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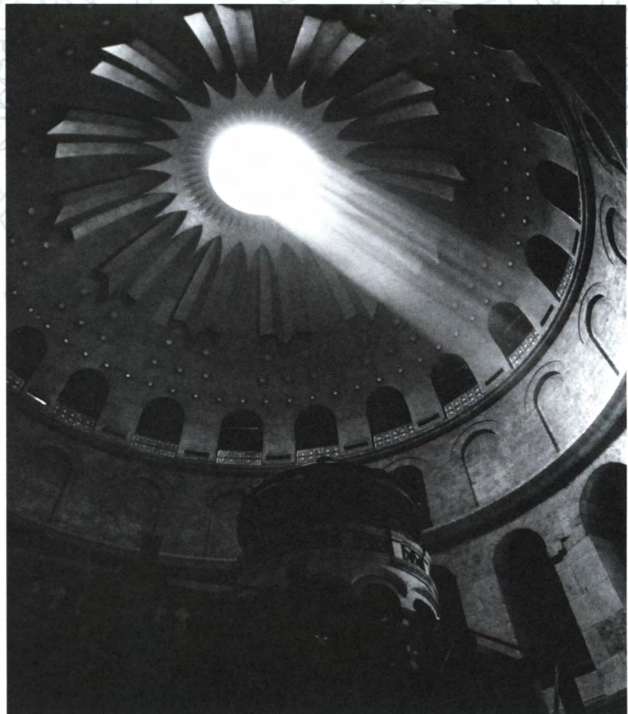
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Climbing the Virtual Minbar of Cyberspace

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> "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair, so that I may climb the golden stair.
>
> BROTHERS GRIMM FAIRY TALE

As an avowedly secular anthropologist who studies Islamic cultures, what better way to orient myself than a fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm. As the story of Rapunzel is spun, a young maiden is trapped in a tower by a wicked witch and forced to let down her golden hair for the old dame to climb. One day along comes a prince, who with the best of intentions tries to free the girl but is pushed out of the tower by the witch and blinded by thorns. In the children's version the couple is eventually reunited and lives happily ever after. In the real world ever before us there are seldom such happy endings. As scholars of Islam, institutionally holed up in the Ivory Tower of Academic Isolation, there are not many opportunities to let down our doctored hair and allow our golden voices to escape the classroom. One such opportunity, seemingly out of a fantasy world not even imagined by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, is opened up by the Internet.

The Brothers Grimm, of course, are quintessentially Western. They began collecting German folk tales just before the epic Orientalist volumes of *Description de l'Égypte* came to print. Such an opening metaphor begs to be de-Orientalized lest it lead to yet another tropic West over East rhetorical trap. So allow me to leave the tower behind and climb the virtual *minbar* of cyberspace. For those of us who dabble in digital media, an important question is who will hear our scholarly *khutba*? Will those who would most benefit hearing about Islam beyond the stereotypes simply dismiss what we

say as elitist khutzpah? How might we make an impact by exegesis, apart from reciting what the Qur'an is about? For example, the Qur'an speaks about the famous Yemeni dam of ancient Saba (Sheba), destroyed by a divinely sent flood on the unbelievers of the time. But some commentators suggest the real damage was done by a small mouse gnawing away at the base. How much of the Islamophobia prevalent in the media and popular culture could be destroyed by scholars today with a simple click of a different kind of mouse?

Adventures in Cyberspace

A major focus here is on my own limited efforts to go beyond the tower in communicating and educating about Islam and the Middle East. The Internet has been the Apple of my eye for a decade and a half. In the late 90s I began requiring my students to conduct "webservations," assigned reviews of websites, analogous to the once mandatory book reviews. My reasoning was simple. Since fewer students were actually reading the books assigned but were spending many pre-Facebook hours embracing cyberculture, it was the professor who needed to adapt. The idea was to develop critical skills for assessing the rhetoric of websites, especially in courses I taught on Middle East anthropology and Islam. Often I would select a group of websites with conflicting information, forcing my students to confront rigid stereotypes and compare the content to what was read in the course. For example, in a course on Islam taught in 2002, I asked students to watch several online cartoon videos about Osama Bin Laden and isolate the assumptions and distortions of Islam.

The autumn of 2002 provided an opportunity to conduct an online virtual seminar on the Qur'an with my own students and those of Bruce Lawrence at Duke University. With a small amount of funding from SSRC, Bruce and I not only created a forum for discussion by our students, but a permanent website for "Online Qur'an Resources" (www.ahjur.org/quran/virqur.htm). This site provides links for websites on all aspects of the Qur'an, including translations, search engines, recitations in Arabic, and interpretation. In addition there are links to the relation between the Qur'an and jihad, justice, and science. As an experiment we put up several sites that are Islamophobic in nature and attack the Qur'an as a resource for critical assessment. The digital corpus collected was meant to be a resource with minimal commentary, a pool for creative pedagogical engagement rather than an endorsement, although we do provide a commentary on what we regard as representative and fair treatments of Islam in that old-fashioned medium known as the book. If it was good enough for Gutenberg half a

millennium ago, it should still be good enough for us. After all, even though we book airplanes to travel to conferences, we still walk the dog.

In 2005 I graduated from the classroom to a narrow space on the World Wide Web for the launching of the academic blog "Tabsir: Insight on Islam and the Middle East" (www.tabsir.net). This was originally a forum for my own postings. Again the reason was rather simple. I had tried on several occasions, both individually and through my university's Press Room, to respond to problems I saw in newspaper articles and op-ed columns about Islam, but invariably with no result. Submitting and waiting for a response usually meant the point I wanted to make was no longer newsworthy. Not having a last name of Friedman or the theoretical bravado of Dowd, I would be lucky even to get a letter to the editor excerpted. Besides, I had little desire to dummy down my own prose in standard newspaperese. So the blog was born; like most blogs, it had a very small circle of friends and colleagues as a base. Soon the anthropologist Gabriele Marranci joined from the other side of the Atlantic. Between the two of us we managed to post something almost every day, often drawing attention to other Internet resources or republishing other commentaries. At present Tabsir has a dozen scholars, some more active than others, including anthropologists, historians, scholars of religion, and poets. To be sure, it is no Daily Kos nor likely to be, but the blog does serve as a forum for informed commentary in a timely and unfiltered manner. If you are reading this essay and have an urge to enter the blogosphere, please consider Tabsir as a base.

In 2006 I attempted to carve out another small segment of cyberspatial geography, this time on behalf of the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association. As President of the section from 2002-2004 one of my major interests was generating a non-subscription-based online journal devoted to the study of Islam and the Middle East as represented in cyberspace and the resulting impact of the Internet on Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures. Encouraged by Jon Anderson, one of the earliest academic cybernauts focusing on the role of the Internet, the journal was finally launched in 2006. I chose the title "CyberOrient" for the venture. This was a conscious, and not necessarily widely appreciated, modification of a term ("Orient") that in the post-Said academic milieu had about as much panache (in an academic sense) as Mahometanism and its etymological derivatives. We all know that there is no "Orient" as generally constructed by many discursive "Orientalists" of the past and present. The divide between a term like "Orient" and what it was supposed to represent was a fault line that ran through university classrooms as well as popular culture. That was the beauty of the term for describing representation in cyberspace, where

what is represented can only be imagined through pixels and encountered through mouse clicks. To label the issue "CyberOrient" was to admit from the start that whatever reality is, it is being distorted.

I know why it is that most successful journals are now run by major presses, even those that used to be published in-house by professional organizations. To protect the limited budget of my section, I bit the bullet (or more appropriately bit the byte) and worked with a former student to design the online journal with a user-friendly content-management system. This took some time, especially since the system I was using transformed from something called Mambo to something else called Joomla in the process. But with moral support from two dozen colleagues, the journal surfaced (www. cyberorient.net). I suspect that most of the readers of this essay have never heard of *CyberOrient.* Although individual scholars can write books, create syllabi and generate conference papers, starting up a journal with a good idea is like trying to grow a temperamental flower in a field of weeds. The combination of my own busy schedule, limited tech ability beyond the basics and sheer massiveness of the Internet has been, in a word, staggering.

Does *CyberOrient* have a future? As founding editor, I can now say that it does. Considering that virtually all scholars doing fieldwork or any other kind of analysis of Islam and Middle Eastern cultures are coming to rely on the Internet and its resources in one way or another, there is plenty that could be said and written about this process. Given the spread of Internet access outside Europe and America, the impact of this new medium is of increasing relevance, especially for the younger generations who will be taking it for granted. Cyberspace allows for a virtual Ummah unlike any gathering of Muslims before. Despite attempts by some governments to block access to certain kinds of sites, the diversity of voices and views suggests that major changes are under way in the ways Muslims identify themselves and are represented by others. The need for an interdisciplinary forum on this *CyberOrient* is obvious. I personally had no interest in switching the fledging online journal to a publishing house that requires subscription. The proliferation of new journals (I can speak from personal experience, since I also co-edit one of these) about Islam or the Middle East since 2000 alone is staggering. But what individual scholar, let along university library, can keep up with the new titles? There are more opportunities than ever before to get your work published, but in the process what you write is less and less available to readers who might be interested.

So why has it taken so long for *CyberOrient* to take off? My feeble attempts to generate interest on a few scholarly e-lists and hand out flyers at professional meetings were quite ineffective. Even though it is a peer-

reviewed journal, there have been virtually no submissions. I suspect that even colleagues who know about the journal have limited interest because it is not an "established" journal. A tenure-file c.v. looks better with an article published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* or *Middle East Journal* than a strange title like "*CyberOrient.*" As someone who has reviewed tenure files, I fully understand that. A second problem is academic writing burnout. Unless one has the stamina of an Isaac Asimov, finding time to write for the multiple venues out there is increasingly difficult. Ironically, because most of us now spend so much time using the Internet for personal as well as professional reasons, we have less time to read articles and books and less time to write ourselves. But an even larger problem is the endemic start-up challenge: marketing. Whether creating an online journal or a blog, how does one get the word out? Most of us rely far too heavily on Google, which has catapulted Wikipedia to an authoritative stature that dwarfs common sense. There may be millions of websites out there, but when push comes to click the usual suspects are the ones that rise to the top.

The solution to my *CyberOrient* dilemma has been one that requires a page from the capitalist business world. When a company is not profitable (even if they make a great product), unite in some way with another company. There are actually several major forums out there for anyone interested in Islam and the Internet. Two of these are based in Europe. Gary Bunt, based at the University of Wales, has written three important books on Islamic cyberspace, has an online webliography (http://www.virtuallyislamic.com/) and maintains an active blog (http://virtuallyislamic.blogspot.com/). Back in the United States, Alan Godlas maintains an important website on "Islam and Islamic Studies Resources" (http://www.uga.edu/islam/), as well as a Yahoo discussion group devoted specifically to the study of Sufism (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sufis_without_borders/). Vit Sisler, based in Prague, founded and maintains Digital Islam (http://www.digitalislam.eu/) with a wide array of resources. In 2010 we joined forces so that cyberorient. net and digitalislam.edu are linked together, the former a peer reviewed journal and the latter a forum for commentaries and information. To the extent we academics are preaching to a very limited choir, our hair only goes part way down that Ivory Tower to the ground where what we say might have a beneficial effect. So I am pleased to have found a more significant venue for the journal I started.

Having both a blog and an online journal as a base, in October 2008 I was able to at least embolden those of us in the Ivory Tower with the publication of an online "Statement of Concerned Scholars about Islamophobia in the 2008 U.S. Election Campaign" (http://tabsir.net/?page_id=672). This started

out as a post on the Islam e-list of the American Academy of Religion. In the end by word of mouth, email and cross-listing (even on the online portal of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) the number of individual scholars signing on reached 150. In terms of the overall election coverage, this was a small amount, but for many of us it was an opportunity to demonstrate our concern over Islamophobia independent of political preferences. The Islamophobia, or perhaps better styled MisIslamothropy, prevalent after the election is an ongoing concern that I have been able to thread in the blog Tabsir. The peddlers of "Islamofascism" and outright tale-wogging of Middle Easterners will not be destroyed by what we as academics say, but a measure of mitigation can only help. A rational argument will not empty the hate out of a racist, but there is always a need to counter the stereotypes and misrepresentation about people most of us have devoted a lifetime to studying.

Becoming a "Jackademic of All Trades"

The point of this essay is not just to talk about what I have tried to do as a scholar in cyberspace, but also to suggest ways we in academe can communicate beyond the tower both virtually and virtuously. My first comment is a caution, based in part on what I just described above. We as academics are in danger of being enticed into the role of an instant expert on anything having to do with Islam or the geographical space proscribed by the term "Middle East." I call this the trope of becoming a "jackademic of all trades." I freely admit that we are easily seduced into such a role. I have shaken my head so many times watching the "talking heads" on cable news and documentaries that I often feel as though I could easily do better than that. I was contacted at one point by a BBC radio program and asked to be interviewed about veiling in the Middle East. This is not my special focus as a scholar, but I have certainly read a fair amount on the topic and know where to find relevant information. The show was quite professional and the comments I made were presented fairly. I believe I contributed to debunking some popular stereotypes such as the notion that Muslims invented veiling or that veiling was only a symbol of male oppression. In all respects I consider that experience a plus. On another occasion I was asked by the Public Relations department of my university (on about an hour's notice) if I could give an interview to a local cable news network about an outrageous claim made by local Representative Peter King that the mosques on Long Island were hotbeds of terrorism. I was certainly eager to counter such a spurious claim. The cameraman and reporter arrived to my office without having any idea what King had said; I pulled up the video about his

remarks from a major cable news source. The reporter had little idea what to ask, so basically asked me to think of questions. I spoke for about 15 minutes. What appeared that night on the news segment was about 15 seconds. The quote extracted was "He has done this before." Indeed I said that, but what it had to do with the issue escapes me. None of the commentary I made about why the statement was inappropriate made it through the clipping process. To make matters worse, the cameraman filmed me at such a bizarre angle, that when I leaned back a little in my chair it looked like I was laying down in the business section of an overseas flight.

While there are both positive and negative examples for anyone who is interviewed in the media, I raise the issue of when and how we might go beyond what we know quite well to commenting on issues on which we may not be experts. Of course, we do this all the time in our classrooms, called upon to teach subjects or lectures that do not require substantive expertise to introduce topics to students who have little or no prior knowledge. Yes, we are more qualified than most in such a context, but there is always the danger that we overextend or in ignorance repeat information that is wrong. I know quite a bit about "Islam," as my publications suggest, but I do not begin to know everything, nor am I qualified to comment on many issues except in a most general and non-professional way. I am certainly entitled to give opinions, but the hubris at times inherent in the academic worldview easily inflates a sense of competence into the nonsense of mere self-importance. Here is the dilemma: might what I say when I am outside my comfort zone in a public forum such as cyberspace cause the head of someone who really knows the subject to shake sideways? Unlike books and journal articles, which tend to fade quickly from scrutiny, what is uploaded on a website may stay there indefinitely, even after we think the site content has been deleted.

The problem is not expertise as such. Postmodern distrust of metatheoretical academic experts suggests at times that all knowledge is relative and that the Nietzschean twist of truth-as-illusion justifies contempt for those experts viewed as opponents. When it comes to medicine and technology, we have no problem recognizing expertise or at least wishing for it. The same holds true for academic pursuits. Borrowing from the methodological liberation of the scientific method, the measure of expertise should be the pragmatic fit with a perceived reality and not an abstract categorically philosophical imperative. Perhaps we need to replace the notion that academics are "know-it-alls" with the idea that knowing enough to make progress or make sense is sufficient. Our worldly engagement, as Edward Said once noted, is a defining element of being

an intellectual. We should not turn down the opportunity to be talking heads; the important thing is not to let it go to our heads.

Neurosis of Neutrality

Mitigation is a profoundly misunderstood process. The zero-sum mentality of binarily dividing the world into good and evil, conservative and liberal, us and other pervades the Ivory Tower and popular public culture. Thus, if I take issue with and argue against stereotypes of Muslims, am I by definition an apologist for Islam? There is so much misrepresentation and outright hateful writing about Muslims, Arabs and the range of "Oriental" others that the lifetime of a scholar interested in Islam could easily be taken over by countering the false and misleading information both within and beyond the tower. It is hard to be even-handed, no matter how hard one tries, given the level of vitriolic screed denigrating Islam and Middle Eastern cultures. When I watch an alleged documentary in which the central tenets of Islam are subsumed under the image of wild Nazi goose stepping, my immediate reaction is anything but conciliatory. Propaganda, no matter what bias it propagates, militates against neutrality.

In the post 9/11 climate almost anyone who cautions against equating Islam with terrorism, for example, is accused of siding with the terrorists. Any professor who in a classroom might discuss the political oppression of Palestinians by Israel is liable to be targeted for inclusion in an online rogues gallery of campus watchful partisan eyes. In both cases the underlying assumption is that there is something fundamentally (usually fundamentalistically wrong) in being a Muslim or a Palestinian. Perfunctory caveats aside, the bottom line among the clash mongers is that the only good Muslim is a Western Culture loving Muslim. The prejudice against Islam, like the lingering racism against blacks, is ever near the surface. Consider the sad statistical fact that in April 2009, one in ten of the respondents in a Pew Foundation survey were convinced President Obama is a Muslim and that only five out of ten were sure he was Christian. The conflation of competing hate faults in the case of President Obama is highlighted by a placard held aloft at an April 15, 2009 anti-tax tea party in Arizona. On the sign was a picture of Hitler with the face of "Barack Hussein Obama." On another sign President Obama was depicted as bowing to the Saudi King Fahd and reaching for the genital-level "jewels" of the custodian of the two holy cities. In such images, fueled by rightwing pundits and sore electoral losers, being black and being Muslim and being a Nazi killer and being a sex pervert are all the same.

At times it seems as though there is no need to defend something that is so blatantly obvious, for example the simple case that Barack Obama is not a practicing Muslim, nor that he took office swearing an oath on the Qur'an. Lunatic raving usually fades without an audience to perpetuate it. Cyberspace, however, greatly expands the lunatic fringe both in politics and religion. This is true both for those who hate Islam and those who hate the West for hating Islam. Fortunately, sane voices do break through from time to time. Perhaps the most powerful example during the last election was the eloquent endorsement of candidate Obama by General Colin Powell, who asked the simple question of why it should be a problem to be a Muslim. To the extent our work as academics spreads the same message, the Ivory Tower is both served and breached at the same time.

Apart from having our neutrality left in our office, there is a deeper question worth discussing between colleagues. To what extent does fair treatment in our analysis of Islam or political issues in the Middle East result in too fine a balance, a failure to take a moral stand. This is perhaps the neurosis of neutrality, the idea that we need to cover both sides and be careful about taking sides. When I teach about Islam in a classroom, my goal in a secular institution is not to proselytize nor serve as an apologetic for the religion. Part of the process of teaching students about Islam is to break down the stereotypes most have been exposed to. Another necessary part involves showing the diversity of viewpoints, both historical and cultural, that are assumed under the rubric "Islam." Although there are numerous textbooks available, most recreate a normative view of Islam from the ubiquitous five pillars to the meaning of jihad in the modern world. An alternative way to engage students in the wider diversity is through websites, which range from traditional viewpoints to the fringe in all directions. Exposing students in a classroom setting to the diversity of views by Muslims and about Islam does not necessarily mean being neutral about what is being said. The range of rhetoric and propaganda provides a worldly resource for applying critical thinking skills.

Neutrality, in the sense of considering opposing views, is not the same as a naïve form of cultural relativism in which critical assessment is divorced from moral engagement. I guide students through Islamophobic, racist, ethnocentric and sexist rhetoric to encourage critical skills based on logic and thinking beyond the dogma box. To what extent, then, should I encourage students to be as critical of specific Muslim perspectives as I am about their detractors? One sensitive issue that is still newsworthy was cast into the media spotlight a few years ago with the Danish cartoon controversy. Like the earlier public debate over author Salman Rushdie's *The*

Satanic Verses, the depictions of Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper resulted in anger and violence in many Muslim contexts. Although most mainstream newspapers and media outlets did not show the actual images, in deference to the ban on such images of the Prophet in Islamic tradition, the full range was available with a click of the mouse on Internet sites. The Wikipedia entry on the topic provided links to websites with the images, but only showed a historic miniature of Muhammad by Muslims and for Muslims from a Turkish source. Some contemporary purists started a petition to have Wikipedia remove this historic image.

Images, often more than words, provide useful teaching moments. While I would think twice about asking a class on Islam to look at images which would offend them, I would not want to approve the notion that it is wrong in itself for such cartoon images to be looked at, even for Muslims who freely choose to see what the problem is. But I would not hesitate, as a scholar, to show an artistic rendition of Muhammad made within an Islamic culture several centuries ago when it obviously was not banned outright at the time. The debate over the ban on such images is important. Neutrality commands respect for the sensitivities of others, but it does not grant all opposing views a license to avoid scrutiny. The meaning of diversity cannot be communicated if only one view is considered appropriate. As in all pedagogical effort, a balance must be struck between too rigid a framework and outright offense.

Cyberspace is by nature politically uncorrect. There are no doubt as many offensive sites readily available with the proper (or improperly typed) url as there are valuable resources for personal or professional use. To return to the metaphor of the panel, we as academics have no choice but to reach beyond the tower, since the Ivory Tower of our academic heritage is no longer isolated. Every time we log on, the tower's walls disappear. Those who take the chance and free float into www-land do so no longer clothed in the cloaking device of professional ivy expertise. When the classroom expands to an infinitely expanding network, we will soon be laughed at as intellectual emperors with no clothes or else far too clothes-minded in our old ways. Most of us do not desire to be missionaries for Islam or any of the cultures we study, although we have little choice but to hack through (in the positive cybernautic sense) the piles of propaganda and mounds of misinformation. If remaining neutral in this process is nothing more than locking ourselves out of the positive force of moral engagement with the issues we study, we will continue to draw salaries, stimulate a student here and there, and do little else to escape the cell made for us. ❧