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CONSTRUCTING ISLAM: A BRITISH CATHOLIC PAPER'S REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIMS

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Background – Context

- Questions: in what ways is Islam constructed in *The Tablet*? To what extent do various Islam-related-events affect discursive construction of Islam and Muslims in *The Tablet*? Can we identify the knowledge of Islam that is constructed and circulated in *The Tablet* following such events?
- Argument: the production of knowledge through representations is always self-centred.

Two general approaches in defining discourse

- **Non-critical approach:** discourse is seen as a particular unit of language. Attention is given to only linking the sentences together as they are. The problem is that it neglects the social ideas and the historical context that inform the way we use and interpret language.
- **Critical approach:** discourse is studied as 'language in use' in relation to social analysis. This approach is interested in "*what* and *how* language communicates when it is used *purposefully* in particular instances and contexts" and how "language is used to *mean* something and to *do* something and that this 'meaning' and 'doing' are linked to the context of its usage" (Richardson 2007:24). Language therefore is not only a medium of communicating ideas but becomes a domain in which our knowledge of the social world is actively created and shaped.

Foucauldian approach of discourse

- For Foucault effects of truth are produced within discourses (1980:118) in which truth is seen as a system of ordered procedures for production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. This truth is linked to systems of power which produce and sustain it. Here, power is not a repressive concept; rather it is a productive concept. Power does not dominate those who are subject to it but it incorporates them, shapes and 'retools' them to fit in with its needs. Discourse therefore is concerned with "establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions" (Gill 2000:176). Within discourse, knowledge allows only "certain ways of thinking about reality" and therefore it "can be used to exclude knowledge from others" (Cheek 2004:1142-3). Foucault therefore believes that we are subjected to the production of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (1980:93).

General British media discourse on Islam

- 1). The West versus Islam discourse: there can be no peace, no resolution of conflicts until one civilisation defeats and dominates the other politically, economically and culturally.
- 2). The war on terrorism discourse: 'us' versus 'them' (President Bush: "you are either with us or with them"). The application and the cultural politics of 'us' and 'them' or 'West' and 'Islam' in the news discourse in fact help to "create and reinforce the fears of what are predominantly white audiences towards ethnic groups" (Allan 1999:171).
- 3). The Islamophobic discourse: Muslims then are projected particularly in the media as dangerous and subversive, or in the words of Philip Lewis, "a trojan horse in the heart of Europe with a deadly cargo of 'fundamentalist' religiosity" (Lewis 2002:1).

The Tablet's Construction of Islam and Muslims

- The West and Islam are partners.
- Critique of multiculturalism and British model of Islam.
- Catholicism as a point of reference.

The West and Islam are partners

- “there is no incompatibility between Islamic civilisation and Western civilisation...Islam and the West are partners.... Islam set standards of tolerance that Christianity never even aspired to...; Muslim Europe was the only place where Jews felt safe; Christendom received its early education in medicine, architecture, science, mathematics and many other areas from the Muslim world; Europe was reconnected to the philosophical traditions of the classical era through the Muslim world...without Islam, there would have been no Aquinas, Newton, no rocket science, no computers, no modern civilisation at all” (**What we owe to Islam**, 29/09/2001). ”.
- “Where would the normative philosophy of the Catholic Church, Thomism, be without Aquinas’s introduction to Aristotle via Islamic scholars like Averroes? Where European science, mathematics, medicine, architecture? Far from being incompatible with it, an Islamic presence in Europe would reunite broken parts of Europe’s religious heritage” (**A bridge from Europe to Islam**, 7/12/2002).
- “....it is a dangerous mistake to speak of a “war on terrorism” at all. The word “war” should not be used in the context of a response to this type of evil, for it dignifies the attackers as combatants and legitimises their criminal acts. It also incites the users of the word to offer a warlike response” (**No quick fixes against terrorism**, 3/11/2001).

Multiculturalism and the British model of Islam

- *The Tablet's* texts see multiculturalism as problematic or even dangerous in the context of Britain: "Until recently, any suggestion that British standards and values must be predominant has been greeted with a suspicion of racism. But this has always been slightly hypocritical. In truth, multiculturalism has always meant "multiculturalism on our terms... Acceptance of basic British values requires some agreement across all communities on what those values are" (**Proud to be British**, 15/12/2001). "Multiculturalism, which was invented as an answer to racism, can itself feel like racism when it is used as a method of exclusion...". (Longley, 2/09/2006).
- Critique of multiculturalism is often related to the failure of young British Muslims or young British Asians to integrate into British society and therefore their 'Britishness' is questioned.
- *The Tablet* proposes and offers what it calls 'a British model of Islam'. This proposal mainly deals with the 'instruction of faith' in which *The Tablet* advocates the need of 'British-educated role-models to lead and to instruct' the young British Muslims in faith.

Catholicism as point of reference

- In the situation where Muslims face various Islamophobic attacks, *The Tablet's* texts share solidarity with Muslims. Editorials and articles published in this period of study identify what Islam and British Muslims go through as alienation. Interestingly, when alienation and Islamophobic attacks on British Muslims are addressed, texts in *The Tablet* employ a historical analogy in comparing the experience of the Catholics going through prejudices, stereotypes and attacks in the past (Hornsby-Smith 1991; Coffey 2000) and what Muslims now experience in Britain. By referring to Catholicism's experience and sometimes the Irish experience in Britain, *The Tablet's* texts suggest that the Catholicism's experience of how "a faith community established itself in a protestant state" (Bunting, 30/07/2005) could be a *model* for acceptance and respect of Muslims in Britain and a *model* also for British Muslims to learn how to integrate with the British society. Therefore the suggestion is that Islam and British Muslims could *learn* from the experience of Catholicism and British Catholics and argues that the Catholics could *help* and *sympathise with* Muslims with regard to assimilation and integration into British society and values.

Discussion.....

- From the study findings, the first thing we notice is that while ‘a clash of civilisations’ hypothesis is generally and publicly advocated in the context of terrorism, for example in the British general media, *The Tablet*’s texts construct Islam as the West’s partner based upon historical evidence in which Islam has contributed to the Western civilisations. In doing so, *The Tablet* contributes a positive way in looking at the relations between the West and Islam. As a matter of discourse, *The Tablet* does not only present the historical evidence to support the idea that ‘the West and Islam are partners’. It uses the evidence to produce and circulate a new knowledge to its readers about Islam and its relation to the West.

Discussion (cont...)

- However, the question is, when *The Tablet* constructs the West and Islam as *partners*, what does this really mean? Discourse implicitly embodies certain views, knowledge, beliefs and even particular 'positions' for the subjects addressed in the discursive practice (Fairclough 1995). *The Tablet's* construction therefore embodies also its views, knowledge, belief and positions regarding the West and Islam. Since text produces knowledge, the construction of Islam as a or *the* partner of the West, in our judgment, raises two perspectives. Firstly, the thesis that 'the West and Islam are partners' assumes that both the West and Islam are two entities that could share power in facing terrorism and Islamophobia as their common enemies. This perspective offers a unity of power between the West and Islam. Secondly, the thesis that 'the West and Islam are partners' attempts to produce a common identity within which both the West and Islam assert themselves in their multiplicity and differences.

Discussion (cont....)

- Due to prejudices and Islamophobic attacks on Islam and British Muslims, *The Tablet's* texts frame 'a world' for Islam and British Muslims called 'alienation'. This 'world of alienation' is created for 'a minority of young British Muslims' who are identified as 'culturally orphans'. Interestingly, since young British Muslims live in 'a world of alienation', Catholicism is presented in *The Tablet* as a 'Moses' who could *help* and *sympathise with* the Muslims to cross the 'Red Sea of alienation' or 'a brother's keeper' from whom Muslims could *learn* based on its experience of integrating in 'a Protestant state'. Since discourses determine who speak, it is significant to point out that this construction of Islam and Muslims is produced in *The Tablet* by non-Muslim sources, with mostly Catholic sources or at least sources that affiliate with the Catholic Church. In this way of representing Islam, *The Tablet* constructs also the Catholicism and at the same time *The Tablet* sees Catholicism through the eye of Islam. Therefore, the texts in *The Tablet* in fact produces the knowledge about Catholicism through their representations of Islam. Islam becomes a sort of image which functions to represent Catholicism.

Conclusion

- Construction of knowledge and power relations is a complex process of the production of meanings in the media discourse (Said 1981, Poole 2002). In this study, we argue that *The Tablet's* texts do not merely *describe* or *say something* about Islam and Muslims. Moreover, they *construct, produce* and *create* knowledge on Islam and Muslims in the context of terrorism in which Islam is constructed as the partner of the West. Within this construction, power relations can be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, power relations can be explained in terms of relational identity in which the West and Islam share a common identity in facing and challenging 'the oppression of terrorism'. Secondly, power relations in *The Tablet's* discursive practice can be understood also as *a relation of subordination* in which *The Tablet* constructs Islam and Muslims as subjected to the 'leadership' and 'domination' of Catholicism and Catholics based upon the experience of being successfully integrated into British society and values. Thirdly, in representing Islam, *The Tablet* constructs also the Catholicism and at the same time Islam becomes a sort of window, through which *The Tablet* represents Catholicism. Therefore, the texts in *The Tablet* in fact produces the knowledge about Catholicism through their representations of Islam. Islam becomes an image which functions to represent Catholicism.