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The literal truth about terrorism: an analysis of post-9/11 popular US non-fiction books on terrorism

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SPECIAL SECTION: TERRORISM AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIASCAPES

The literal truth about terrorism: an analysis of post-9/11 popular US non-fiction books on terrorism

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More books with the word ‘terrorism’ in the title have been published in the twenty-first century than the combined total of all such books prior to that. Over half of these were on the subject of ‘Islamic terrorism’. The sheer volume of such texts, without even taking into consideration their contents, contributed to rendering as ‘true’, the existence of the phenomenon they publicised. Such an increase in the literature on the subject of Islamic terrorism was made possible by an overall relaxation of usually strict enunciative rules and regulations governing discursive production. This article explores the effects of the loosening of the latter controls through an analysis of popular non-fiction books published on the subject of terrorism in the United States in the early years of the ‘war on terror’ and the authors of these books, as the existence of these texts – never mind their influence – has been ignored by terrorism scholars to date.

Keywords: best-sellers; discourse; Foucault; Hirsu Ali; Islam; *Jihad*; Muslim; Spencer

In the War on Terror knowledge is power. (George W. Bush, 2001)

Introduction: enunciating contemporary terrorism

Acts of terrorism, as has come to be widely accepted in the twenty-first century, are acts of violence threatened or carried out against Western civilisation by Evildoers – Arab/Muslim barbarians who are fanatical in their belief in Islam and hatred of liberal norms. The degree of truth that this knowledge of terrorism has attained in the first decade of the twenty-first century is such that it has become nigh on impossible for Western societies to *think otherwise*: not only is the terrorist nothing but an Evildoer, but also only an Evildoer can be a terrorist. Just how *true* this truth about terrorism is at present became evident on 22 July 2011 when Anders Behring Breivik, a 32-year-old Norwegian man took the lives of 77 people in a politically motivated killing spree. In the first two hours or so after Breivik’s attacks began, the media and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic jumped to what the United Kingdom’s *The Guardian* newspaper called ‘the obvious conclusion’: the attacks were being carried out against Norway by ‘Islamic radicals’.¹ Television news stations, Internet editions of newspapers, and social media pundits’ coverage of the attacks

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were all initially framed in this way, some even calling it ‘Norway’s 9/11’ (Flynn and Hughes 2011).²This ‘truth’ about the terrorist as an Evildoer became more evident when the said ‘terrorism experts’ hastily distanced themselves from Breivik as details of his identity began to emerge. Despite the clearly stated political motives behind Breivik’s destructive violence,³ the terror that it engendered, and the Norwegian (and international) laws that defined Breivik’s actions as ‘terrorism’, Norway – and Western societies at large – struggled to name, speak of, judge, and punish Breivik as a terrorist once it became clear that the killer was ‘blonde, tall’, ‘Nordic looking’, ‘native Norwegian’; read ‘Not a Muslim therefore not an Evildoer’. Thus, his actions could not *really* be terrorism.

This article is a partial explanation of how this ‘truth’ came to be. For this purpose, it analyses the body of ‘popular literature’ on the subject of terrorism published in the United States in the first 10 years of the ‘war on terror’, drawing on the concept of the ‘will to truth’ as detailed in Foucault’s *The Order of Discourse* (Foucault 1981, pp. 48–78). Western thought since Classical Greece has been dominated by what Foucault described as ‘the great myth’: that knowledge and power are independent of each other. It is this myth that allows the division between true and false, when viewed from inside of a discourse, to be seen as ‘neither arbitrary nor modifiable nor institutional nor violent’. When the myth is cast aside, it is possible to see that what is accepted as true is the result of a system of exclusion, ‘a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system’, which Foucault called the ‘will to truth’ (1972, p. 35). The latter, although the most influential, is just one of a number of forms of control to which the production of knowledge is generally subjected. Foucault describes three distinctive categories of such control: external, internal, and enunciative. Along with the ‘will to truth’, two other systems of external exclusion exist, of which ‘prohibition’ is the most obvious.

‘Prohibition’ refers to the fact that not everyone is entitled to speak about everything under whatever circumstances:

not all regions of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some of them are largely forbidden (they are differentiated and differentiating), while others seem to be almost open to all winds and put at the disposal of every speaking subject without prior restrictions. (Foucault 1981, pp. 61–62)

Taboos are placed on certain objects of speech, certain rituals have to be followed according to circumstance, and there are certain privileges or rights the speaking subject must possess before being permitted to speak. The third system of externally imposed discursive exclusion is the division between madness and folly: the rejection of certain discourses from being allowed within its limits on grounds that it is devoid of reason while accepting other speech as composed of reason. These three types of external control work together, reinforcing and compensating for each other, thereby forming a complex and constantly changing discursive grid. The ‘will to truth’ dominates the other two forms of external control, invades and assimilates them while itself growing ‘stronger, deeper, and more impeccable’ (Foucault 1981, p. 56).

In addition to the external controls described above, Foucault identifies two other types of procedures that limit and organise discourse and constrain what can be produced as true knowledge: internal and enunciative. Internal controls organise, classify, and distribute through commentary, the establishment of disciplines, and through the role of the author. Enunciative control refers to the qualification to speak: the subjection of discourse or rarefaction among speaking subjects. It means that generally ‘none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so’ (Foucault 1981, p. 62). Whereas previously the field of terrorism appears to

have been subject to strong enunciative controls, only admitting credentialed ‘experts’, in the decade following the 9/11 attacks it was reincarnated as a discourse ‘open to all winds’ (Foucault 1981, p. 62).

This becomes clear from the eclectic mix of authors contributing to American terrorism discourse during this period: Adam Dorin (2007), an ex-army anaesthesiologist, prepared the American public for a possible attack on the United States through its health system by advising them on how to anticipate such an attack by ‘thinking like a terrorist’. A ‘comprehensive history of the terrorist organisations waging war in the twenty-first century’ was provided by Tamara Orr, a ‘children’s author’ and ‘homeschooling expert’. Orr’s *Islamic Jihad in Egypt* (2003), which promises ‘an invaluable glimpse into the inner workings of the world’s most shadowy armies’, is only one in her catalogue of over 200 books covering many fields of expertise including liver cancer (2009), Greek mythology (2008), Avian flu (2007a), and date rape (2007b). Another children’s author who provided insight into the new enemy was Patricia D. Netzley, the author of over 50 books for children, young adults, and adults, who turned her highly adaptable expertise to the subject of ‘terrorism’ a few years after the 9/11 attacks, publishing an encyclopaedia on the subject (2007). Previously, her expertise had included witchcraft (2006), UFOs (2000a), unicorns (2000b), and alien abductions (2000c). Contributions were also made to the terrorism literature by physicist David Jonsson, who first explored the ‘clash of ideologies’ between Islam and Christianity (2005) and later warned of an Islamist strategy for ‘achieving world domination’ and ‘Islamisation of the West’ by ‘controlling currency, oil resources, free trade zones, transportation media and financial markets’ (2006). Jonsson had learnt ‘the basic tenants [*sic*] of Islam as a political, economic and religious system’ through work that ‘brought him to more than fifteen countries with significant or majority populations who are Muslim’. He also became ‘proficient in Islamic law (*Shariah*) through contract negotiation and personal encounter’ (Jonsson 2009).

The relaxation of the usually strict rules regarding the qualifications of the speaking subject, which previously would have excluded many from entry into the discourse, clearly increased hugely the number of people speaking the ‘truth’ about terrorism in the past decade. Added to this was the fact that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the American public gained a substantial part of their knowledge of terrorism from a media that was highly patriotic, strongly propagandist, and largely biased (Eisman 2003, Altheide and Grimes 2005, Matsaganis and Payne 2005). The most popular authors on terrorism in the United States during this period were those who repeated the same ‘truth’, and they were also the figures who (re)speke this ‘truth’ to large audiences across almost every media platform from television to print and radio to the Internet. The present analysis largely focuses upon popular non-fiction books published on the subject of terrorism in the United States in the early years of the ‘war on terror’ and the authors of these books, as the existence of these texts – never mind their influence – has been ignored by terrorism scholars to date.

Knowledge (*savoir*), as Foucault said, is found not only within the covers of books judged as ‘academic’, but also in ‘fiction, reflexion, narrative accounts, institutional regulations, and political decisions’ (1972, p. 202). Excluding from our analyses books written on the subject of terrorism by authors who do not have formal institutional affiliations, the requisite educational or professional credentials, and are not published by academic presses, means leaving out a substantial portion of the texts on terrorism that were produced during this period, as well as excluding from discussion and analysis some of the most widely read texts on terrorism of the last decade. This analysis is also important for another reason: it demonstrates the drastic changes that took place in the enunciative forms of control exercised on the production of terrorism knowledge in American society during

the ‘war on terror’ that would not be possible to demonstrate in an analysis limited to the ‘serious’ terrorism literature. Furthermore, both academic and non-academic discourses are underwritten by the same ‘will to truth’; therefore, this author sees no reason why these two categories should remain rigidly distinct. This article therefore treats popular post-9/11 US non-fiction terrorism books as integral a part of the prodigious machinery that produces the ‘true’ knowledge of terrorism as the ‘mainstream’ academic/scientific literature on terrorism that has been shown by Critical Terrorism Studies scholars to serve the same purpose.

Only in America

Every society has its own major narratives,

which are recounted, repeated and varied; formulae texts, and ritualised sets of discourses which are recited in well defined circumstances; things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure. (Foucault 1981, p. 56)

Commentary, through repetition of the old in an endless number of ‘new’ ways, imposes on the narratives an identity and *sameness*, making the discourse finite, while providing the opportunity for infinite variation and repetition:

By a paradox which it always displaces but never escapes, the commentary must say for the first time what had, nonetheless, already been said, and must tirelessly repeat what had, however, never been said. (Foucault 1981, p. 58)

The popular non-fiction books on terrorism published in the United States during the first decade of the twenty-first century, although focusing on what was said to be the ‘new Islamic terrorism’ instead were very much founded upon *old* narratives. These texts repeated in new ways centuries-old American narratives of Orientalism, American Exceptionalism, and manifest destiny. American Exceptionalism, which holds that America occupies a unique place in history that is fundamentally different from all other countries and thus a ‘God-given destiny’ to guide the rest of the world according to its own political, social, and economic values (Lipset 1996), is a foundational ‘new world’ narrative. Along with the belief in America’s ‘manifest destiny’ (see Campbell 1998),⁴ American Exceptionalism remains prominent in American politics and society right up to the present time. The role of these narratives in American foreign policy decision-making and identity formation has been widely evidenced (see, e.g. Campbell 1998).

For the first three years following the 9/11 attacks, ‘Islamic terrorism’ was the focus of over half the research published in the English language on the subject of terrorism (Silke 2009, p. 43). Within seven years, enough knowledge existed on ‘Islamic terrorism’ to warrant an anthology of its theories and practice (see Perry and Negrin 2008). In these ‘new’ texts, on the subject of ‘new terrorism’, the new ‘lies not in what is said but in the event of its turn’ (Foucault 1981, p. 58). Recall the discursive practices of Medieval Europe and North American puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Islam was used to bolster the piety of Christian populations through the portrayal of the religion as a heresy and Mohammed as a false prophet. Also bring to mind the Barbary captivity narratives in which Europeans and North Americans taken as slaves by North African Muslims

told their stories of extreme cruelty suffered at the hands of the ‘barbaric’ followers of Mahomet (Kidd 2003, Naseem 2011, ch. 2). These narratives were employed historically as a powerful rhetorical device to discredit the perceived enemies of Christianity and ‘Western civilisation’. As Thomas Kidd has argued, these rhetorical uses of Islam became increasingly secularised over time:

Early in the [eighteenth] century, Islam was typically used for religious purposes in religious debates while later commentators often took knowledge ‘derived’ from observations of despotic Islamic states to support political points. Although one should hesitate to describe early Americans as conversant with Islam, they certainly conversed about Islam regularly. (Kidd 2003, p. 766)

The same can be said about American discourse in the early twenty-first century. Americans certainly conversed about Islam a lot during the first decade of the century. An overwhelming majority of the conversations were in the context of terrorism. This linking of Islam and terrorism had the effect of not only reinvigorating the use of Islam as a rhetorical device in political discourse, but also allowed the domain of terrorism – equated with Islam – to become a part of religious discourse.

Islam qua violent *jihad*, violent *jihad* qua Islam

The main leitmotif in popular post-9/11 US non-fiction terrorism books is the concept of Muslims waging a Holy War against the West. This is a concept made possible by the combined reanimation of two old narratives: that of a barbaric Islam clashing with the civilised West and the inherently violent nature of the Islamic religion. The old narrative of Islam versus the West had been strongly reactivated before the 9/11 attacks with Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis (1993), around the same time that the ‘new religious terrorism’ discourse began to emerge. Despite its many critics (O’Hagan 1995, Said 2001, Henderson 2005), Huntington’s thesis of ‘civilisational realism’ (Salter 2002, p. 131) – which predicted that in the post-Cold War world the primary source of conflict would be cultural and religious identities – resonated strongly with many American intellectuals and policy-makers. The divisions that appeared in the ‘war on terror’ were taken by many such figures as ‘infallible proof’ of Huntington’s claim that ‘Islam has bloody borders’, and as a manifestation of his predicted clash between Islam and the West (Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 253). The books examined in this article were built on this thesis, which was itself built on existing narratives of Orientalism, barbarism, and American Exceptionalism. The validity of this narrative of an Islamic Holy War against the West would not have been possible without its connections to the discourse of the inherent violence of Islam.

Early Christian discursive practices rarefied the discourse of Islam as being violent from its very origin. In contemporary discourses of terrorism, Islam’s congenital savagery is predicated upon emphasising a single meaning of the concept of *jihad* to the exclusion of all others. *Jihad*, in Islamic teachings, is of two basic types: internal and external. Internal *jihad* or *ijtihād* refers to individual spiritual striving while the external *jihad* takes the form of a just war waged against enemies of Islam. Whereas a majority of Muslims agree that *ijtihād* is superior to violent *jihad*, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and their followers emphasise(d) offensive violent *jihad* as incumbent upon Muslims in fighting the perceived wrongs and injustices committed against Islam by the United States and other

Western powers. The best-selling texts examined herein focused only on violent *jihad*, or ‘Holy War’ as it came to be known.

The concept of *jihad*, during this period, came to be interchangeable in Western discourse with ‘Islamic fundamentalist terrorism’. With titles such as *Jihad: Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism* (Katz 2004), *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (Lewis 2004), *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (Warraq and Bostom 2008), *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad* (Lindsey 2002), *At the Heart of Terror: Islam, Jihadists, and America’s War on Terrorism* (Palmer and Palmer 2007), *Understanding Islamic Terrorism: The Islamic Doctrine of War* (Sookhdeo 2004), *Light in the Shadow of Jihad: The Struggle for Truth* (Zacharias 2002), *God’s Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (Allen 2006), *Jihad and Sacred Vengeance: Psychological Undercurrents of History* (Piven 2002), and *Muhammad’s Monsters: A Comprehensive Guide to Radical Islam for Western Audiences* (Bukay 2004), the rarefaction of the discourses of Islam as violence, terrorism as the new form of this old violence, and Islam as a Christian heresy, began even before readers got to the first word of these texts.

The works of American author Robert Spencer stand out. Spencer began writing on the subject of ‘Islamic terrorism’ after the 9/11 attacks and in the past decade has published 12 books and over 300 articles on the subject.⁵ His *Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (2005), which became a *New York Times* best-seller in 2005, recasts the ‘war on terror’ as ‘the Crusade [the West] must fight’, and (re)introduces Mohammed as a ‘Prophet of War’, while describing the Qur’an, as a ‘Book of War’. Spencer followed this enormously successful publication with *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion* (2006), a *New York Times* best-seller in 2006. All Spencer’s books reiterate the idea of Islam as a religion of war, and mirror the early Christian discourses of Islam as a heresy. His commentary is rarefied and validated through repetition across various media platforms in both the United States and abroad, including on television – Spencer has appeared on *CNN*, *FoxNews*, *PBS*, *MSNBC*, *CNBC*, *C-Span*, *France24*, and *Croatia National Television (HTV)*; national and international radio, including *Vatican Radio*; weekly columns for conservative US publications *Human Events* and *FrontPage Magazine*; in documentary film format as *Islam: What the West Needs to Know* (2006); and on his Jihad Watch⁶ website. In addition to the rarefaction of Spencer’s narrative on these platforms, it was further rendered ‘true’ by its injection into official US governmental discourse via his delivering seminars on Islam and *jihad* for the United States Central Command, United States Army Command and General Staff College, the US Army’s Asymmetric Warfare Group, the FBI, and the US intelligence community.⁷

Spencer has recently gained in notoriety outside of the United States as a result of the utilisation of his writings by the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik (Shane 2011), but Spencer is only one among a large number of US authors to have contributed to the master narrative of an evil monolithic Islam bent on destroying Christianity.

‘New’ Christian discourses on Islam

Terrorism, Jihad, and The Bible (2001) by preacher John F. MacArthur was one of the first books published in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to reactivate the practise of using Islam as a rhetorical device for strengthening Christianity, and using portrayals of Islam as a violent religion in order to do so. MacArthur reanimates the discussion of evil and the Devil in connection with Islam and argues that ‘powers of evil were working through Mohammed’ to invent the religion of Islam and states: ‘If any religion qualifies

as a “doctrine of demons”, Islam does’. According to MacArthur, the 9/11 attacks finally revealed the ‘sinister effects’ of the false religion of Islam: ‘Once the consciences of evil people have been freed to do evil, they will do it’. ‘Obviously’, MacArthur concedes, all followers of Islam have not remained as militant as the early Islamic armies:

[B]ut Mohammed himself was an aggressive, deadly militant, who boasted of killing and robbery and other evil acts in the name of Allah. So there is plenty of warrant in the Islamic belief system for justifying violence and *jihad* in the name of Allah. And the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is simply a return to the militant ‘missionary’ efforts advocated by Mohammed himself.

In MacArthur’s portrayal, Islam is a ‘perverse and evil lie that invariably produces perverted and diabolical deeds’ and it was the religion itself – satanic, demented, and inexorably violent – that caused the terrorist attacks of 9/11. These claims are a repetition of the very same claims made in Humphrey Prideaux’s highly influential *The True Nature of Imposture, Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* published in 1808 in which Muhammad’s ‘lustful’ nature and the inherent falsity and violence of the religion revealed to him is expounded upon at some length. MacArthur’s enunciative authority is considerable. In addition to being an award-winning author who has written a host of US best-selling books,⁸ he also hosts the *Grace to You* radio programme, which according to MacArthur’s website airs more than 800 times daily, reaching all major population centres in the United States as well as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Singapore.⁹

Among other notable early publications postulating an ‘Islamic terrorism’ emerging from the domain of evangelical Christianity is *Unveiling Islam: An Insider’s Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (2002) by brothers Emir and Ergun Caner. The Caner brothers, who had been Muslims, but converted to Christianity in their teens, became leading figures in the American religious sphere after the book’s publication and travelled the country as leading enunciative personalities, repeating their narratives to receptive audiences across America. In *Unveiling Islam*, they dismiss the non-violent meaning of *jihad* in Islamic teachings as nothing more than a ‘politically correct notion’ and disparage those who stress this form of *jihad* over the violent one as ‘talking heads on television’ (Caner and Caner 2009, p. 35). The brothers devote a whole chapter to repeat the narrative of ‘Muhammad: the militant messenger’ (Caner and Caner 2009, p. 38), attribute the Qur’an to the Devil, and expend considerable effort on explaining the alleged interference that Satan ran during Allah’s revelations to Muhammad (Caner and Caner 2009, pp. 40–45). *Unveiling Islam* sold well over 200,000 copies, and won the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) Christian Book Award in 2003. The popular publication’s authority was doubly strengthened by the ‘insider’s look’ into Islam that it alleges to provide, and was the first in a ‘new’ genre of ex-Muslim narratives that flourished in the United States during this period to become one of the most widespread sources of ‘knowledge’ about Islam and its connections with terrorism.¹⁰

Ex-Muslim narratives

There exists within the field of evangelical Christian literature published on the subject of terrorism during this period a specific highly popular sub-genre: biographical narratives of apostate Muslims who have renounced the faith that they were born into and lived to tell the tale of its many inherent savageries.

One of the most prolific contributors to the ‘Islamic terrorism’ literature whose publications are promoted as being endowed with rare insight due to the author’s status as an apostate Muslim is Mark A. Gabriel. A doctoral graduate of Egypt’s Al-Azhar University, the author began his contributions just a few months after the 9/11 attacks by asking: ‘Why do Islamic terrorists do what they do?’ (Gabriel 2002). He has since analysed the ‘unfinished battle’ between ‘Islam and the Jews’ (Gabriel 2003), compared ‘profound differences and surprising similarities’ between Muhammad and Jesus (Gabriel 2004), made a ‘journey into the mind of an Islamic terrorist’ to find out why they hate the West (Gabriel 2006), and shed light on the ‘mysterious attitudes of the Muslim world’ that make it reject noble Western/American ideals of equality and freedom (Gabriel 2007). What is most emphatically stressed in the material promoting Gabriel’s books is his ‘unique background’ of being an ‘ex-Muslim’, which is said to allow him access to the mindset of the Islamic terrorist in ways that ‘most westerners are unable to understand’. He ‘spent his entire childhood in Muslim schools’, but ‘after his conversion to Christianity, his family disowned him, and tried several times to kill him. He escaped his Muslim homeland and eventually settled in the United States, where he chose a Christian name to reflect his new life in Christ’.¹¹ The cruelty that Islam inflicted on him, more than his education at Al-Azhar, is what gave Gabriel such unfettered entry into the United States terrorism discourse. This is evidenced by other ex-Muslims who have found themselves welcomed into the discourse as ‘experts’ with no other qualifications to speak about Islam or terrorism, apart from having once been a follower/victim/perpetrator of the violence that is Islam.

Another prominent example of this type of author is Walid Shoebat, a software engineer by profession, who has thus far contributed three popular books to US terrorism knowledge. One of them, a memoir, *Why I left Jihad: The Root of Terrorism and the Return of Radical Islam* (2005), was a best-seller in the United States. The cover of the book proclaims in bold writing: ‘By Ex-Muslim Terrorist Walid Shoebat’. According to his biographical note, Shoebat had been a ‘radicalised Muslim willing to die for the cause of Jihad until [he] converted to Christianity in 1994’. He was involved in ‘terror activity’ with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and had even planted ‘a bomb in Bethlehem [. . .] which for the grace of God, did not injure anyone’. After chronicling further ‘terror activities’ with Muslims in the United States itself, where Shoebat had emigrated in 1978, he concludes his biographical note thus:

I state the above so you know [. . .] my background and firsthand knowledge of the issue. I speak to the American people to warn and *educate* them about the very great dangers which are very underplayed both by our media and our political leaders. Now that you have brief details of my background, I would like to offer my expert opinion, if you can call me an expert – but perhaps an experienced former terrorist would be more appropriate [my emphasis].¹²

Among the universities that have sought the ‘expert opinion’ of Shoebat are Harvard Law School, Columbia University,¹³ Concordia University, University of California, University of Southern California, University of Georgia, and Washington University. He has also spoken at various US government agencies and institutions, including on Capitol Hill, and has made multiple appearances in the media in the United States and abroad as an expert on ‘Islamic terrorism’, including on *CNN*, *CNN International*, *FOX News*, *ITN*, *NBC*, *CBS*, and *ABC*. The authenticity of the personal narrative, upon which Shoebat’s ‘expert opinion’ is based has since been called into question (Sacirbey 2010, Cincotta 2011), but he continues to be among the experts favoured by US government institutions to provide terrorism education to law enforcement and counterterrorism officials in the United States.

Return of the barbarity pirate narrative: Christians in cruel Muslim hands

In addition to the enunciative value accorded to apostate Muslims who also claim to be ex-terrorists such as Ergun Caner and Walid Shoebat, the United States terrorism discourse also regarded as high-value knowledge stories told by Christians who – like the White slaves taken captive by North Africans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – suffered at the hands of cruel Muslims.

The discursive practices of Brigitte Gabriel, a Christian from Lebanon, stand out in this particular stream of the present day Barbary narratives. The cover of her first book, *Because They Hate: A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America* (2005), introduces her to potential readers thus:

Brigitte Gabriel lost her childhood to militant Islam. In 1975 she was ten years old and living in Southern Lebanon when militant Muslims from throughout the Middle East poured into her country and declared jihad against the Lebanese Christians. Lebanon was the only Christian influenced country in the Middle East, and the Lebanese Civil War was the first front in what has become the worldwide jihad of fundamentalist Islam against non-Muslim peoples. For seven years, Brigitte and her parents lived in an underground bomb shelter. They had no running water or electricity and very little food; at times they were reduced to boiling grass to survive.

Gabriel's book's publisher, St Martin's Press, asks readers to interpret the text not only as a memoir, but also as a 'political wake-up call'. The book made it on to the *New York Times* best-seller list and, according to the second edition (2008a), was required reading for Navy SEALs dispatched to the Middle East and was also put on the official reading list at the FBI Academy. Like Shoebat, Gabriel had no prior knowledge of Islamic teachings except for personal experiences with 'Islamic terrorists', the former as a terrorist and the latter as a victim of terrorists.

The discursive practices of Brigitte Gabriel, too, repeat narratives already prominent in American society around Orientalism and American Exceptionalism. In *Because They Hate*, for example, she praises America's 'greatness' as a nation and repeats Samuel Huntington's thesis of a clash of civilisations (2005, p.186). She followed-up in her second best-selling book, *They Must be Stopped: Why We Must Defeat Radical Islam and How We Can Do It* (2008b), with assertions such as: 'It is not yet politically correct to talk about a religious war. But this is exactly what we are facing: a religious war declared by devout Muslims . . . It's not radical Islam. It's what Islam is at its core' (pp. 70–71). Like other members of this group of authors, Gabriel, too, appears often in American media, and has founded an organisation called *ACT! For America*, a nationwide network that aims to 'more effectively inform, educate, and mobilise Americans regarding the multiple threats of radical Islam' and 'arm activists with the information to get involved and take effective action'. Its vision is a 'citizen action network' that '*aggressively promotes and implements educational programs that teach and enable citizen participation in the defense of America on the community, city, state, and national level*'¹⁴ [my emphasis]. Gabriel's enunciative role and authority in grounding the United States terrorism discourse in truth – Act! was formed in 2007 as an outgrowth of Gabriel's American Congress for Truth, established in 2002 – has increased with time. Today, Gabriel is described on the Act! website as 'one of the leading terrorism experts in the world providing information and analysis on the rise of global Islamic terrorism', and indeed, has lectured at major universities and shared her insights on 'Islamic terrorism' with politicians and world leaders.¹⁵

Conclusion: a twenty-first-century *disputatio*

Starting from the test found in Homer's *Iliad*, Western civilisation has had several methods of establishing the truth that belonged to particular epochs (Foucault 2002, p. 17). The current system of establishing the truth through enquiry emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, replacing Homer's test. The above analysis shows that the production of 'true' knowledge about the Evildoer reanimated major narratives and discursive practices that were prominent in Western encounters with Islam from the Middle Ages. In many ways, establishing the 'truth' about the Evildoer involved reactivation of not only these discursive practices, but also older methods of establishing the truth, such as the *disputatio*. The *disputatio* was a confrontation between two adversaries in which both used verbal weapons, rhetorical procedures, and demonstrations based on appeal to authority for establishing the truth of their statements. In the *disputatio*, 'the more authors one of the participants had on their side, the more evidence of authority, strength and gravity he could invoke, the greater were his chances of winning' (Foucault 2002, p. 51). More books with the word 'terrorism' in the title have been published in the twenty-first century than the combined total of all such books prior to that. Over half of these were on the subject of 'Islamic terrorism'. The sheer volume of such texts, without even taking into consideration their contents, contributed to rendering as 'true' the existence of the phenomenon they publicised. Together the particular books described herein have sold millions of copies and their authors reached millions more people through repetition of the narratives contained in their best-selling books on television and radio, in newspaper coverage, and on their websites. Is it any wonder then that the narrative of 'Islam as Evil' and 'Muslims as Evildoers' has gained such currency in the past decade?

Notes

1. *The Guardian* newspaper first published this opinion in an article by Peter Beaumont on 22 July 2011, just as news of the attacks in Utoya began to emerge. It carried the headline 'Oslo bomb suspicion falls on Islamist militants'. Later that afternoon, it substituted the article with one headline 'Norway attacks suggest political motive', by the same author (Beaumont 2011). There was no explanation for the removal of the original article, nor any notification. A search for the original article will result in one being pointed to the substitute, but the original is still available on various social media sites and other forums.
2. A photograph of the *The Sun*'s front page as it appeared on the day is available from: <http://twitpic.com/5u6n2l> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
3. Anders Behring Breivik's 'manifesto' entitled *2083: A Declaration of European Independence* [online] is available from: <http://publicintelligence.net/anders-behring-breiviks-complete-manifesto-2083-a-european-declaration-of-independence/> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
4. The phrase 'manifest destiny' was coined by Democrat John L. Sullivan during the debate over the annexation of Texas in the 1840s, and remained a part of American political and cultural discourse throughout the nineteenth century as it continued expansionist policies against indigenous Americans and Mexicans (see Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 266).
5. See 'About Robert Spencer', available from <http://www.jihadwatch.org/spencer> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
6. See <http://www.jihadwatch.org> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
7. See 'About Robert Spencer', available from <http://www.jihadwatch.org/spencer> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
8. *The MacArthur Study Bible*, first published in 1997, won the ECPA's Gold Medallion Book Award in 1998 and the Gold/Platinum/Diamond Book Award in 2007. His other best-selling books include *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* series, which has sold more than a million copies and won the ECPA's Platinum Award in 2005 for sales figures over a million, and *Twelve Ordinary Men*, which sold more than half a million copies and won the ECPA Gold Award in 2008.

9. See 'Grace to You' website at <http://www.gty.org/> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
10. Recent developments in the brothers' story are worth noting here as they provide testimony as to the strength of the 'will to knowledge' that underpinned American discourse during this period. Ergun Caner was appointed Dean of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary at around the time of the book's publication. In 2010 it emerged that Caner had included 'factual statements that are self-contradictory' in his biographical details. These contradictions are significant: Caner claimed to have been raised as a radical Sunni Muslim in Turkey, in 'a climate of Jihad', hence the 'insider's look' at Islam that he, together with his brother, was able to provide in their co-authored book. 'In one sermon, he put it more bluntly, saying he was trained to do what the Sept. 11 terrorists had done', as reported in the *Washington Post* (Wan and Boorstein 2010). It transpires, however, that although the Caners converted to Christianity as teenagers, they were not brought up in 'jihadist Turkey'. Despite the collapse of the edifice on which Ergun Caner's 'expertise on Islam' was based, Liberty University retained him as a professor, although they decided not to renew his contract as Dean when it expired in June 2010.
11. See profile of 'Mark A. Gabriel, PhD', available from <http://www.christianbookpreviews.com/christian-book-author.php?isbn=1591852919> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
12. See 'Biography of Walid Shoebat', available from: <http://www.shoebat.com/bio.php> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
13. Shoebat's October 2006 lecture at Columbia University attracted controversy when the University changed it from a public lecture to an invite-only event shortly before the lecture was due to begin. There is no record of the lecture on the Columbia University website, but a video of a portion of the lecture is available on YouTube; see 'Walid Shoebat, Ex Jihadi Columbia University', available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoMq5HYMpZQ> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
14. ACT stands for 'American Congress for Truth. Act! For America'. See 'About ACT! for America', available from: <http://www.actforamerica.org/index.php/learn/about-act-for-america> [Accessed 6 August 2012].
15. See 'Brigitte Gabriel: Leading Expert on Global Islamic Terrorism', available from <http://www.actforamerica.org/index.php/learn/about-ms-gabriel> [Accessed 6 August 2012].

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