CHAPTER 1

Imagining the Other

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The relationship of “Judeo-Christian” and Muslim civilizations is like that of amnesic siblings: both have trouble remembering the Self’s kinship with the Other. Memories of their shared Abrahamic parentage appear to be lost in a foggy haze; yet, they persist in an old sibling rivalry. Ironically, each imagines the Other to be alien in values, even though Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a fundamentally core vision about humanity’s relationship with God and about the necessity of universal ethics to order human relationships (e.g., Arkoun, 2006; Armstrong, 1994; Chandler, 2007; Gopin, 2009; Volf, 2011). There are significant differences between the Abrahamic traditions in theology and ritual practice; however, no other three religions “form so intimate a narrative relationship as do the successive revelations of monotheism” telling “a single continuous story” (Neuser, Chilton & Graham, 2002, p. viii) that runs from the Old Testament to the New Testament and from the Bible to the Qur’an.

Not only do the worldviews of these religions have a common basis, but their historical relationships are also profoundly intersected (e.g., Goody, 2004; Hobson, 2004; Matar, 2003). Despite the contemporary characterization of “the West” as primarily “Judeo-Christian,” Muslims have been integral to the evolution of European civilization. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment would not have been possible without the vast infusions of knowledge from Muslims in the later medieval period (e.g., Al-Rodhan, 2012; Belting, 2011; Garcia, 2012; Tolan, Laurens & Veinstein, 2012). Among the vital contributions of numerous Muslim scholars is the influence of Ibn Rushd (known in Latin as “Averroes,” d. 1198) on the development of European philosophical rationalism, Ibn Tufayl (“Aben Tofail,” d. 1185) on epistemology, Ibn al-Haytham (“Alhazen,” d. 1040) on scientific...
empirical observation, al-Khwarizmi (“Algoritmi,” d. 850) on mathematics, Jabir ibn Hayyan (“Gerber,” d. 815) on chemistry, al-Razi (“Rhazes,” d. 925), al-Zahrawi (“Abulcassis,” d. 1013) and Ibn Sina (“Avicenna,” d. 1037) on medicine, and al-Idrisi (d. 1165) on geography. As Hobson notes in this book, the rise of Western civilization would not have been possible if not for Europe’s borrowing from the scientific and technological advancements produced by Muslims. The “voyages of discovery” would have not occurred without the vital transfers of maritime knowledge and instruments necessary for long sea journeys.

Muslims also owe important debts to other civilizations. Islam’s cosmology was drawn from the sacred histories of its Abrahamic antecedents. The Prophet Muhammad was clear on his message’s close connection to the Judaic and Christian traditions. Jack Goody’s chapter in this book discusses how early Muslims adopted the cultures of existing civilizations neighbouring the Arabian peninsula. The formulation of Islamic philosophy, theology, and law was significantly indebted to learning acquired from Jewish and Christian teachers (Fakhry, 1983). The followers of Judaism and Christianity as well as those of other religions played a significant role in “Islamicate” civilization (Hodgson, 1974). However, the contributions of each to the other have generally been written out of Western and Muslim societies’ respective historical memories. This has promoted a cultural ignorance that has had the consequence of seeing each other as profoundly alien.

The vital role of Muslim philosophers and scientists is generally presented as a mere footnote in contemporary narratives of Western history, and the Jewish and Christian foundations of Islamic creeds remain largely unacknowledged by Muslims. On both sides, educational curricula, popular history, and the media are largely silent about the interdependent development of Western and Muslim civilizations. Their reciprocal tendencies of viewing the Other with suspicion does not allow for the inclusion of the history of mutually beneficial and productive relations stretching over 1,400 years. On the other hand, the intermittent conflict between them is singled out as a primary form of engagement between the two. These mutual perceptions are not unique to the relationship between Western and Muslim societies; they are typical of the social constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) that shape the ways in which human beings view each other (Vuorinen, 2012). However, the primary images of the Other reciprocally held by these two groups have had a global impact on promoting major conflicts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

It is human tendency to imagine the world as divided into the Self and the Other. Such concepts operate in the mind as primary organizing ideas