aggression. In this zero-sum game, the Self views itself as necessarily losing out when the Other enjoys a benefit—it becomes inconceivable for both to have gains through cooperation (non-zero-sum game). This is one of the major reasons why it is usually very difficult to bring two warring parties to the negotiating table.

Rival groups, often prompted by their leaders, develop mirror images of each other, as happened during the Cold War between NATO and the Soviet bloc. Both sides come to view the Other in similar manners—as untrustworthy and ill-meaning. On the other hand, the Self is viewed in positive terms as seeking to do good. The actions of the Other, no matter how benign, are usually interpreted through negative perspectives. Each side launches reciprocal propagandic attacks against its Other. Despite these similarities in behaviour, both ironically see each other as being at the polar opposite. The Self’s media and other channels of public discourse are key elements in disseminating the images that often mirror those produced by the Other. Robert Ivie (1980), who examined American portrayals of the national Self and the series of Others with

whom it engaged in war over the course of two hundred years, found a remarkable consistency in their characterization: the U.S. was always peace-seeking and defensive while the enemy was always belligerent and warlike. Such characterizations form the bases of the topoi that generate stereotypes (Karim, 2003a). Western media depictions of Muslims over the last few decades reveals a dramatic increase in the use of stereotypes and discriminatory rhetoric (Eid, 2008b; Hirji, 2011; Jiwani; 2011; Karim 2003a). Such coverage frequently relates the teachings of Islam to terrorism, destruction, and conflict. Similar forms of stereotyping and disparagement can be found in some Muslim portrayals of Western societies (Abdel-Malek, 2000; Ford, 2012; Ghanoonparvar, 1993).

Hostile tendencies between Self and Other tend to disregard the multiplicity of hybrid fusions that emerge through contact between different social groups (Bhabha, 1994). There is a deliberate effort, frequently on the part of societal elites, to emphasize distinctions with the Other in order to enhance the unity of the Self. Every single person in the extended Self is expected to conform in her personal identification against the Other. Communal identity is maintained in categories of essentialized (ethnic, racial, religious, or ideological) purity; great lengths are taken to avoid “contamination” from contact with the Other. Some examples are the reservations to which North American aboriginal peoples were historically confined, the separation of “racial” groups under South African apartheid, the traditional caste-based practices in India, as well as the extreme suspicion during the Cold War of communist values in NATO states and capitalist ones in Warsaw Pact countries. Such thinking suppresses the subtle and overt linkages that people of varying backgrounds develop with each other over time.

A key motivation on the part of certain leaders is to divide and rule. In fabricating or exaggerating a threat from another group, some elites seek to convince their community about their own indispensability by promoting the belief that it is only they who will be able to protect the population. This is intended to reinforce their positions of power. A common tactic is to present the Self as good and the Other as evil. Such essentialization helps set up a situation in which the faults of the Self, particularly the elites, tend to be hidden under the veil of goodness as those of the Other are exaggerated. In this absolute scenario, the Self can do no evil and the Other can do no good. Indeed, in the most extreme cases, they become personifications of good and evil. When this happens, it becomes easier to carry out and justify massive harm to the Other. With the effective use of the mass media by the elites, large sections of the nation are brought to acquiesce to genocide (as happened in Nazi Germany, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda). Notions of “the evil empire” and “the axis of evil” have also helped leaders rally populations against other countries. Once an Other has been labelled as a “rogue” state or “terrorist” group, fewer justifications have to be made when brutal military action is taken against it (Karim, 2003a).

It would be incorrect to suggest that societal leaders are always bent on fomenting discord. Contemporary governments are often engaged in sustaining harmony between the people of diverse characteristics who are part of society. This was not necessarily the case until the mid-twentieth century due to the entrenched concept of the nation-state as consisting primarily, if not solely, of a population that was similar in language, culture, ethnicity, and religion. A number of factors have brought about the willingness to deal positively with various aspects of pluralism within a country. Current patterns of migration have given rise to populations which have an unprecedented level of diversity. Whereas in the past newcomers would usually be absorbed culturally into receiving societies, the scale of human relocations as well as the ability to maintain one’s social and cultural characteristics has grown due to factors

like the availability of media (film, video, satellite television, the Internet, telephony) and transportation that provide continual links with the land of origin and its diasporic communities (Karim, 2003b). Additionally, the human rights movement that emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has helped to assert the legitimacy of minorities within states and has led to the emergence of policies, such as multiculturalism, which provide enabling mechanisms for migrants to maintain and cultivate their cultural forms. It has also encouraged the recognition of multi-layered identities that many individuals have as well as of hybrid cultures. Trends of internationalism have also encouraged the coming together of various states under umbrella organizations such as the United Nations. Nevertheless, the polarizing tendencies of othering have not disappeared and often continue to divide groups and countries. As in most other public debates, it is in media content where the competition of these discourses unfolds. Whereas progressive journalists produce materials that are respectful of diversity and encourage intercultural/international understanding, others knowingly or unknowingly exploit differences and stereotypes. The latter tendencies compound the already existing states of cultural ignorance and make possible clashes within and among societies.

### **“The West” and “Islam”**

The ways in which “the West” and “Islam” are conceptualized in dominant discourses are deeply problematic. They have been presented as inimical geopolitical entities locked in a deadly struggle. These complex and changing social entities are constructed as being monolithic and static in their composition. Like other human groupings, they are what Benedict Anderson (1983) has called “imaginary communities”—imagined as existing in particular forms by their own members and by others. The general idea of “the West” as a unitary civilization with a singular cultural connection to the history of Western Europe begins to break down when examined closely. The social geographer Alastair Bonnett notes that “‘the West’ is a highly expandable category” (2004: 5). It is usually imagined as geographically encompassing Western Europe, North America, and Australasia—drawing together disparate jurisdictions like Hawaii, Nunavut, Malta, Bulgaria, and Norway into a composite whole. Such places have relationships in their own historical, geographical, political, social, and economic contexts that also relate them to other regions of the world. The Hawaiian archipelago, which has become part of “the West” as a state of the United States, is located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean almost 4,000 kilometres from the North American mainland and on the other side of the planet from Europe. The vast majority of the population of the large northern Canadian territory of Nunavut is aboriginal and has little relationship with the cultural heritage of Europe. Malta, which is a member of the European Union, is located in the Mediterranean Sea and has strong historical and cultural connections with North Africa. The central European country of Bulgaria, which is now a member of NATO and the EU, was previously an Ottoman principality and, during the Cold War, a signatory to the Warsaw Pact. On the other hand, Norway, which has extensive cultural ties with countries in the western part of Europe, has chosen not to be a member of the EU. Conversely, Mexico, which is geographically within North America and linked economically to Canada and the United States through NAFTA, is generally not considered to be part of “the West”. Despite these anomalies, the notion of “the West” as a stable and well-defined region of the world, distinct from all others, persists. Edward Said asks,

How can one today speak of “Western civilization” except as in large measure an ideological fiction, implying a sort of detached superiority for a handful of values and ideas, none of which has much meaning outside the history of conquest, immigration, travel, and the mingling of peoples that gave the Western nations their present identities?

(Said, 1994: 347)

This may sound reductionist, but it is clear that as a civilizational entity, “the West” should be understood as a changing, porous, overlapping, multicultural, and contradictory conglomeration—features which are also present in other civilizations.

The vast majority of the people of Europe have Christian or post-Christian identities. This is a core characteristic of the region’s definition in the minds of many of its residents, and is contributing to resistance in admitting Turkey to the EU (Does “Muslim” Turkey . . . , 2005). The history of Muslims in Europe is more than 1,300 years long. In 2010, they numbered 44.1 million in the continent, growing by 4.1% in ten years; they are projected to exceed 58 million by 2030 (The future of . . . , 2011). There has also been a long presence of Jews in Europe, whose other inhabitants include Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians. A similar diversity exists in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. A realistic notion of “the West” has to acknowledge the significant and growing presence of its ethnically non-European and religiously non-Christian minorities.

Uses of the term “Islam” as a singular civilization or geopolitical bloc are also misleading. Similar to constructions of “the West”, “Islam” is also generally imagined as a fixed entity of a clearly demarcated religion and a well-defined global set of adherents. It is often presented as acting as a monolith and also being acted upon by Others as a singly-constituted object. Mohammed Arkoun remarks that “[w]e can no longer use the word ‘Islam’ without quotation marks. It has been so misused and distorted by the media, Muslims themselves, and political scientists that we need a radical reworking of the concept” (Arkoun, 1990: 50). “Islam” has appeared as a timeless phenomenon—unchanging and static—in the discourses of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Actions that took place a thousand years ago are selectively chosen to provide explanations of the contemporary political stances of Muslim-majority governments or Muslim insurgents (Karim, 2003a). Dominant Western presentations of “Islam” are often caricatures of its most militant adherents, whose voices have tended to become the loudest in the broad range of Muslim opinions. This has come to make “the word Islam . . . sound to western ears like a rattlesnake’s rattle” (Bulliet, 2004: 133). Terms such as “Muslim”, “Sunni”, and “Shia” have often become ways to sound alarms rather than to denote practitioners of a faith.

Composite terms like “the Muslim world” or the Islamic ideal of the *ummah* as a unified global body of Muslims are assumed to be sociological and political realities upon which theory can be based, policies made, and actions undertaken. Whereas the followers of Islam adhere to a set of beliefs in common, there remains a diversity that exists not only in cultural but also religious practice among the billion and half Muslims living around the world (Hirji, 2010). Many Sunnis and Shia often do not consider groups such as the Druze, Ahmedis, and Bahais to be Muslim; more exclusivist tendencies among certain Sunnis also remove the 165 million Shia from the Islamic fold, and some Shia hold Sunnis as unbelievers. The term “Muslim world” is often viewed as referring to majority-Muslim states, thus excluding the hundreds of millions of Muslims who live in India; China; eastern, western, and southern Africa; Europe; North America; and elsewhere. Conversely, the presence of the tens of millions of Christians, Hindus,

Jews, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, agnostics, atheists, and others who live in majority-Muslim countries is obscured by calling the latter “Muslim” or “Islamic” countries. The hybridity of belief and practice (Khan, 2005) that resists the categorization of individuals or families into sealed off religious compartments is also often not recognized.

Marshall Hodgson used the term “Islamicate” to be inclusive of the religious diversity of majority-Muslim societies: it “would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (Hodgson, 1974: 59). The many contributions of Christians, Jews, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and others to Muslim civilizations are recognized through such a term. It points to the confluence of faiths, cultures, and ethnicities comprising the public cultures of the Ummayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman territories as well as of contemporary majority-Muslim states. The idea of a single monolithic Muslim civilization is made redundant, given the vast diversity of material conditions and cultures in places such as Aceh, Afghanistan, Albania, Alberta, Algeria, Anatolia, Arabia, Australia, and Azerbaijan.

The geopolitical terms “the West” and “Islam” have locked the imagination into narrow ways of thinking about complex realities. They tend to prevent the consideration of the vast pluralism that exists in both, and the acknowledgement that they are constructed entities whose individual components have had long-standing relationships across what are considered to be civilizational borders. Indeed, Richard Bulliet (2004) makes an intriguing case for an “Islam-Christian civilization” based on the many commonalities in outlook as well as the many harmonious interactions between Christians and Muslims (also see: Karić, 2011). The essentialization of the terms “the West” and “Islam” as denoting completely separate monoliths erases past lessons and future scope for productive engagement; instead of being heuristic categories that enable the building of knowledge, they become the means for disseminating misinformation and ignorance.

### **Christian-Muslim Engagements**

Christians and Muslims have had ongoing interactions almost since the emergence of Islam, some 14 centuries ago, and have significantly influenced the development of each other’s civilizations. However, the knowledge about these exchanges is either non-existent, sketchy, or considered irrelevant in contemporary Western and Muslim societies. Tendencies on both sides to polarize the portrayals of Self and Other have left little room for acknowledging how they have historically worked together. The early development of Islamic theology was significantly influenced by Christian and other traditions of knowledge, and the later scientific and philosophical advancements of Muslims were crucial in giving impetus to the European Renaissance. Western and Muslim powers engaged in war against each other from time to time; however, there were extensive periods of collaboration between them. Indeed, cultural exchanges and political alliances were not uncommon even during the Crusades (Fletcher, 2003). There was extensive trade across the Mediterranean and along the routes between the lands ruled by Christians and Muslims.

When Muslim Arabs initially encountered the learned cultures of neighbouring regions, they were eager to follow the Prophet Muhammad’s counsel to acquire knowledge wherever it existed. This region was part of the vibrant Hellenic world where the works of philosophy, science, religion, literature, music, and art were studied. The openness of Muslims to other

cultures provided for their own intellectual flowering. It comes as a surprise to contemporary Muslims that certain key aspects of the Islamic faith which have become integral to its structures of belief owe their development to scholarly methods derived from other civilizations. The only textual sources that emerged from Muhammad's time were the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (the Prophet's sayings). In the next few centuries, Muslims developed the basis of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*) and philosophy (*falsafa*). However, the production of these bodies of work required the intellectual tools of analysis and philosophical reasoning which Muslims acquired from others (Fakhry, 1983). Aspects of architecture that are now thought to be iconically Muslim, such as the dome and the arch, were also borrowed from Roman and other cultures.

During the Middle Ages, the Church authorities in Europe prohibited reading of ancient works that were thought to be contradictory to officially approved Christian teachings. This caused the narrowing of scholarship and eventually led to a general decline of learning, with some exceptions. However, even as Europe sank into its Dark Ages, the study of the writings from ancient Greece and elsewhere continued in what is now called the Middle East (Rubenstein, 2003). Muslims encountered learned scholars who were well versed in the knowledge of the day. They came upon renowned academies of learning such as those of the city of Jondishapur, which was the intellectual center of the Iranian Sassanid Empire. It had been for centuries an institution for study and training that attracted Persian, Greek, Indian, and Roman scholars in medicine, philosophy, theology, and science. The followers of the Prophet Muhammad were keen to obtain these and other forms of knowledge.

A translation movement ensued. Numerous manuscripts were rendered, mostly by Nestorian Christians, into Arabic. This increased access to the most advanced knowledge of the day and promoted intellectual growth. Scholars of various religious backgrounds living in majority-Muslim lands contributed to the treasury of human learning. They provided original philosophical insights into old problems and introduced new modes of thought; discoveries were made in mathematics and various sciences and innovative techniques were developed (Bala, 2006). *The Canon of Medicine*, a 14-volume medical encyclopaedia was completed by Ibn Sina (Latinized as "Avicenna") in 1025. Based on a combination of his own practice and medieval medicine in Muslim civilizations as well as on the writings of the Indian physicians Sushruta and Charaka, ancient Persian and Chinese scientists, and the Roman sage Galen, it served for many centuries as a standard medical text in European universities and the centres of learning elsewhere. The engagement with non-Islamic thought also produced some heated debates among Muslim philosophers, as when Zakariya al-Razi (Rhazes), drawing upon Platonic-Pythagorean influence, proposed that prophecy was superfluous. Ibn Tufayl wrote about independent human thought, equality, freedom, and tolerance—ideas that appear to have influenced Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Emmanuel Kant (Attar, 2007). This was part of the massive transfer of knowledge from majority-Muslim lands to Europe in the time leading up to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

A key Muslim contribution was to the scientific method. Much of the knowledge of the ancient world was theoretical. The Qur'an encouraged the exercise of directly observing worldly phenomena as a means to understanding faith (*din*) and the material world (*dunya*). Practice of this method led to the growth of the empirical study as an important basis of scientific discovery. Among the earliest practitioners was the tenth-eleventh century optical scientist Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen), who used the empirical method two hundred years before European scholars. Additionally, religious requirements, such as knowing the proper times for worship and fasts as

well as the direction of Mecca for the physical orientation of ritual prayer, prompted research into astronomy and geography. Highly accurate calculations were made in these fields. The intellectual culture of the lands under Muslim rule fostered exchange between learned individuals of various origins. Scholars of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and other backgrounds thrived variously in Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Delhi, Fez, Istanbul, Samarkand, and Shiraz. However, as was the case in other pre-modern civilizations, the community of scholars was a limited one with the vast majority of people being illiterate.

By the time the European Renaissance was beginning to flower, an intellectual decline had begun to set in the East—firstly in Arab lands and later in others under Muslim rule. This was prompted, among other reasons, by philosophical and theological conformity (Fakhry, 1983; Hoodbhoy, 1992). Conservative scholars expressed fierce hostility to the forms of thought that had been derived from non-Muslim sources. They promoted a limitation of theology to those origins considered to be authentically Islamic. In doing this, they sought to reverse generations of engagement with other cultures which had led to the evolution of many Muslim civilizations. They also fiercely attacked Sufis and the Shia as well as Sunnis who did not conform to the rigid practice of the faith that they preached. Their puritanical approach which deferred to the first three generations of Muslims gave rise to the Salafi movement among Muslims, which has grown in influence in recent times. Conservative influence in discouraging intellectual and cultural pursuits appears to have played a significant role in the steady decline of Muslim achievements in science, philosophy, literature, art, and architecture.

The Enlightenment in Western societies widened the scope of scientific inquiry and made it qualitatively different from that of previous eras (Hoodbhoy, 1992). The arrival of European powers in Muslim domains in the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the realization of the extent to which the latter had fallen behind scientifically. Whereas advancements in military armaments had paralleled those in other forms of technology when Muslim societies had flourished their weaponry could no longer match that of the Europeans, who were embarking on colonization. Most Muslim-majority lands came under European control within a matter of decades. Even though colonial rule has now ended, Western societies continue to wield enormous influence in majority-Muslim countries economically and technologically. Whereas some adherents of Islam have sought to understand the cultural and philosophical bases of Western power, others have been wary of what they view as erosion of their ways of life. This perception is, of course, not limited to Muslims but is shared by many in other societies who have complained of Western cultural imperialism. However, the growing military presence of the Western states in Muslim-majority countries in recent times has increased the fear among a significant number of Muslims of the threat posed to their cultural and religious integrity (Kull, 2011).

This has led to a militant anti-Western posture and to acts of terrorism against Western targets by groups like al-Qaeda. Ironically, these militants have an affinity for things Western even as they attack Western targets. It is noteworthy that most of the hijackers of the attacks on September 11, 2001 had technical training, several of them in Western institutions of higher learning. Their worldview, which seeks a purity of religious piety, appears to be removed from their own experiences and the sources of their material knowledge. They find the justification for their violent actions in their interpretations of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* while others are inspired by these primary sources of Islam to embrace compassion and caring towards all of humanity. Such varied readings led al-Qaeda's erstwhile leader, Osama bin Laden, to be treated simultaneously as a "controversial hero" by some Arab Muslims (Eid, 2008b) and a villain by others.

Even though contemporary states are engaged in serious discussions about democracy, human rights, and the ethical development of their societies, almost everyone comes to the table with bloody hands. No single philosophical tradition has successfully shown the way for the creation of utopia. Western technological innovations over the past centuries have provided many material comforts, but inequality, poverty, and suffering continue to haunt human beings—including those living in the most developed countries. Whereas Western societies are continuing to be productive, contemporary non-Western cultures are increasingly making contributions to the advancement of human civilization. Global relationships are in the process of being rearranged, and Western societies will most likely not be the only leaders in scientific progress by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Clash of Civilizations Thesis**

A key reason for Samuel Huntington to expound on what he viewed as “the clash of civilizations” was to propose a strategy to “revive the power of the West” (1996: 308). He borrowed the term the “clash of civilizations” from Bernard Lewis’s September 1990 *Atlantic Monthly* essay “The Roots of Muslim Rage”. However, Lewis—contrary to widespread belief—was not the first to use it. It appeared as early as 1926 in a book titled *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*, authored by Basil Matthews of the World’s Alliance of the Young Men’s Christian Association (Bulliet, 2004). That publication has languished in obscurity, but Huntington’s writings on this topic became influential because they appeared at the particular juncture of history when the end of the Cold War coincided with the attention-grabbing terrorism of al-Qaeda. Having spent most of his academic career addressing national and international politics in the Cold War context, Huntington saw the emerging multi-polar global reconfiguration in the terms of security and military blocs. He offered a worldview in which civilizations were the most salient entities for cultural identification and political action: they were largely sealed off from one another and there was a high likelihood of conflict between them. This conceptual framework has been robustly challenged (e.g., Bulliet, 2004; Rubenstein & Crocker, 1994; Said, 2001, October 22) for its weaknesses in serving as a basis to analyze history, culture, and geopolitics. Nevertheless, it continues to hold sway among many scholars and policymakers who appear to be taken with its simple model in which humanity is divided into seven distinct civilizational entities. Huntington essentializes civilization as a social category that definitively shapes the worldview and solidarity of human collectivities: “differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic” (1993: 25). The simplicity of his model veers towards the simplistic.

Huntington constructs civilizations as watertight compartments of cultural purity and as separated by “fault lines”—a geological metaphor apparently implying that radical differences between civilizations are part of nature. Like medieval Muslim purists and their present-day successors, Huntington holds that cultural pluralism does not produce successful societies. He strongly opposes multiculturalism which he views as rejecting American heritage and weakening national solidarity. The United States can remain strong by vigorously guarding and enhancing its Western pedigree: the “futures of the United States and of the West depend on Americans reaffirming their commitment to Western civilization” (Huntington, 1996: 307). His prescription that “the West” should not seek to westernize the world in order to create a universal civilization is not based on the belief that it does not have anything useful to offer. Adhering to the notion of completely distinct civilizations, Huntington advises “the West” to concentrate on strengthening

itself to ward off challenges from Others. He proposes that international relations be re-organized in ways that civilizations, rather than individual states, become the primary interlocutors at the global stage.

However, only some civilizations are capable of collaborative interaction, according to Huntington's theory. He proclaims that the "conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations" (Huntington, 1993: 25). In this worldview "the West" and "Islam" are made particularly inimical to each other, with divergent values that make serious clashes between them inescapable. The scenario of inexorable conflict provides a strong justification to politicians who would not take up the arduous task of conciliation. It is also of utility to those who are in the highly profitable business of supplying the materials for making war and those who seek to gain geopolitical advantage and acquire control over resources. Belief in the model of inevitable civilizational clash has also proved ideologically useful to the Muslim militants who hold that Islamic ideals are essentially different from Western ones and that Muslims have a religious obligation to attack Western targets. The dominant interpretations of the attacks of 9/11 and the responses to them were shaped by the prevalence of this idea. Predictions of conflict therefore have become self-fulfilling prophecies, as a seemingly unending cycle of violence unfolds from decade to decade. Ignorant of the past and of the potential for present and future cooperation, religious and secular fundamentalists on both sides are bent on pursuing violent courses of revenge and counter-revenge. The withdrawal of Western armies from Iraq and Afghanistan and the tilt towards democracy in certain Arab countries notwithstanding, the entrenched conviction that "the West" and "Islam" are destined to clash—if not countered—will continue to promote an intensification of the conflict.

### **The Clash of Ignorance Thesis**

There have been numerous references to the term "clash of ignorance" by academics (e.g., Asani, 2003; Georgiev, 2012; Hunt, 2002; Mishra, 2008), religious figures (e.g., Aga Khan, 2002, June 23; Tauran, 2012, March 17), government leaders (e.g., Al-Nahayan, 2005, April 8; Ferrero-Waldner, 2006, March 27), think tanks (e.g., Anna Lindh Foundation, 2010, September 16; CMIESI, n.d.), and others, since its emergence a decade ago. Edward Said appears to have coined it in a *Nation* magazine article which was published six weeks following the 9/11 attacks. The short essay was written as a critique of the clash of civilizations thesis and he seems to have offered the heading "The Clash of Ignorance" as a counter to the title of Huntington's article (1993) and book (1996); its form mimicked and mocked the latter. Even though Said's term does not work semantically in the same manner as the "clash of civilizations", it draws on the latter's widespread familiarity and, in the mere replacement of the last word, carries a jolt of irony which alternatives such as the "clash stemming from ignorance" or "clashes based on cultural ignorance" do not.

Some of the ideas in Said's October 22, 2001 article had appeared previously in the afterword of the 1994 edition of his magnum opus, *Orientalism*, but he had not encapsulated them within the concept of the "clash of ignorance". The 2001 piece was pithy and hard-hitting. It broached, among other issues, the motivations for promoting the clash of civilizations thesis; the disregard for complex histories; the reformulation of the Cold War model; the monolithic presentation of multifaceted entities—particularly "the West" and "Islam"; the drive to mobilize collective passions to gain geopolitical advantage; the distortion of religions by followers who are primarily motivated by the pursuit of power; the barriers against the entry of Muslims and

their history into Western domains and discourses; the ready calls to crusades and jihads; the failures by Muslims to acknowledge their own integration of Western technology and culture into their lives; the reduction of Islamic humanism, aesthetics, intellectual quests, and spiritual devotion to harsh penal codes by leaders of some majority-Muslim states; and the adherence in Western governmental circles to Huntington's paradigm of inexorable clash.

All this and more appears in the tightly-written 2,313 word essay. Limited by its format, it runs through a series of thoughts in a brisk, but not superficial, manner. Its rich allusions to ideas, events, history, politics, culture, and historical and contemporary figures remain unpacked: almost every paragraph deserves at least a chapter of commentary. The article has been cited many times, but with only a modicum of analysis. There does not appear to exist a full-fledged critical fleshing out of the skeletal thesis. Said, who died in 2005, did not publish again on this topic.

The essay criticizes the clash of civilizations paradigm for promoting a tendency towards "vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis" (Said, 2001, October 22). The clash of ignorance thesis does not position itself as a template for providing formulaic explanations of unfolding engagements between cultural collectivities. As opposed to the epistemologically rigid scope of the clash of civilizations model, it promotes a greater openness of inquiry. Said suggests that instead of the grand theory approach of the clash of civilizations, "it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice" (Ibid). Such heuristic approaches facilitate critical analysis of the relationships between peoples in history and in our times rather than restrict them to ideologically limited modes of inquiry. The clash of ignorance thesis foregrounds the ways in which ignorance is formed, perpetuated, and exploited. Its relation to information, knowledge, and wisdom are also highlighted. However, whereas Said played a significant role in bringing attention to this fundamental problem, he merely scored its surface. Much more work remains to be done in developing a theory that provides an intellectual framework for examining empirical information about the issues of ignorance in intercultural communication.

Of those who have referred to the clash of ignorance over the last decade, the Aga Khan has been the most persistent. Whereas this Muslim religious leader had raised issues related to the general problematic since the 1980s, he specifically began using the rubric of the clash of ignorance in 2002 (NanoWisdoms, n.d.). As head of an international development network, he has been engaged in education for several decades as well as serving as an Islamic interlocutor with Western governments and media. In contrast to Said's role as an academic, the Aga Khan's work relates to the practical matters of running several organizations. The various threads in his discourse include: intercultural ignorance inhibits the development of a common vocabulary with which to communicate across cultures; inter-faith dialogue based on mutual ignorance is a meaningless exercise; school curricula are failing to keep pace with 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization that is increasingly bringing together people from around the world; the knowledge deficit resulting from cultural ignorance impedes predictability, anticipation, reflection, and dialogue; the gaps in cultural knowledge also pose a long-term obstacle to effective foreign and economic policymaking as well as to progress, justice, and stability; and the general failure of Western media to report on Muslim societies in an informed manner stems from the absence of basic knowledge about the latter in Western societies.

The solutions that the Aga Khan proposes involve: reformulating the standards of general education in the contemporary world by integrating broad-based information about other cultures

in educational materials; understanding and adopting pluralism as a primary value for building harmonious and productive societies; fostering a cosmopolitan ethic; appreciating the place of art in knowing about the Other; learning to understand Muslim societies from a broad-based civilizational approach (i.e. through knowledge about peoples, cultures, languages, economies, geographies, and histories), rather than viewing them only through the lens of religion; and broadening Muslim societies' engagement with their own ethnic and religious diversity. He has looked to putting these ideas into practice through his educational institutions and has sought to use his substantial art collection and programs of his Trust for Culture to familiarize Western and Muslim audiences with the achievements and diversity of Muslim civilizations. He has also encouraged a Western country to engage internationally in addressing issues of intercultural relations through his partnership with the Canadian government to establish the Global Centre for Pluralism in 2006.

Other major programmatic attempts to counter the clash of civilizations thesis have been the "Dialogue among Civilizations" and the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiatives. The former was promoted by the previous president of Iran, Mohammed Khatami. A foundation was established in Switzerland in 2007 and several international conferences have been held, but the Dialogue among Civilizations does not appear to be on the current Iranian government's list of international priorities. The leaders of Spain and Turkey sponsored the Alliance of Civilizations initiative in 2005 to promote international cooperation against extremist militancy by encouraging intercultural and interreligious dialogue between the Western and Muslim societies. It runs international gatherings, programs, and training under the leadership of a United Nations High Representative. These initiatives implicitly subscribe to the philosophical stance of the clash of ignorance thesis. Along with the Aga Khan's programmatic activities, they furnish practical examples for studying the usefulness of the concept in enhancing intercultural communication theory.

The interdisciplinary study of intercultural communication emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the effort to understand the interactions between people of different cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities. It is dominated by a positivist methodology that is based on the empirical examination of cross-cultural interactions in particular settings (e.g., Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2012). This approach does not lend itself well to the study of the issues of culture that go beyond personal or institutional interactions. Other contributions have been made in the area of cultural studies, whose political, economic, and social analysis seeks largely to uncover how meaning is produced and circulated through practices, beliefs, and institutions. This approach offers significant potential for studying the problem of ignorance in intercultural communication. Whereas most attention in cultural studies is focussed on contemporary societies, some work has been carried out in uncovering the historical causes of present-day cultural relations (e.g., Hall, 2000; Karim, 2003a).

The clash of ignorance thesis underlines the role that the distortion of knowledge plays in impeding effective intercultural communication. A fundamental problem that it identifies is a set of prevailing beliefs about the relationship between the Self and a particular Other. The central assumption here is that differences with the Other are insurmountable and that interaction with her constitutes a game in which the inevitable outcome is a clash. Another is the supposition that one is engaged in a zero-sum game in which gains by the Other necessarily mean a loss for the Self. Ignorance is furthered through particular readings of the history of the relationship between Self and Other. These readings are shaped by the religious and political biases that remain in

place, generation after generation, each producing “facts” and interpretations that come to form thick sediments of untruths.

Even after painstaking efforts to uncover the layers of misinformation and to expose the ways in which “knowledge” is constructed, the ingrained manners of presenting the Other continue to be promoted by those who benefit from them. It is in the self-interest of people in power to continue these tendencies in order to preserve their hegemony (Karim, 2003a). Complex dynamics between knowledge and ignorance are shaped by ideology, economics, and the desire to maintain authority as well as by fear, habit, and unwillingness to acknowledge one’s errors. Ongoing exclusions of the vital contribution of Muslim philosophical and scientific traditions to Western societies in the intellectual histories written in Europe, North America, and Australasia would appear to validate Said’s (1994) critique that Western studies of the Orient are influenced by ideology. However, Said himself has been criticized for not recognizing similar tendencies by Muslims (e.g., Buruma & Margalit, 2005).

In addressing both Western and Muslim societies’ uses of knowledge and ignorance, the clash of ignorance paradigm has shown itself to offer an analytical framework that enables a more even-handed approach than the one-sided critique of Orientalism. The former does, however, appear to leave itself open to the charge of implying that it is ultimately possible to eradicate all clashes between groups once they understand each other. Even if perfect intercultural communication were attainable, this would not mean that the Self and the Other will come to agree on all matters. Contemporary bodies such as parliaments enable engagement between conflicting positions through discourse domestically, and diplomacy provides the potential for coming to an understanding at the international level. However, these institutions are not always successful in preventing violence. The proponents of the clash of ignorance do not suggest that violence is completely preventable. Their argument is formulated against the clash of civilizations paradigm, which holds that the fault lines between “the West” and “Islam” run so deep that never the twain shall meet. They are troubled that Huntington’s model provides the justification not to consider exploring possibilities for peacemaking. They promote the viewpoint that the Self and the Other do not necessarily have to clash, but do not say that this is completely avoidable.

The clash of ignorance thesis makes a significant contribution to the understanding of intercultural and international communication as well as to the study of inter-group relations in various other areas of scholarship. It does this by bringing forward for examination the key impediments to mutually beneficial interaction between groups. This thesis directly addresses the particular problem of ignorance that other epistemological approaches have not raised in a substantial manner: ignorance is not only the accidental absence of knowledge but is culturally constructed over generations and used politically. Whereas the critique of Orientalism deals with the hegemonic construction and exploitation of knowledge, the clash of ignorance paradigm broadens the inquiry to include various actors whose respective distortions symbiotically promote conflict with each other. It supplements Michel Foucault’s (1980) power-knowledge dynamic to provide conceptual and analytical tools to understand the exploitation of ignorance for the purposes of enhancing particular groups’ or individuals’ power. The clash of ignorance thesis also highlights the value of taking into account the wider historical, intellectual, and religious relationships between societies. Studying human beings through an approach that includes the examination of their spiritual and ethical aspirations in addition to their political and economic motivations will potentially reduce conflict between groups. Whereas questions of power, politics, and the manipulation of information are already broached by cultural studies, the

clash of ignorance paradigm sharpens this approach to examine the broader implications of the systematic corruption of knowledge over long periods and the generational shaping of the imagination of large conglomerations of peoples. It also encourages the investigation of the interstices where the bodies of evidence on intercultural collaboration are concealed as well as of the manners in which this is done. The substantial epistemological potential of the clash of ignorance thesis to understand better how the Self and the Other imagine and engage each other will hopefully reduce the occasions for conflict and enable mutually beneficial relationships.

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## Notes

- 1 The authors of this essay are working on a three-volume multidisciplinary publication project on the “clash of ignorance” that also involves other scholars engaged in the study of architecture, communication, conflict resolution, education, history, history of science, Islam, knowledge translation, literature, philology, political psychology, political science, and religion.
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