

Introduction

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

Like so many other authors, my researching and writing this book was inspired and motivated by an experience that had a profound effect on me. In 2008 I was in Stockholm, Sweden, staying in a small student apartment in the south of the city. It soon became clear to me that if I wanted to have something close to an authentic Swedish experience, then I needed to speak and understand some of the Swedish language. So I enrolled in a beginner-level Swedish language course, two classes a week. The classes had few students, and they were relaxed and enjoyable. The most interesting aspect of this experience was the friendships I made with other students while talking during coffee breaks and after class. It was a chance encounter with one young man in particular that would forever change how I would understand the world and which would inspire the years of researching and writing this book.

My new friend was from Palestine. We got to know each other during lunch and coffee breaks, and each week we shared more about life in our home countries. His story was particularly interesting because it gave

me an insight into what it was like for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. He told me about how the Israel Defense Forces had forcibly removed him and his family from their homes, and with no place to live, they fled to a Jordanian refugee camp. He lived in the camp for a few years until his application for asylum was eventually accepted by the Swedish government.

With the help of the Swedish refugee services, he was resettled in Kiruna, one of Sweden's most northern, darkest, and coldest cities. The small city is located north of the Arctic Circle, meaning it experiences both the midnight sun and the polar night throughout the year. Even for Swedes, Kiruna is especially cold, and it could not be any more different to the parched Palestinian landscape. Following the end of his employment in a factory, my new friend moved to suburban Stockholm where he lived with three other Middle Eastern refugees. Unable to speak Swedish fluently, he wanted to both communicate with the people of his adopted nation and have better employment opportunities. This inspired him to join the Swedish language class.

Up until this point in time I had never shown great interest in the situation in Palestine. When I thought about the ongoing conflict, far away from the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, where I grew up, all I could recount was the narrative that tended to dominate the Western media: the Palestinians were by and large terrorists whose desire to violently attack Israelis was in part motivated by their radical Islamic beliefs. While we hear a lot more stories now about the dire situation in places like the West Bank and Gaza, my thoughts about the ongoing conflict were dominated by media reports about what they referred to as pro-Palestinian terrorist groups.

This narrative was however completely contradicted by what my new Palestinian friend was telling me. He was neither a terrorist nor a hater of Jews. He abhorred violence and did not want retribution against those responsible for displacing him, his family, his friends, and neighbors from their land. He wanted to spend his time doing what he loved—playing soccer, drinking coffee, and smoking. He called smoking his dirty habit, which he began during his time in the refugee camp to help him relieve stress, suppress his hunger, and pass the time. Like most people he also

dreamed of falling in love and having a family. Most importantly, my conversations with him revealed to me another viewpoint about the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The stories I was told by the mass media about the conflict simply did not match up with what this man was describing, so I went online, searching for alternative news sites. The more I read, the more I became aware of the many competing narratives and categories writers were using when representing the alleged terrorist threat posed by Palestinians. One of the categories used by some writers that piqued my interest was something they were calling Wahhabism.

More research helped reveal to me that this was a term that became increasingly popular among Western scholars and commentators following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Prior to these attacks few Western scholars and commentators wrote about this phenomenon, and of those who did it was usually in relation to the role it played in the forming of the modern Saudi state. Articles about Wahhabism rarely appeared in popular US newspapers and magazines, and it was largely ignored by the plethora of US-based think tanks and foreign policy organizations now churning out documents about this primarily religious phenomenon. The 9/11 terrorist attacks were a turning point, as commentators began using the term when describing the influence it supposedly had on the Saudi Arabian hijackers. Furthermore, Western scholars and commentators began linking this Saudi state-sanctioned religion to Islamic radicalism and violent extremism throughout the world. The more reading I did, the less convinced I was of the apparent relationship between Wahhabism and Palestinian violence, which many US-based right-wing, conservative, and pro-Israeli commentators were claiming. My Palestinian friend had certainly never used the term. That experience planted a seed that has since grown to become this book.

This book is my modest attempt at understanding how the phenomenon Wahhabism has been represented by authors writing in a post-9/11 world characterized by anxiety about terrorism between and inside states. I am particularly concerned with how intellectuals belonging to the liberal and neoconservative traditions represent Wahhabism, and the different truth claims they rely on to support these representations. This book is

also designed to understand some of the ways in which different ethical, political, and religious motivations are informing these representations.

I have set out a number of questions to help focus my book. They are: How have scholars represented Wahhabism? What kinds of problems are there with these interpretative exercises? What kinds of problems can we find in the sociology of intellectuals that warrant this kind of enquiry? How do liberal and neoconservative intellectuals in particular represent Wahhabism? And how are we to understand and make sense of these representations?

At this point it is important to briefly set out why I am focusing on *representations* of Wahhabism and not what is referred to as Wahhabism. There are numerous considerations that are shaping my inquiry. Though this proposition needs and gets some more elaboration later in the book, I want to highlight the basic difficulty of engaging with Wahhabism itself. There are good grounds for doubting that the phenomenon of Wahhabism has some natural or objective reality that can be immediately grasped as if it were a physical object. While we cannot see, feel, or touch the different social and intellectual processes constituting Wahhabism, we can examine its various representations. Additionally, it is hard to study a phenomenon in the social world for which we do not have a standard or widely agreed upon conceptualization or definition. Wahhabism, as I explain, is a contested category.

Let me start here with the proposition that Wahhabism does not have a natural or objective reality. This view owes a good deal to the critique of a long-standing tradition running through the history of Western philosophy after Aristotle and Augustine that treated language and its categories as if they were labels easily applied to real things. This view holds that a real thing exists in some external reality and corresponds with the concept in human thought to which the linguistic word refers. This tradition was subverted by what we can refer to as the linguistic turn, which is associated with philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty, and with the deconstructionist turn announced by Ferdinand de Saussure and later by Jacques Derrida. Critiquing this tradition, Saussure explains that this approach

assumes that ideas already exist independently of words; it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature. . . . [F]inally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation—an assumption that is anything but true. But this rather naive approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms.¹

It was Saussure who pointed out that it is impossible for definitions of concepts to exist independently of or outside a specific language system. Concepts like Wahhabism cannot exist without humans naming and attaching meaning to it. Authors like Gustav Bergmann have built on these ideas, emphasizing the key role language plays in constituting the representations of reality that we can then work with.² This is why my book focuses on representations, and because they are a major focal point, it matters that we have an understanding of what I mean when speaking about representations of Wahhabism and how they work.

The term ‘representation’ means ‘to bring to mind by description’ and ‘to symbolize, serve as a sign or symbol of, serve as the type or embodiment of.’ It comes from Old French *representer* meaning ‘present, show, portray’ and from the Latin term *repraesentare* meaning ‘make present, set in view, show, exhibit, display.’ We can trace the study of representations to classical Greece when Plato and Aristotle considered literature to be an important form of representation. In fact, Aristotle believed the arts to be valuable forms of representation, seeing them as a distinctly human activity. According to Aristotle, “From childhood, men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect man differs from the other animals, that he is far more imitative and learns his lessons by representing things.”³

Since then, representations have been the focus of study for modern philosophers like Ernst Cassirer.⁴ These studies have tended to understand man to be *homo symbolicum*, or a representational animal, treating him as a creature whose distinctive character is the creation and manipulation of signs, which are understood as things that stand for or take the place of something else.⁵ As I will detail later, representations are also important elements of political theory. Political theorists have focused on

them since at least the eighteenth century, when Edmund Burke sought to deal with the recurring question about the relation between aesthetic or semiotic representation (things that stand for other things) and political representation (people who act for others).⁶

W.J.T. Mitchell offers a useful way of thinking about representations. He says we should think of a representation as a triangular relation of something or someone, by something or someone, and to someone. It is only the third part that must be a person. In light of this, Wahhabism can be understood as a representation of something, by an author and to an audience. Aristotle wrote that representations differ from one another according to object, manner, and means.⁷ The object is that which is represented, the manner is the way in which it is represented, and the means is the material used. In this study the object is Wahhabism, the manner is the ways in which intellectuals use language to represent it, and the document, for example, the newspaper article, magazine story, or online publication, is the means.

Authors are also able to use language in different ways to help achieve their desired outcomes. They can use particular rhetorical techniques like analogies, metaphorical language, similes, and neologisms. They can also construct violent accounts in such ways that help persuade the reader to either condemn or condone particular acts of violence. Another focus of this book is understanding how intellectuals use these particular rhetorical techniques to help achieve their intended aims.

It is also important that we have a deeper understanding of the relation between the representational material and that which it represents. Semioticians typically differentiate between three kinds of representational relationships: icon, symbol, and index.⁸ It is the symbolic representation that is pertinent to this book. Symbols tend to be based on arbitrary stipulation rather than their resemblance to the thing signified. Authors representing Wahhabism use text to stand in for what they believe Wahhabism to be, and then many of us as (uncritical) readers agree to regard it in this way. Representation in language is symbolic in that letters, words, and texts can represent states of affairs without actually resembling the situation. We are, as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously pointed out, simply playing language games.⁹

Ian Hacking is among the authors to have raised some important questions when it comes to studying representations.¹⁰ He encourages us to consider whether we are explicitly or implicitly denying the existence of the natural world and if we are ignoring the possibility that some representations of the world are better than others. When I say that Wahhabism is an observer-dependent phenomenon represented by an author to an audience, what I mean is that the experience of Wahhabism in the social world comes into existence when categories are created for it, and these categories are shaped by authors with differing prejudices operating in different social and cultural contexts. As we will see, the variability in representations of Wahhabism across time and space (between intellectuals belonging to different traditions) helps illustrate this. Pursuing this line of reasoning provides for powerful insights into the cultural fabric pertaining to the construction of Wahhabism.

It is important that I state that I am neither denying that an observer-independent reality exists in the natural world nor am I asserting that everything is socially constructed. In terms of my ontological and epistemological approach I accept that a reality does exist and my interest is in how people make sense of it. My work does not decide which representations of Wahhabism are more truthful or better; rather I offer a critique of the different truth claims authors rely on when representing Wahhabism. Just as is the case with Hacking's work on 'making up people,' in which he argues that creating classifications like 'fugue' creates new ways to be a person, the ideas motivating my study of representations are that authors' conceptions of the phenomenon of Wahhabism shape both the ways in which we respond to it and treat the people and groups we ascribe as belonging to it.¹¹

Representations have indeed been the source of much scholarly debate, especially in the field of literature, and have drawn the attention of eminent thinkers like Plato. He accepted the common view that literature is a representation of life and for that reason he believed it should be banished from the state. He understood representations as substitutes for the things themselves or, even more worryingly, as false or illusory substitutes having the ability to inspire antisocial emotions among people.¹² The only representations allowed to exist in Plato's republic of rational