

## **Beyond Clashing Symbols, Toward an Epidemic of Sanity**

Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk

Since September 11, many pundits have claimed that conflicts in the world today are manifestations of clashing Islamic and Western value systems. However plausible such arguments may sound in the abstract, the stunning moral incoherence of recent events in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, and Saudi Arabia suggests otherwise. From Abu Ghraib to Khobar, both Westerners and Muslims are engaging in self-defeating actions which betray values that people around the world hold sacred. Rather than a deep conflict of principles, we witness a dangerously superficial clash of symbols, in which violent confrontations erode the sacred values upon which human coexistence depends.

In Iraq, new images of sexually abused Iraqi prisoners and gloating guards surface every week. To “protest” these degrading and humiliating acts, militants associated with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi have videotaped the grisly execution of Nicholas Berg, and terrorists in Saudi Arabia have committed comparable offenses against foreign workers in Khobar. Meanwhile, in Israel-Palestine, a Likud-led government has continued to seek security for Israeli homes by bulldozing the homes of Palestinians, and armed Palestinians in Gaza have attempted to trade the body parts of slain Israeli soldiers for imprisoned comrades.

Mesmerized by clashing symbols, Americans, Israelis and Muslims have become indifferent to the values that their sacred traditions are said to embody. Cut off from these values by the adrenaline of combat as well as by contempt for dehumanized adversaries, they champion symbolic goods that are increasingly devoid of substance. Every action has become a defense of state, nation, or religion, yet in reality nothing is sacred.

To understand the moral contradictions of war and terror, we must recognize that the problem is not an incompatibility of cultural values, but rather a failure to practice them. Torturing prisoners is anti-American, and demolishing houses is an affront to Israeli values. Likewise, slaughtering civilians and bartering with the dismembered remains of enemy combatants is profoundly un-Islamic. Yet the clash of symbols obscures these facts.

Haunted by fear of extremist violence, Americans and Israelis are finding symbols of Islamic religious expression repellent. Likewise, Muslims who are upset about cultural and political imperialism are seeing explicit anti-Islamic statements in symbols of Western culture. Muslims are refusing to recognize real Western and Israeli achievements, while Westerners and Israelis are reducing Islam to a set of practices that denigrate women and reject tolerance. By relying upon the worst offenses committed by adversaries to establish their own comparative virtue, both sides are neglecting ethical guidelines that normally circumscribe their behavior. Both sides are retreating into fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is a politicization of group values and symbols. It occurs when, under pressure of insecurity, a community selects a narrow subset of basic tenets from their tradition to generate criteria for invidious comparisons with outsiders. For Muslims, fundamentalism consists of an explicitly religious condemnation of foreign intrusions and influences. For Westerners and Israelis, the fundamentalist impulse finds expression in a culturally triumphalist outlook that uses liberal democracy and free market economy to justify military dominance.

When groups in conflict respond to provocations with unprocessed emotion, they allow specific contradictions and threat perceptions to define their entire relationship. The resultant fundamentalist

posturing implies a refusal to listen to the “other.” Yet a return to the larger frame of a culture and its humane values, always present if sought for, can open up space for understanding and cooperation.

To fixate on symbols that trigger an “us versus them” mentality is to endure a psychopathic condition. This confusion of symbolic form with substance is precisely what drove the terrorists who struck at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon: the United States is not a series of buildings that can be brought down, and destroying external forms does not damage the spirit that built them. Similarly, the “martyrdom” of a Palestinian suicide bomber does little to advance the cause of Palestinian liberation, and absolutely nothing to diminish Israeli achievements in science and technology. Preoccupation with eliminating leaders like Abdel Aziz Rantissi, Rehavam Zeevim, and Izzedin Salim is also a counterproductive symbolic action that displaces serious conflict analysis.

Americans, Israelis, and Muslims have much to gain from moving beyond symbols, and toward genuine openness to new experiences of the “other.” Instead of retreating into deep subjectivity, we need to develop a process of communication capable of generating deeper insight. Only active engagement through sustained dialogue can help us to discover the common humanity concealed by symbols and obscured by fear, anger, and insecurity.

A process of sustained dialogue among Americans, Israelis, and Muslims should not rush to achieve immediate rewards. Rather, it should seek to help each community understand how the other communities express their basic concerns, while encouraging all parties to work together in the discovery and creation of shared meanings and values. This would generate acknowledgement of similarities as well as differences between ideals, and provide bases for advancing these ideals in cooperative ways.

As shareholders in a common Abrahamic enterprise, Americans, Israelis, and Muslims need to experience themselves “in relationship” rather than “out of relationship.” We must find meaning in the common tragedy of our estrangement as well as in the possibility of healing and reconciliation. We must also reconsider traditional ways of construing the values that divide us in dichotomous terms – i.e., “individualism versus community,” “reason versus passion,” “science versus faith,” “materialism versus spirituality,” and “freedom to do versus freedom to be.” When cultures view these sets of values as “either/or” rather than “both/and,” they are more likely to find themselves locked into adversarial relationships.

By recognizing that seemingly opposed values can complement and reinforce each other, we can transcend the clash of symbols, opening new possibilities for peaceful intercultural relations and full development of the human personality. We can overcome our present failures to uphold humane values, and affect a genuine and substantive reinvestment of the sacred in our lives.

969 words

*Abdul Aziz Said is professor and director of international peace and conflict resolution at American University. Nathan C. Funk is a visiting assistant professor at George Washington University.*

June 1, 2004

v.9