Scott Gibbs

Toward the Turning

Rethinking the Meaning of 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations, and a Postmodern World

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Chapter One: A New Construct

The source of the better part of barbarism in human history is an apparition, spectacularly unrecognized and ignored. Tribalism and fanaticism are the conventional scapegoats, often in combination, used to explain group violence and cruelty—war and civil war, colonialism and empire, apartheid and genocide, tyranny, and enslavement. Unfortunately, this conclusion is shallow and, when used in dialogue, is often counterproductive, fueling the battle through blame and distracting from a deeper understanding. Nevertheless, tribalism and fanaticism expose what lies hidden within them and, thus, the source of the challenge. Group inhumanity repeatedly arises and is fed by the murmuration of group identification—the reciprocal relation of people and systems of interpretation—stylized semistructured ways of being or what it means to be. These styles are faiths, spiritual or secular (e.g., Muslim, American, Israeli). Paradoxically, unwitting identification, which participates in our quest to survive and thrive, also drives destruction and death. Worse, in the ultimate sad irony, our interpretation systems are contingent, having no logical necessity, making them constructed realities and identity an apparition—a conception dependent on the mind. Contingency makes the dark sides of our faiths heartbreakingly absurd. However, accepting reality offers some hope, as it de-escalates the once momentous and grave, and opens new perspectives and possibilities. Like any mirage, this one evaporates upon examination; like any specter, it disappears with acceptance despite fear in the light of disclosure.

Self-righteous contempt and hostility pervade group relations today. Examples inundate our lives: protest marches, riots, terrorist acts, insurrections, insurgencies, vigilantism, hate speech, profiling, targeted killings, walls, revolutions, civil wars, holy wars, imperialism, and so on. The best efforts at resolution are often relatively futile, and vexingly, natural responses tend to make matters worse. The nature of our group relations consistently devolves into no *relation* at all in a meaningful sense. It is instead competition. Rhetoric leveraged by participants—such as "fight for" or "struggle

against"—articulates the means of action, and language like "victory," "prevail," or "overcome" expresses the ends. Justification washes insensitivity and aggression clean. Spoken or unspoken, power is the commodity at issue. A battle for respect simultaneously bloodies the field in a relatively simple-minded disconnect between means and ends. Dichotomous thought frames the entire setting.

Modernity (and its extreme outcome, postmodernity) manifests this conflict in various ways, creating flux, fostering critique, and elevating identity and identification. As a reflection of our relationship to ourselves, fundamentalism—liberal or conservative, secular or spiritual—emerges and thrives. Conflict compulsively follows. The drama is utterly toxic, with flagrant and insidious consequences. In response, calls for peace and unity abound, but constructive efforts to remedy the situation are too often absent or fall on deaf ears. Curiously, incredulous surprise typically meets the failure of the calls for peace and unity—as if disconnect and division could be coerced away or overcome with a desperate plea. Moreover, there is no end in sight. The most beguiling outcome is the preliminary nature of solutions that participate in the drama and pick a side. The ongoing flare-up of drama exposes these solutions as ultimately hollow.

Deconstruction of the conflict discloses a self-reinforcing, repetitive pattern of reciprocal blame. The problem driving such tensions (e.g., unfairness or discordant values) and, critically, the problem driving much relational drama itself—disconnection—persists. Maybe more troublingly, pervasively and persistently trapped and disconnected in the drama, evidence points to a startling insight: we misunderstand our predicament to the point of being virtually oblivious. Not understanding, we are condemned to endless repetition. All human history speaks to this revelation. What is called for is a redefinition of the nature and relocation of the source of the struggles at hand. What is required is a new construct that is broadly applicable to our tangled state at home and abroad.

The tragic violence of September 11, 2001, followed by the decades-long "war on terror," is a high-profile expression of our predicament, offering an opportunity for a deeper understanding of

the way out. Tit-for-tat brought the demonic drama of group conflict full form to the world stage. Mired in the proliferating pattern, our post–9/11 world has become (and remains) a theater of the absurd. Tedious clashes supplanted reason, dialogue, and progress and fed vicious cycles of escalating, intolerant division and disconnection. Political policy expanded rather than contained drama, and authoritarian ideologies at once flourished from and fed the conflict. Steeped in this milieu, we struggle still in the blast wave of 9/11—which was itself the crescendo of decades of repetitive drama. We remain ensnared and disconnected, stuck in the suboptimal, susceptible to the tragic, and swimming still in the unresolved. Waste, gridlock, recklessness, intolerance, oppression, hostility, violence—the instruments of horror unleashed that September day—set the course for a kind of victory for "them." Any attenuation of the conflict flows not from intention and transcendence but simply from sheer exhaustion, distraction, redirection, or simple luck. The unresolved drama lurks and festers.

Division and disconnection defined the context of the conflict implied in the 9/11 attack and the subsequent responses and counterresponses. The Muslim world knew blame and division intimately before the notorious attack. Across Northern Africa through large swaths of the Middle East, on to Pakistan and Afghanistan, *Dar al-Islam*, the "House of Islam" or "House of Peace" remains today anything but, both at and within its borders. The too often terribly bloody drama with Israel is the epitome of its external expression, while the proxy struggles between Shi'ism and Sunnism and the so-called struggle for "the soul of Islam" (i.e., moderation versus conservatism) speak to the internal tensions. At the same time, the 9/11 attack set the hook fully in the West, itself primed for division by decades of prior unsettling transformation. The subsequent incessant "Freedom" wars and the "Global War on Terrorism," as well as the trauma of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, followed by the COVID pandemic, fiercely pulled the line taut. Fraught with blame and division as intense at times as that during the Vietnam War, the United States drives the hook deeper still. Europe largely follows the same path. Much was insidiously inflamed by the onslaught of 9/11, and much has been fashioned in response.

From academia and the popular media to the corridors of political power, a perpetrator-victim construct typically defines the nature and locates the cause of the relational struggles between Islamists and Western governments or, more generally, between *Dar al-Islam* and the West. In this construct (which defines much of modern group conflict), the perpetrator—the tyrant, the bully, the abuser, the oppressor, or the like—carries out an action that has a harmful effect. The victim—the oppressed, the bullied, the abused, and so on—is acted upon and negatively impacted, injured in some form or fashion. The perpetrator holds a position of superiority and power, while the victim is in a position of inferiority and weakness. Roles change depending upon identification and, thus, agenda. We need to look no further than the events of 9/11 themselves—perpetrator becomes victim and victim becomes perpetrator. Disconnected communication permeates the field, with blame and its minions—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and so on—ultimately ruling the day. Sooner or later, victimhood becomes the perceived position, and hostility becomes the response.

More profoundly, the construct locates the cause of conflict: the perpetrator is responsible and, by extension, is bad, guilty, and even evil. The victim is passive, acted upon rather than responsible. As such, the victim is unaccountable, from entirely innocent or blameless (e.g., the innocent victim) to good or righteous (e.g., the righteously indignant). To acknowledge and accept (let alone validate) the perpetrator in some form or fashion is unjust and damnable. Placing any responsibility on the victim is to "blame the victim." Notably, the "blame game" mirrors and feeds off our dichotomous mind, infested with victimhood and hostility. Similarly, the perpetrator-victim construct participates in the tangled relationship. Its counterproductive nature is essentially part of the problem. As a result, conflict repeats and even intensifies rather than resolves. Perpetrator-victim is the governing dynamic of this theater of the absurd.

A brief overview of modern-day Western–Muslim sociopolitical relations provides specific details of this dynamic and serves as a touchstone for later examination and understanding. Over the past century, Muslim perceptions of the United States, in particular, have increasingly shifted from being relatively innocuous to overt

hostility. Growing American power meant increasing interventionism worldwide, including in the Middle East and the Muslim world. The trend included increasing military intervention (e.g., Gulf Wars, Afghanistan) and troop presence (e.g., in Saudi Arabia). Muslim resentment was stoked by America's consistent support for Israel—including support for its initial settlement, national recognition, and ongoing military and economic aid—a perceived oppressor, occupier of Muslim lands, and displacer of Palestinian Arabs. This support comes in the wake of a period of European colonial rule that facilitated the settlement and creation of Israel in the first place (e.g., the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate for Palestine). Longstanding American support for authoritarian regimes (e.g., the Shah of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) in Muslim-majority countries—primarily driven by American interests (i.e., combating communism and securing oil)—also fanned the flames. The Muslim perspective of the West is now arguably defined by a sense of perceived disrespect and unfair treatment. The denigration of Western society and its perceived moral decadence suggests a move from resentment to contempt.

The Muslim world's struggles to establish prosperous, representative self-sovereignty after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of Western colonialism were the underlying fire fueled by American intervention. The West bears some responsibility in this struggle due to historical and colonial legacies (e.g., border formations and support for autocratic regimes). However, Muslim-majority countries also contend with challenges stemming from independent economic and social factors, such as economic uniformity (i.e., oil) and a history of authoritarian and religious rule rather than secular representative government. Internal strife and strongmen ran rampant, creating conditions ripe for political exploitation and instability and the proliferation of a mindset of persecuted suspicion, blame, and fixation on and opposition to external meddling, real or imagined. This tumultuous backdrop fed on and was fed by the rise of political Islam, marking a profound rejection of Western ideologies. At the same time, modernity (e.g., nationalism and capitalism) failed to offer solutions, often appearing as the root of the problem, and significantly challenged Islamic authorities, causing extremist responses. Blame and zealotry created

a nasty combination, expressing the warped mindset behind 9/11 and myriad horrors before and since (e.g., the Israel–Hamas War).

Western perceptions of Muslims have likewise undergone a notable transformation over the last century, shifting from relatively benign curiosity (e.g., exotic images) to an increasingly simplistic, hostile view (e.g., terrorists, oil sheiks). This transformation similarly correlates with the rise of American power and antagonism toward its increased use in the Muslim world, which is characterized by three interrelated yet often conflicting policy goals. First, America and select Western allies sought to contain or defeat perceived tyranny (e.g., Axis Powers, the USSR, and terrorism), sometimes leading to alliances of convenience with authoritarian rulers of Muslim lands. Second, America and the West generally sought to secure oil resources, vital (so it seemed) not only for Western stability and power but as fuel within a capitalist identity, again resulting in support for autocratic regimes, often at the expense of human rights. Finally, America provided unwavering support for Israel, driven by sentiment (e.g., Holocaust sympathy and religious commonality), strategic geopolitical interests, and domestic lobbying. Perceived secular and spiritual superiority also arguably generated a conflicted conscience often "reconciled" through unambiguous judgment. The convergence of self-interest, fear of terrorists, and rather unequivocal belief in uprightness bred a climate of fear, denial, and defensiveness (e.g., innocent victimhood and righteous indignation). In turn, sentiment and self-interest fueled ongoing interventions, the embrace of authoritarian regimes, and steadfast support for Israel, creating similar responses in a cycle of repetitive drama.

Israel occupies a central stage in the Western–Muslim drama, serving as both a symbol of oppressive unfairness, disregard, and disrespect on the one hand and a beacon or bastion of hope on the other. Several secular and religious forces have shaped (and continue to shape) the Jewish relationship with the Land. On a secular level, riding a modernity-fueled wave of identity and the championing of the rights of "peoples" and political self-sovereignty, early Zionism—coupled with the ongoing knowledge that minority status in foreign lands was a dangerous dead end—drove the settlement, foundation, and development of the Land. Simultaneously,

spiritual reasons rooted in a 2,500-year-plus history of a divinely sanctioned, diaspora-fueled connection between the Jewish people and a particular land have contributed to a sense of immovable entitlement that persists today. Set against a backdrop of millennia of, at times utterly horrific minority-status persecution (e.g., the Holocaust), fledgling state status, and ongoing Arab military invasions, terror attacks, and Palestinian uprisings ("*intifadas*"), Israeli (Jewish) attitudes about modern Arab hostility oscillated between combative suspicion and paranoia, giving rise to a mindset characterized by entitlement, hostility, and denial. This mindset fed division and polarization within and without. These complex dynamics continue to shape Israel's role within the larger Western–Muslim or Middle Eastern narrative. In this multifaceted saga, a shadowy notion looms large in the struggle for control over land and, more generally, within the tit-for-tat dynamic between Israel, the United States, and the Western world on one side, and Islamists, political Islam, and *Dar al-Islam* on the other: the enduring and complex interplay of identity, identification, and group interaction.

Two opposing configurations of the perpetrator-victim construct explain the struggles between the West and the Muslim world. In the first configuration, the perpetrator is typically a terrorist or a terrorist group, and, more broadly, an Islamist group or an Islamist state. The so-called West, generally, and the United States, in particular, are the victims, innocent and even virtuous. This configuration permeates policy discourse, is buttressed by select popular media narratives, and finds its clearest expression in the so-called Right in the West. In this case, causality lies first in the Islamist movement, in radical Islam or Islamic fundamentalism or extremism. Driven by its own set of extreme principles that fail to separate church and state and find their origin in radical ideologies advanced by writers like Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb, and so on, Islamism is seen as waging "holy struggle." It struggles against the "Near Enemy" of corrupt, dictatorial regimes or apostate (i.e., moderate) Islamic movements within *Dar al-Islam*, or the "Far Enemy" of the United States and the West generally.

In an extended form of the configuration, causality lies squarely within Islam, both in its history and in its teachings. Islam is seen as imperialistic and authoritarian, best exemplified by the circumstances of the birth of the religion, which rose via conversion through conquest and ruled through a dictatorial caliphate. At the same time, the doctrinal demand for submission to God's authority blankets the globe with a mission of crusade. Islam, then, is portrayed as continuing its centuries-old march of submission. Moreover, Islam is viewed as rigid and fixed, unable to adapt adequately in our complex, modern world (for instance, the doctrinal belief in the *Qur'an* as the infallible, literal Word of God creates a hurdle to adaptation). Islam wages war with itself in the form of a struggle for "the soul of Islam." This struggle takes shape in the creation and embrace of extreme doctrines and behaviors, fueled by internal societal decline left by the end of colonial rule or the failure of dictatorship (or both). The internal battle ultimately manifests in external struggle (i.e., terrorism). In the end, grounded in causality, the entire configuration explicitly or implicitly cries for Islamic change, from moderation to modernization: "they" need to change, not "us."

In the second configuration, the roles are reversed: the perpetrator is the United States or, more broadly, the West; the victim is the Islamic world. This configuration permeates academic discourse, is likewise buttressed by a select media narrative, and influences and expresses itself, to varying degrees, in the West through the so-called Left in various forms. It feeds and flows in the modern floodwaters of identity politics, with its philosophical wellsprings starting with Hegel, through Marx to Foucault, and a rather simple-minded, competitive, power-struggle interpretation of relations. Explicitly or implicitly, this configuration first centers on perceived Western policies of exploitation and domination—specifically, the West seeks to exploit non-Western lands economically, particularly the Muslim world. Such exploitation is made possible by the decline of Muslim political power. It has existed for centuries (i.e., colonialism), with the modern-day demand for oil and other commodities just the latest assault. In turn, the determination to economically exploit drives domination policies, from the rise of Euro-