

Dissension in the Ranks: The “Sufi”–“Wahhabi” Debate

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Abstract

The Western Cape has played host to a flurry of controversies that has rocked its Muslim community. This paper deals with the most recent dispute, which should be considered from three interrelated perspectives, namely of (1) a clash between ideas, (2) a struggle for social resources and (3) a race for legitimation. 41 letters and articles that appeared in 4 Cape newspapers were discourse-analyzed. Authors were split into two opposing camps, Categories X and Y, depending on each letter-writer’s explicit or implicit stance regarding the issue of contention: shrine veneration. Although the dominant Category Y casts the debate in terms of the ideologically loaded “Sufi”–“Wahhabi” couplet, it is demonstrated that the extra-discursive referents called into being by this construction are, at best, elusive. At its most radical, this paper problematizes the taken-for-granted notion of a “group”, which bears the implication that mainstream theories of intergroup relations needs to be reworked.

Introduction

On the 31st of December 2000, the SABC broadcast a television documentary in which a Muslim man was shown prostrating on the grave of a popular saint buried on Robben Island. A leading cleric responded by writing a letter in which he categorically dismissed such acts of “shrine worship” as beyond the pale of Islam. Soon, another furore would erupt in the Cape Muslim community: death threats would be hurled about and families thrown into turmoil. The definitive doctrine of Islam, namely its “uncompromising monotheism” (Smith

1981: 33), was unravelling, and we, the apprehensive public, were led to believe that “Sufis” and “Wahhabis” had drawn swords on each other. Not for the first time, there was dissension in the ranks. In this paper, then, we take an in-depth look at this so-called “Sufi”–“Wahhabi” debate, with particular emphases being placed on its central components of identity, rhetoric and ideology. But in order to contextualize the controversy, we must begin with a brief consideration of Cape Muslim history.

History repeating itself

In any religion, there must be a tension between a straight and crooked path. For those faithful few who choose the road less travelled, guidance readily descends from on high and there are few postmodern anxieties – but the opposite holds for those who would doubt. Yet when co-religionists begin to receive *contradictory* directives, the outsider can be forgiven for thinking that the straight path becomes a very narrow one indeed. Assuredly, the Cape Muslim community has witnessed many such instances of contrasting juridical interpretations – so much so that the inevitable occasional spat has given way to a lamentable proliferation of bitter rivalries.

One of the great sons of Cape Islam, a prince born in the Trinate Islands, was the legendary Tuan Guru. Well-versed in the Shafite school of jurisprudence, he founded the first mosque in South Africa in Dorp Street in 1798, and served as its first Imam (Davids 1980). Although he appointed a successor in his living days, with the Imam’s passing, the Muslim community nevertheless became embroiled in its first internal dispute (Tayob 2001). This was never resolved to the satisfaction of the disaffected party, and the nascent congregation was irreversibly split with the establishment of a rival mosque in Long Street (Davids 1980). In turn, this incident set in motion a disturbing trend that has continued until the present day, namely the familiar spectacle of Imam jostling with rival Imam for ecclesiastical power.

With the arrival of a Turkish scholar named Abu Bakr Effendi, who came to the Cape as a spiritual guide in 1863, community cohesion took another turn for the worse (Davids 1980). Effendi was a Hanafite specialist, and proceeded to establish his Hanafite following in the historically Shafite community. But with his ill-fated ruling against the consumption of snoek and crayfish, conflict soon followed (Davids 1980). In yet another incident, an Imam who had come under the influence of Effendi failed to observe a Shafite rule before commencement of the Friday midday prayers (Jumuaah) – this infuriated the predominantly Shafite congregation, which subsequently lobbied for the Imam to be relieved of his position. Ironically, the matter found its way to the Supreme Court and, largely owing to Effendi’s impressive testimony, the judgement went in favour of the beleaguered Imam. The Shafites were devastated, and initiated a “hate campaign” that, in its extreme version, prevented the marriage of Shafite women to

Hanafite men – a deplorable recourse whose rumblings continued to be felt well into the 1940s (Davids 1980: 55). True to form, another mosque of (Hanafite) malcontents was established, and it was only in 1945, with the inception of the Muslim Judicial Council, that the hatchet was finally buried.

An additional dispute revolved around the Jumuaah prayers. According to a Shafite ruling, these prayers may only be performed if at least forty worshippers constitute the congregation – failing this, the usual midday prayers, which are performed on every other day, will suffice. The trouble was that, with the increasing number of mosques in the Cape, the Muslim community was becoming increasingly dispersed, which didn't augur well for the Shafite opinion. Although advice was sought from as faraway a place as Makkah, only certain Imams agreed to perform the Jumuaah prayers at a single mosque (Davids 1980). The result was that certain adherents were not comfortable in the knowledge that several Shafite Jumuaahs would occur each Friday. They compensated by performing the normal midday prayers as well, in the fear that their Jumuaah prayers had been invalidated. This in turn precipitated a new controversy – after all, no Muslim was supposed to say more than five obligatory prayers on any given day. Advice was sought from Makkah a second time and an identical answer was provided, this time by a delegation from Zanzibar. Unfortunately, one Imam refused to be a signatory to the agreement – his argument being that, since he presided at the oldest mosque in the Cape, the single Jumuaah prayer should in all fairness be performed at his mosque. But the signatories felt otherwise, and the prayers were arranged to take place at the largest Shafite mosque in Lower Chiappini Street. Needless to say, the agreement fell apart and, more than a century later, the Jumuaah question has yet to be clarified (Davids 1980).

A more recent controversy concerns the issue of the lunar month. Certain Muslim leaders hold their religious festivals at the same time as these are celebrated in Makkah, whilst others insist upon sighting the local moon before commencing with festivities. Again, this scenario has led to an acute polarization within the religious hierarchy that has inevitably filtered down to the community level. Several shortcomings – including administrative incompetence, violation of commitments, volatile alliances and inadequate theological expertise – have been cited as contributory factors to this pervasive climate of religious squabbling (Da Costa 1995).

Surely, the Cape Muslims of centuries long gone endured more than their fair share of troubles – which they haphazardly eased by building more mosques, it would appear. They fell prey to what Da Costa (1994: 113) has described as an “incomprehensible religious discord” that continues to plague their overzealous descendants. Davids (1980), too, makes the humorous yet tragic observation that acts of litigation defiled the precincts of virtually all of the famed Bo-Kaap mosques. Yet any trenchant analysis of this culture of acrimony is not our immediate concern. For now, the instructive value of the mistakes of the past resides

in their capacity to set the scene for the so-called “Sufi”–“Wahhabi” debate – the newest controversy of all.

Competing Islams

Van Dijk (1998) writes that social conflict may irrupt in several ways: it may do so as a clash of ideas, a struggle over social resources, or a race for legitimacy. In the case of the “Sufi”–“Wahhabi” debate, all three are relevant and interrelated, and each implies an ideological confrontation. We deal firstly with this dispute, then, as a clash of ideas.

Debates of this sort that seek to separate the permissible from the heretical are not uncommon in Islamic history. The Prophet himself would constantly speak of aberrant devotional exercises, *bid'a*, that would plunge supplicants into Hellfire. Brilliant scholars of the calibre of Ibn Taymiyyah, too, would lambaste what they deemed religious excesses, and the controversial Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab reiterated their case in the 18th century. Closer to home, in 1987, a fatal controversy spilled out onto the streets of Azaadville, between Deobandis and Barelvīs. That dispute too, like the present one, centred on the issue of identifying the boundaries of acceptable Islamic practice (Mukadam 1990).

This is an appropriate juncture at which to introduce a critical heuristic device. David Hume (1875) posited a fascinating theory on the sociology of religion. In juxtaposing monotheism with idolatry, he argued that the human race was, for psychological reasons, doomed “to rise from idolatry to theism [only] to sink again from theism into idolatry” (Hume 1875: 334). Hume’s work has, of course, been criticized precisely for its psychological reductionism, but Gellner (1981) enhances it by incorporating Ibn Khaldun’s theory of Arab social organization. While the specifics of this syncretic move are not our concern, it is Gellner’s resulting distinction between the “High” and “Low” versions of the Islamic faith that strikes forcefully at the heart of the current controversy.

Although the secularization thesis maintains that the influence of religion subsides with the onset of industrialization, Gellner (1994) regards Islam as the exception to this rule, arguing that an irreducible bifurcation in Islamic practice has safeguarded its allure – he is of course referring to the High and Low modes explicated in his earlier book. The High variant is known by its scripturalist, literalist and rule-bound interpretation of the Islamic faith. The Low variant, on the other hand, is typified by a preponderance of esoteric and ecstatic rituals that has infused the religious conscience of rural populations. Gellner’s assertion is that certain features of a given social milieu will determine which of the variants will dominate. Today, of course, in a world epitomized by a rationalist outlook, the High variant has taken precedence, but in the Western Cape, we think, its rise has unsettled a community that owes its existence to an ostensibly Low variant – popular “Sufism” (see Tayob 1995).

In its earliest days in the Cape, open practice of the Islamic faith was punish-

able by death. Yet, “[b]ecause of its egalitarian spirit, Islam became an attractive option for the underclasses and dispossessed” (Moosa 1995: 134). The “Sufi” rituals, especially given their enactment beneath a shroud of secrecy, doubled as palliatives for the exploited: the magic, the delirium and the cult of shrines that dotted the Cape Peninsula invested the disaffected enthusiasts with the sense of power they so desperately craved (Moosa 1995; Mukadam 1990). Even today, while the repressive sociopolitical conditions encountered by early Cape Islam are relics of that forgotten past, the psychological significance of the shrines stands firm. Since democracy, Cape Muslims have not witnessed the radical turnaround for which many South Africans were hoping – and for as long as their marginality persists, they will continue to hurry towards the timeless, inexhaustible seduction of the shrines. As for those who slate this popular religious experience as pagan, they have, in effect, perpetrated an assault on meaning.

Theorizing intergroup conflict

Since the present debate documents the confrontation between two opposing groups, it is necessary to provide an account of intergroup theorizing. Much has been written in this regard, of course, where mainstream theories in particular have championed the materialist claim that internal schemas are veridical representations of external reality. In social cognition research, for instance, “[s]ocial categories ... are seen as cognitive productions and cognitive constructions but these constructions seem to be based on a real array of similarities and differences which sum up human physical and natural differences” (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 72). Social identity theory too, although it acknowledges the socio-historical specificity of social groupings, nonetheless treats them as epistemological and ontological givens (Wetherell and Potter 1992). But, what both research traditions fail to consider, is that categories are actively constructed to achieve rhetorical ends. Social categories do not have unequivocal external referents – their meaning, function and significance depends on their particular location within a given discursive configuration (Wetherell and Potter 1992). And this critical perspective constitutes our argument: social groupings are not simply ‘discovered’, but are constructed and enforced insofar as they aid the accomplishment of ideological projects.

This alignment with what is effectively a social constructionist line of theorizing does not entail a wholesale rejection of mainstream theories. On the contrary, such theories are crucial to an informed appraisal of the debate – particularly in terms of what is “up for grabs” for the dispute’s protagonists. Naturally, both parties selflessly averred that “pure Islam” was at stake – but the debate’s thoroughgoing tone of condescension militates against the possibility that either group could have been an exponent of exceptional piety. Rather, it was the fragile loyalties of ordinary Muslims that were at stake, and the frantic lobbying of groups – each of which to the other’s consternation and detriment sought to

annex a bigger slice of the pie – precipitated the confrontation. Mainstream theories of intergroup conflict corroborate this claim: barring some notable exceptions (Billig 1976; Tajfel and Turner 1979), for both Sherif (1966) and Deutsch (1973), conflict erupts when group interests collide. The television documentary was a welcome victory for Category Y, because its version of Islamic spirituality was being beamed to viewers (Muslim or not) across South Africa – but for Category X, whose dogma was essentially a negation of Y's, it was a significant setback. X could not sit by watching idly as the vital Muslim conscience drifted towards Y – and so the seeds of controversy were sown. Given this brief exposition on intergroup conflict, the remainder of this paper is framed in terms of Van Dijk's (1998) third category in his typology of social conflict: the race for legitimacy.

Groups or categories?

The heading of the foregoing section, "theorizing intergroup conflict", is something of a misnomer. The "Sufi"–"Wahhabi" debate is a patently *intragroup* phenomenon – hence our front-page claim that dissension is occurring *within* the ranks. And since dissension is internal, it is difficult to separate the various factions that are involved. Although a simplification of a complicated situation, based on our content analysis, we shall advance the position that a minority voice (Category X) has challenged the established traditions of the resident majority (Category Y). What we can expect then, to introduce Van Dijk's (1998) distinction, is for the marginal Category X to attempt to *justify*, while the dominant Category Y *legitimizes*, its position.

Theoretically speaking, our protagonists (Categories X and Y) are better dealt with as relatively obscure "categories" rather than well-defined "groups", and Moosa's (1995) position is useful in justifying this conceptual distinction. While Categories X and Y appear to embody, respectively, "high" and "low" Islam, "there is no recognized boundary" within the Gellnerian antinomy (Moosa 1995: 137). Moreover, it is not at all clear whether these categories possess some sort of continuity *beyond* this controversy, which is a necessary feature of *groups* (Van Dijk 1998). The observer sees what he/she thinks is a titanic clash of distinct entities when, in actual fact, a difference of opinion has been exploited, exaggerated and exerted to its utmost in order to facilitate the construction of "[a] bestial other ... who is different from self" (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 214). For, Categories X and Y are both aspects of a certain Islamic whole, and so neither can afford to aggress against that totality. To do so without some kind of rationalization would blur the ideological self/other distinction, produce extreme feelings of ambivalence and result in a cognitive dissonance of sorts (Festinger, 1957). Hence, each category constructs the other as being *outside* this whole, which in turn permits the indiscriminate use of force against this enemy. What would have been a problematic *civil* war, then, transmutes into a necessary

and therefore palatable one against an alien *other* (Moscovici 1987). We hasten to add, though, that “Sufis” and “Wahhabis” will, for now, be regarded as *groups*, if anything, because they are considered by the wider Muslim community to be stable, enduring and self-conscious entities.

Drawing Van Dijk’s (1998) schema, together then, we can summarize the current situation thus: every Muslim believes in an idea, whether it is “puritanical” or “associationist”. These ideas periodically clash and antithetical social categories that weren’t there before make their appearance. Between the self-appointed custodians of these ideas, a dispute develops and a struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims – precious social resources as they are – ensues. But only the sufficiently persuasive argument will be believed – and these social categories know this only too well as they set about expounding their respective positions. Their strategies invariably involve processes of legitimation and delegitimation, justification and accusation – each of which is geared towards the discrediting of the other and, by extension, the colonization of the Muslim mind.

Materials and Method

41 letters and articles relating/related to the debate appeared in four English-medium Cape newspapers from January through September 2001. (As far as the authors are aware, local press coverage of the debate occurred *only* in English.) These letters were published in the *Cape Argus*, *Muslim Views*, *Al-Qalam* and *Ad-Dawah* newspapers, and were discourse analyzed. Specifically, the *Cape Argus* is a daily publication, whilst the three Muslim newspapers appear on a monthly basis.

Letters were divided into two camps, Categories X and Y, depending on each letter-writer’s explicit or implicit stance regarding the issue of contention: the permissibility of certain acts of shrine veneration. Additional potential data sources included pamphlets, unpublished correspondence, mosque sermons, Internet resources and radio interviews – these were not considered for the present analysis, however. In all, 27 letters were written in defence of Category Y’s position, and the remaining 14 propounded the views of Category X. To break this ratio down further, there were 30 writers in all, with 20 of them penning the letters of Category Y, and 10 writing those of Category X. Following is an example of how excerpts will be referenced, and how the coding technique is to be deciphered:

(Y9i/vii): this means that the excerpt has been drawn from Category Y’s pool of letters. The letter-writer has been assigned the number “9”, which will be used to indicate all of his/her subsequently quoted extracts. This excerpt is from

the first (i) of Y9's seven (vii) letters. Roman numerals will, however, be omitted if only one letter was penned by the writer concerned.

Discourse analysis has only sparingly been applied to letters (Phillips 1999), which constitute the greater portion of our analytic material. Moreover, as Stainton Rogers et al (1995) reveal, discourse analysts are reluctant to commit themselves to any single technique – and we have followed suit. The texts were first content analyzed, as recommended by Potter and Wetherell (1987), following which discrete discourses were extracted and their linkages to others scrutinized (Parker 1992). Central to this analysis (and the Parkerian schema of course) is a deliberately political orientation: specific acts of silencing and, more generally, the ideological effects produced by certain discursive strategies are treated as significant themes.

Analysis

Locating the other

Delegitimation and accusation, as the discursive strategies of sabotage, involve moves and countermoves that foreground the negative attributes of the other. In contrast, the opposite strategies of legitimation and justification are deployed for the purposes of positive self-presentation. Both sets, though, deliver identical consequences: whether the other is disparaged or the self is inflated, the ingroup is portrayed in a relatively more respectable light. Taken together, these moves constitute what Van Dijk (1998: 267) has designated the “ideological square”:

1. Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us.
2. Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them.
3. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them.
4. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us.

But Van Dijk's schema can be misunderstood as circumscribing only those instances involving the expression of *partial* truths – it doesn't explicitly account for the outright fanciful. To these four devices, then, we would add a fifth strategy:

5. *Fabricate* information if it furthers the ends of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

The following analysis, then, will be structured in terms of the protagonists' utilization of these strategies. From Subsections 3.2 to 3.4, we scrutinize Category Y's utilization of Move 2, while Subsection 3.5 deals with Category X's retort (Move 4). We then repeat this exposition (Subsections 3.6 and 3.7), but in reverse (X's Move 2 and Y's Move 4). Thereafter, the issue of ontology is considered (Subsection 3.8), followed by an explication of each category's application of Move 1 (Subsection 3.9). Silences about the other are, of course, to be con-

sidered as Move 3 in action – unfortunately, the limited space does not permit us to address this move in our analysis. We would also caution the reader to bear in mind that, with the deployment of any given move, Move 5 could conceivably be operating in the background. And that is as far as our commitment to “the truth” will extend – it will be interrogated, not *offhandedly* supplied. The task of separating fact from fiction is not ours – what matters, is that the reputations of both social categories are at stake. And that means that each, *by any means possible*, seeks to legitimate itself at the expense of the other, reallocate the allegiances of the Muslim masses, and ultimately enforce its ideology by perpetuating relations of domination and subordination.

“These are the Wahhabis in our community ...”

Since any conflict presupposes a clash between at least two social categories, it is only natural that we attempt to uncover their defining characteristics. In this collection of letters, though, there is a relative paucity of *self-referent* descriptors – hence the analysis places the greater emphasis on each category’s characterization of the other. However, that does not in any way constitute an impoverishment of sorts, as processes of othering are in any event a form of self-revelation: the discursive practice of positioning Them implicitly entails the construction of a counter-position for Us.

The debate’s opening flurry of letters appears in the Cape Argus whose readership is, in the main, not Muslim. In this newspaper, then, Category Y’s objections are not directed specifically at the Muslim public, but at a fairly cosmopolitan readership. That noted, Category Y depicts the views of its antagonist, Sheikh Faaik Gamielien, as “small-minded” (Y1), “confused” (Y7), “intolerant” (Y2), “irresponsible” (Y4) and “ignorant” (Y3):

1. Through the ages men of his ilk have condemned what they could not understand or had no knowledge about as shirk (idolatry). (Y4)

Gamielien has allegedly embarked upon a “campaign of misinformation” (Y4) that projects “a wrong perception of Islam” (Y3), and causes “turmoil” (Y4) and divisions within “the already splintered Muslim community of the Western Cape” (Y4).

Significantly, the tone and direction of the debate is radically transformed as soon as the fracas invades the *Muslim* newspapers: a more-than-conspicuous article, titled *Wahhabis are butchers*, is published, an impassioned piece that leads the dispute onto a highway of conspiratorial politics from which it has yet to exit. Prior to this article’s publication, the issue appeared to revolve around the comments of a reputable sheikh, who had expressed views that had offended the sensibilities of the mainstream Category Y. But the sheikh did not seem to be

representing any particular *group* – his views stood relatively isolated, minus a reference point. Moreover, as gleaned from some of the foregoing quotes, he was generally chastised in his *personal* capacity, not *qua* party spokesperson – to the innocent bystander, then, there was little indication that an ideological storm was brewing. The only attribution of a ‘group’ identity was contained in excerpt [I] and even still, it didn’t come any more recondite than that: “men of his ilk” is a phrase closer to obscurantism than edification. Still, the initial impression that many will have entertained of a *single* dissenter wreaking havoc, bears testament to the silent, manipulative workings of rhetoric. For, the strategy of addressing a social collectivity as an *individual* is precisely meant to trivialize dissension (Van Dijk 1998). In so doing, the possibility for the emergence of a cohesive group of malcontents is stifled, and the status quo remains, undisturbed. But as the debate wore on, that ‘lone’ voice grew ever louder and bolder: the forces were gathering at the border. Category Y had to “make the un-familiar familiar” (Moscovici 1984: 29), for the worst possible enemy to fight, would always be the faceless one. And so, in laying the blame squarely at the door of the enigmatic ‘Wahhabis’, the article, *Wahhabis are butchers*, had initiated that indispensable process of “anchoring”.

This polemical work, penned by a respected Muslim professor (Y5i/ii), identifies those who “have all jumped up screaming... ‘grave worship’” (i.e. Category X) as people almost all of whom have been “overseas at universities where the Wahhabi ideology dominates, and [who have] come back into our community thoroughly soaked in an ideology that undermines mainstream Islam”. Many of these cohorts are allegedly on the “pro-American” Saudi government’s payroll, receiving, “many years ago”, \$1000 each month for proselytizing their congregations with Wahhabi dogma. These “Wahhabis in our community”, we are led to believe, have “barbarism as their origins”, because “they have inherited on their hands the blood of the Muslims slaughtered” by their Saudi-based Wahhabi counterparts 200 years ago:

2. They killed everyone in sight, slaughtering child and adult, ruler and ruled, lowly and high-born. They began with a suckling child nursing at his mother’s breast and moved on to a group studying the Qur’an, slaying all of them, down to the last man. When they had wiped out the people in the houses, they went into the streets, the shops and the mosques, killing whoever happened to be there ...
(Y5i/ii)

While the historical accuracy of these reported events is not our concern, needless to say, they have elsewhere been described as “political manoeuvring” (X1i & ii/ii) or flatly denied, by none other than Category X. For the purposes of *this*

analysis, the salience of the passage lies not in its grisliness, but in its *construction* of the other. We say ‘construction’, partly because the veracity of the professor’s allegations has been fervently contested: identities are not simply what we claim them to be, in part because no-one ever gets to have the last word (Billig 1987).

Wahhabism, in turn, is further anchored and demonized in a six-part series, *Massacre in the name of the Most Merciful*, whose central claim is that the movement is, in fact, an instance of latter-day Kharijism, a breakaway sect of early Islam famed as much for its followers’ religious fervour as for their habitual shedding of *Muslim* blood. The similarities between the two movements lie not only in their warrior ethic, though, but also in their pronouncements of *kufir* (disbelief) and *shirk* (idolatry) on all who disagree(d) with them. The “proclivities” of Category X, then, are grounded via the crushing weight of history, in that it is unproblematically branded as the resurrected version of Kharijism and Wahhabism.

For the remainder of the debate, then, Category X is portrayed as either Wahhabite in outlook, or in actuality. Members of the category, through the property of transitivity, are inscribed with each and every characteristic that is or can be linked to Wahhabism proper: as Potter and Wetherell (1987) have noted, the power of categorization lies not in the boundary-making that it facilitates, but in the value-laden inferences and attributions coincident upon category membership that it makes possible. Inversely, to display a characteristic reminiscent of Wahhabite mores, either makes a person a Wahhabi in the strict sense of the term, or an approximation thereto: any seeming “convergence of effort” (Moscovici 1987: 156) encourages such discursive acts of brute assimilation. More succinctly, through this logic of transitivity, being placed in a particular category lays the person bare to all manner of attributions distinctive of that category. On the other hand, possession of the attribute makes one an instance of the category. Thus the potency of transitivity resides in its unrestrained applicability, which disregards the *direction* of the inference being made. Put differently, transitivity can transcend discursive space by making disparate discourses seem almost complementary to one another. Here is an apt example of this transitivity mechanism, a startling ‘double bind’ that thrives on the tactic of condemnation by association:

3. And they [“the Wahhabis in our community”] have inherited on their hands the blood of the Muslims slaughtered by these people [the Wahhabis of yore]. This is their heritage. (Y5i/ii)

And in reverse:

4. And why do some of them go to the Saudi Embassy in

Pretoria so regularly? These are the Wahhabis in our community. (Y5i/ii)

Here, Category X is linked to Wahhabite discourse simply through the word “Saudi”, and is bound to acts of butchery through the intermediate element of “Wahhabism”. The “Saudi” connective is not epiphenomenal though: it carries connotations of its own and is a powerful discourse in its own right. The Saudis are portrayed as having “usurped power in the most brutal and barbaric manner” (Y6) and “used the religion for their political power to suppress the religion” (Y7):

5. These Saudis, under the supervision of the Americans and the British, created Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia like the one in Madinah to produce the worst Muslim intellectuals. Their graduates exported an antagonizing theology [Wahhabism], promoting their agenda of divide and rule. To claim that students who study in Saudi Arabia have no link with Saudi politics is naïve – exactly because the students are the ones who make their agenda operate. (Y7)

Almost without exception, in the case of Category Y, references to the Wahhabis are buttressed by those pertaining to the Saudis – a subtle ruse that achieves two related functions. Firstly, it encourages the conflation of religion with politics, constructing and reinforcing the impression of Wahhabism as a “political entity... masquerading as ‘pure Islam’” (Y6). And because Wahhabism is now seen to be parading in religious garb, the task of exposing its political agenda becomes all the more urgent. In consequence, the debate is haunted by a dark, conspiratorial outlook, one of Islam under threat by hypocrites from within its ranks, which resultantly fosters a climate of panic that is intended to reallocate the support of a community beset by “confusion” (Y8).

Metaphorically speaking ...

Characterizations of Wahhabism are to some extent typified by vivid, metaphoric images. Descriptions are arranged around a variety of metaphors, one of which is the depiction of Wahhabism as an element of nature that must be resisted:

6. The slow and deceitful infiltration of the evil of Wahhabism into the South African Muslim population ... (Y8)

7. It is important to trace and locate the history of Wahhabism emanating from a particular family and tribe ... (Y6)

8. It is very dangerous to underestimate the Wahhabi impact on Islam ... (Y8)
9. Despite the destructive nature of Wahhabism ... (Y9vi/vii)
10. The modern day tendencies of certain Islamic “movements” [e.g. Wahhabism] ... to implode upon themselves and “come to experience a state of spiritual entropy. (Y9iii/vii)
11. But it is in the nature of “energy” to find work to do. And if that “energy” finds itself without a compassionate basis then chaos – particularly in its worst form of demented violence – is a natural consequence. (Y9iii/vii)

A variety of mental pictures spring from these excerpts. On the one hand, we are confronted with the image of a dangerous liquid that is insidiously seeping into a vessel, infecting its contents. On the other, reminiscent of physics experiments, one passage reconstructs a vision of a violent collision between moving bodies; another details in cryptic terms the death of a star that collapses upon itself and transmutes into a black hole. Above all, Wahhabism is likened to an irrepressible, violent force of nature that leaves unspeakable carnage in its wake.

But in stark contrast, Wahhabism is also depicted in artificial, mechanistic terms:

12. repeated references of Wahhabism as a “movement” (Y6; Y8; Y10)
13. Wahhabism... has frequently been a generator of war hysteria and cultural unrest. (Y8)
14. Meanwhile, the Wahhabite propaganda machinery persists in trying to ‘acculturate’ the rest of the Muslim world... (Y9v/vii)
15. Shaikh Seraj Hendricks discusses the rise of Wahhabism and the Saudi connection. (Y9v/vii)

The “movement” maxim functions not only to objectify Wahhabism as separate from and therefore anathema to mainstream Islam, but also serves to inscribe it as an active, regulated and regimented endeavour, rather than as a furious, spontaneous force of nature. In being likened to a “generator” and “machinery” that is hooked up via the “Saudi connection”, the conception of an organized Wahhabism

receives greater currency, whilst Wahhabite loyalists are further portrayed as both ruthlessly efficient and coldhearted. The “generator” phrase, too, provides a link to the earlier excerpts on “energy”. Ultimately, both sets of metaphors function to deny the *humanity* of Wahhabite sympathizers, which makes their emergence all the more threatening and their expulsion by any means possible (after all, they aren’t humans) all the more pressing. The potency of metaphor resides in its ability to captivate the mind in a manner that run-of-the-mill discourse can never equal – the figurative expression cannot help but goad, excite and intoxicate, and encourages a delicious engagement with the ontologically suspect.

It’s a conspiracy!

Conspiracy theories run riot through contemporary (Cape) Muslim discourse. These deal with a variety of issues, including Zionism, rand-dollar exchange rates, Coca-Cola, the Pokemon craze – and now the Wahhabis. As Moscovici (1987) notes, the mere fact that Category X represents a social minority already indicates a conspiracy. This minority seeks to subvert and corrupt and because it “masquerades as pure Islam” (Y6), it is capable of being at once itself and something else. Soon enough, it becomes impossible for Category Y to structure a coherent, logical argument, because this ephemeral minority is simply beyond definition: hence, all manner of contradictory aspects can be attributed to it, because descriptive consistency is no longer a possibility (Moscovici 1987).

Yet there is some sense amid the paranoia: that the Saudi Wahhabis are implicated comes as no surprise, since threatened collectivities typically blame internal dissension on the anarchistic agendas of *foreign* demagogues (Trotsky 1950, cited in Moscovici 1987) – as in apartheid South Africa, where the Soviets were fingered as ANC-backers. By accusing *foreigners*, any ideological fuzz recedes: the possibility of a bewildering *local* confrontation is replaced with the probability of a war against unmistakable *outsiders*. This in turn permits the deployment of no-holds-barred tactics, since Our very way of life is threatened by Them. Ultimate conceptions of Good and Evil constitute the new societal divide. Ontological foundations are reconstructed as the homogeneous ‘group’ is summoned out of nothingness to do battle against an antithetical other.

The “Wahhabis” respond

Below are a selection of responses from Category X:

16. Professor] da Costa claimed that the official Madhab (School of Islamic Jurisprudence) of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism. This is an untruth. (X1i/ii)

17. We therefore demand clearly proven facts, figures and names to show how Cape Muslims are being led astray with

the so-called Wahhabi doctrines. (X1ii/ii)

18. ... these practitioners [Category Y] are now using the Wahhabis (whoever they may be) as the hidden hand behind all this. (X2iii/iii)

Clearly, for the lynchpins from Category X, the “Wahhabis” simply do not exist, and Category Y, “in the absence of Qur’anic proof for their deviant practices” (X2iii/iii), has dreamt up “Wahhabism” in a last-gasp attempt to defend itself. Perhaps the “Wahhabis” are a discursive fabrication, yet there remains a compelling reason why, for Category X, Wahhabism cannot be *allowed* to exist. For, in the Western Cape, the term has acquired such negative connotations that no social category identified as “Wahhabite” in outlook can ever hope to enjoy any substantial support from the Muslim community. Yet two members from Category X nevertheless concede the existence of Wahhabism. Here are, respectively, their explicit and implicit admissions:

19. I suggest that Mr Da Costa take time to peruse the pages of [a religious text] so that he may attain a broader vision and a better understanding about Wahhabism. (X3)

20. Despite being called “Wahhabis” by deviant groups ... the call towards ... the Qur’an and Sunnah is growing ever stronger. (X4)

The reputation of Category X has been done irreparable damage through its discursive connection to supposed Wahhabite atrocities. In a knee-jerk reaction, the one member asserts that “a better understanding about Wahhabism” actually exists, and he subsequently attempts to cast doubt on whether the massacre attributed to the Wahhabis even took place. His fellow defender, on the other hand, *indirectly* acknowledges the concrete existence of the ‘Wahhabis’ by contesting the legitimacy of the label itself. Both members, then, fall back on the standard defensive manoeuvres of mitigation and, in one case, denial (Wetherell and Potter 1992). A third member even acknowledges Wahhabite barbarism, but distances himself from it. However, in keeping with a fundamental tenet of discourse analysis, we must be careful not to impute any mental states such as “self-hate” here. Although Allport’s (1954) account (namely of how sustained disparagement of the minority can cause its members to view themselves through the lens of the disdainful majority) certainly rings a bell, it must be shelved.

Although ‘Wahhabism’ may have a veridical existence beyond textual referents, its *essence* is a site of constant upheaval and contestation. For, while it may be “very dangerous to underestimate the Wahhabi impact on Islam locally” (Y8),

Category Y appears to have little clue what Wahhabism is anyway:

21. Undoubtedly, one of the worst abominations perpetrated by the Wahhabis under the leadership of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was the massacre of the people of Taif. (Y5i/ii)
22. This attack [at Taif] was carried out by the Wahhabis under the leadership of Ibn abd al-Wahhab's son Abdallah. (Y10)
23. [T]he Saudis ... have also subjugated [Wahhabism] to the political agenda of the Americans and the British. (Y7)
24. History will judge and expose [the Wahhabis] for their corruption, brutality and complicity with Western powers. (Y6)
25. [T]he Wahhabi inspired ... movements like the Tabligh Jamaat are at it once again, sowing ... confusion and doubt. (Y6)
26. In addition, the Wahhabites and the Tabligh Jamaah – which has the [Book of Divine Unity] of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab as its founding inspiration – are also anathema to one another. (Y9v/vii)

These three sets of assertions voice contradictions that are not easily dispelled. For one thing, if Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, “the founder of Wahhabism” (Y10), died before any of the alleged Wahhabite atrocities were even perpetrated, is the movement really as barbaric as its detractors would have us believe? Since, if it isn't, much of Category Y's attempts to smear the opposition are invalidated. Is Wahhabism the reluctant bedfellow of the United States and the United Kingdom, or does it willingly conspire with these powers? What criteria are employed in discerning Wahhabite movements from others? Evidently, the *doctrines* of Ibn Abd al-Wahhaab constitute no hard-and-fast criterion (as the Tabligh instance demonstrates), which renders untenable any adamant averment of Wahhabism being a *religious* venture. Neither, for some observers, is Wahhabism even a *political* apparatus, since it is the hapless *victim* of overarching political manoeuvres. Of course, Category X in turn has much to say that will further obfuscate the true identity of the Wahhabis, but we need not belabour the gist of our argument, namely that intra-category consensus regarding certain critical features of Wahhabism is palpably lacking. The fact that *inter*-category differences are just as salient merely alerts us to the rhetorical significance of the ‘Wahhabi’ factor and, more particularly, the narcissistic (but necessary) tendency of social categories to portray themselves in the best possible light.

“The Sufis are in fact friends of Satan...”

In the *Cape Argus*, Category Y loyalists are caricatured as inverted comma Muslims who participate in “pagan ceremonies” (X2i/iii) that sanctify “a host of other polytheistic practices” (X5i/ii) whose origins obviously stem from “various religions of the East” (X5i/ii). Theirs is a “man-made Islam” (X2ii/iii) that sinfully seeks to connect culture to religion even though “no ... cultural heritage ... can add one iota to Divine Perfection” (X2ii/iii).

Moving along to the Muslim papers, Category Y conveys the impression that the villainous Wahhabites are out to crucify the Sufis. Yet, amongst the authors from Category X, only a handful even mentions the word “Sufism”. The etymological status of the word is even disparaged as being alien to classical Arabic (read “Islam”), which functions to support claims that “Sufism” is a cultural, rather than religious, relic:

27. ... “tasawwuf” [“Sufism”] does not have its roots from the Arabic of the Qur’an ... the term Sufi comes from the Persian. (X6)

But soon enough, Category X’s objectification mechanism kicks in and the significance of the Sufi factor is acknowledged:

28. Ignorant multitudes decked themselves out in amulets, charms and rosaries. They listened blindly and followed ... ecstatic Sufi dervishes. These evil Dajjaals [Sufi Antichrists] ... (X4)

29. Sufis and Tariqat followers [are] deviant groups who promote saint and grave worship ... (X4)

30. It is therefore ironic that Shaikh Seraj, who is a Sufi, would brand the Jamaat as a Wahhabi-inspired movement! (X5ii/ii)

Significantly, all of Category X’s references to Sufism are provided by the same authors who disclosed the existence of the Wahhabis: the two seem almost semiotically bound. In a sense, Sufism only becomes an issue to be confronted if Wahhabism is considered to be a ‘real’ entity and – given its battered reputation – in need of defence. Needless to say, this act of defence does not entail a eulogy on Wahhabism, but rather a parody about Sufism’s suspected deviance. But still, as in the case of Wahhabism, Category X attempts to obfuscate the ontological status of the Sufis with its semantic gymnastics:

31. Now if we look at these deviant groups who *call themselves* Sufis ... (X4, italics added)

Sufism, if translated as “Islamic spirituality” (as it usually is), is something to be admired, not despised. To put it bluntly, then, Category X cannot permit “these deviant groups” to become the flag-bearers of Islamic esotericism. Whereas Category X had to sell out on Wahhabism because it had been flogged to death, the existence of Sufism is silenced and, when admitted, disparaged, for an *opposite* reason, namely that, in the Western Cape, Sufism is a phenomenon that has taken on legendary proportions. Tales of our Sufi forebears walking across the sea, turning sacks of potatoes into bags of stone and becoming invisible to enemy eyes, are awesome feats that, for most Cape Muslims, can only be denied with much reluctance. Put differently, to allow the hypnotic charm that is Sufism into the discursive arena is tantamount to losing the debate before it has even begun. Consequently, Sufism becomes something to be silenced by *not being paid any attention* or, failing that, discredited. Hence Category X’s euphemistic depictions of our ancestors as “great people” (X7), “occupant[s] of the grave” (X2i/iii) or “those who have passed on” (X2iii/iii) – never mind the explicitly *Sufi* allegiances of these “esteemed” people (X5i/ii).

Damage control

Muslims aren’t supposed to worship saints – period. In fact, we would not be exaggerating in claiming that they are among the fiercest monotheists around. Hence, when supplicants prostrate enthusiastically on blocks of concrete, Category Y’s shrine frequenters would understandably begin to feel a little queasy themselves. Certainly to the uninitiated Westerner, anyway, images of foreheads being planted on graves unambiguously flag polytheistic tendencies. It is not surprising, then, that Category Y would attempt to downplay the often graphic descriptions of shrine visitations in which Category X revelled:

32. ... the interconnectedness between religion and culture. (Y2)

33. ... the “Faaik Gamieldien issue”... “Faaik-fitnah” [mischievous mongering]... (Y10)

34. ... a reactive attack on the growth of popular Sufism in the Western Cape ... (Y11)

35. ... the issue at hand is whether tabarruk [the seeking of blessings, e.g. at the graves of the pious] (not shirk) is permissible or not ... (Y7)

36. ... [the] struggle to safeguard mainstream Islam in the Western Cape ... (Y12)

37. ... the issue of grave visitation and the etiquette pertaining thereto ... (Y13)

38. ... [the] condemnation of well-established mainstream Islamic practices ... (Y8)

The primary feature of these excerpts is their abstract quality. Gamieldien (X2i/iii) writes vividly about foreheads on graves, “chanting”, “multi-coloured layers of cloths” draped over graves, “incense burning”, a “corpse”, and elsewhere (X2ii/iii) about “shrines of brick and mortar” and “the destruction of the idols”. In a similar vein, his handful of supporters write about “food offerings and animal sacrifices” (X5i/ii) and “amulets, charms and rosaries” (X4). In a manner not dissimilar to the article, *Wahhabis are butchers*, the invocation of graphic images functions to produce the desired responses of disgust. Moreover, visual imagery is more deeply encoded than “just” words, which allows even peripheral details of events to remain uppermost in one’s mind. Such a strategy is crude and opportunistic, but its effectiveness is unquestionable: Van Dijk (1998) makes the telling remark that while one may not be able to control what people will think, one can certainly influence what they will think about.

Category Y must either change the terms of the debate or risk being lampooned as pagans that sacrifice animals and don lucky charms. It opts for the former, by framing its position in the abstract, neutral terms of “culture”, “religion”, “tabarruk” and “mainstream Islamic practices”, thereby drowning negative information about the self in a flood of euphemisms and understatements. Certainly, the “shrine issue” has always been a controversial one in Islamic history, since the religion’s *raison d’être* is predicated upon its intolerance of anything approximating to idolatry. Hence, when the discursive precincts of shrines or graves are neared (as in excerpt 37), the term “visitation” is conveniently slipped in as a security measure. For, one doesn’t necessarily ‘visit’ a place to give voice to pagan longings – on the contrary, in everyday parlance, one “visits” a friend (in this case, of God Himself), and who in all reasonableness will object to that?

“Sufis” and “Wahhabis”? Interrogating ontology

Some will no doubt be puzzled by the ontological insecurity (Giddens 1990) that hampers the “Sufis” and “Wahhabis”: for some of our protagonists, these terms have “real” extra-discursive referents, but for others, whatever they may denote, is pure whim. Hence, we consider this question of whether or not the “Sufis” or “Wahhabis” exist to be an inappropriate one – for, even if an epistemologically higher ground did exist, we certainly don’t (and perhaps never

will) have the resources to endorse it. What we need to remember is that language has *both* reflective and constitutive features, and that telling the difference is an exercise in futility: in respect of the latter feature, to quote Foucault's (1976: 49) celebrated adage, discourses "systematically form the objects of which they speak". And when discourses become ideological, some objects will be formed, but others will be aborted. What we have attempted to demonstrate, then, is that "Sufism" and "Wahhabism" are ontologically contested entities because the terms do not have equal meanings: when juxtaposed with one another, Sufism enjoys a distinct advantage. And since Category Y considers itself the defender of Sufism, Category X cannot compete on an equal footing – the ensuing ideological relations of domination and subordination are simply inescapable.

Shotter's (1993a; 1993b) theory of *joint action* is particularly useful in charting the discursive processes by which this ontological relativism is realized. "Joint action" refers to a third category of events that resides somewhere between what we do (actions) and what happens to us (events): it straddles these two spheres by circumscribing a domain of *interaction* in which consequences, while unintended, possess a degree of intentionality. Since, in joint action we are constantly responding to others, what we wish for and what actually issues from these exchanges, may not coincide – hence the unintended character of outcomes. On the other hand, the intentionality of these co-productions arises out of their regulation of what future exchanges may be made. The intermediate products of joint action establish a context that, if flouted, will result in the dismissal of subsequent responses. Joint action, then, while haphazard in terms of its outcomes, has a certain order to its trajectory. Translating this into the present debate, exchanges on "Sufism" and "Wahhabism" have resulted in the unexpected obfuscation of the meanings of these terms. Neither the strategies of Categories X nor Y were fully successful. The former's approach was directed at wishing Wahhabism and Sufism away, while the latter attempted to define these entities as if they were antithetical cosmic tensions that were locked in a titanic struggle between Good and Evil. Instead, we have been left with incoherent images of what it *might* mean to be a "Sufi" or "Wahhabi". Category X responded to the vitriol of Category Y by, in some cases, rejecting its argument outright. And as accusations of butchery grew increasingly loud, the deafening silences and hedges of Category X continued undeterred. In retrospect, this constant to-and-froing should have alerted us to the probability of an inconclusive finale. In a strange way, then, Shotter's (1993b: 39) "unpredictable outcomes" were embarrassingly obvious.

The art of persuasion: faking "refinement"

The inexorable drive to enlightenment is a vital aspect of the Islamic faith for, without it, Muslims fear lapsing into that historically despicable state of igno-

rance – the age of *Jahiliyyah* – which exemplified the existence of infidel nations. Accusations of ignorance, then, are a powerful device not only for discrediting the position of any opposition, but also for banishing those who disagree to an embarrassing past when “men of [that] ilk” habitually “condemned what they could not understand” (Y4).

Category Y characterizes the views of certain of Category X’s members as “small-minded” (Y1), “ignorant” (Y14) and “confused” (Y7), which reflect states of “complete ignorance” (Y3), “very little understanding” (Y2) and “lack of knowledge” (Y10). But this ignorance is hardly a novelty – in fact, it is typical of the very man, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, whose views Category X seeks to expound. One writer from Category Y depicts this figure of 18th century Islam as a “naïve” (Y7) man who “could not deal with the profound teachings” (Y7) of Sufism – in fact, even the Wahhabite Saudis of *modern* times continue to spawn the “worst Muslim intellectuals” (Y7). In sum, Category X is branded as the inheritors of a culture of intellectual backwardness, which apparently explains its trademark intolerance of the incomprehensible.

Needless to say, Category Y is painted in the same distasteful terms – the Sufis whose cause it champions were typically followed by “ignorant multitudes [that] listened blindly [to] ecstatic Sufi dervishes” (X4). Category Y, amongst other things, “ought to know” (X2ii/iii) that the pagan behaviour captured by the television documentary is outlawed, and “only a fool” (X5i/ii) would deny that such behaviour revokes one’s Muslim identity. Furthermore, Category Y’s dismissal of Wahhabism betrays both the lack of “a broader vision” (X3) and a “logical basis” (X8) as well as states of “confusion and doubt” (X9).

In accusing the other of ignorance, each category implicitly sets itself up as the guardians of “true” knowledge. This is plain to see in each party’s repeated designation of the feud as a “debate” (e.g. X2iii/iii, X/ii, Y2, Y6) – a signifier that functions to remind observers that the said category is in the vanguard of an erudite and therefore meritorious endeavour. Moreover, “debate” signifies the construction of that platform upon which the knowledgeable vanquish the foolish. Initially, though, Category X is unabashedly *hostile* towards the notion of “debate”: its opening letter confidently presents Allah’s Word as the final one, but when dissenting voices burst onto the stage, “debate” suddenly becomes the new keyword, what with its associated cerebral adumbrations. Indeed, the esteem in which truth claims are held, is especially enhanced when these are arrived at under conditions of intense debate.

Debate, in turn, is a stone’s throw from tolerance, since the former is an instrument that forces diametrically opposed positions to endure and engage one other. And in South Africa, of course (given its largely unparalleled history of repression), tolerance is the new buzzword. Category Y quickly capitalizes on this, and begins to lambaste its opponents as being intolerant towards the traditions of shrine veneration, disrespectful towards the ancestors, and of attempting

to suppress the debate with their *ex cathedra* ravings. Category X retorts that tolerance is no answer to evil, which instead requires unsympathetic eradication. Nonetheless, it does at times cash in on the “tolerance frenzy” as both categories waste no time in milking the odious reputation of apartheid. For Category Y, repressive rule is seen as having prevented the emergence of a culture of dialogue, which was, and is, why

39. ... the traditional conservative ulama lived in a comfort zone unwittingly taking on ideological Islam from some Middle East nations without consultation. Now that we are living in a democracy whereby Muslims from all corners of the world are making South Africa their home, the debate is timely and relevant. (Y6)

40. ... [w]e need to encourage healthy debate that will allow us to redefine our roles as Muslims in South Africa and where we as a community are headed. (Y2)

41. ... [a]s a Muslim I am exercising my democratic right to voice my very strong objection against Shaikh Shouket Allie's letter. (Y15)

For Category X, by contrast, oppressive governance was especially vicious because

42. the present shrine was constructed by the Apartheid regime in 1969... [which] was yet another elaborate ploy ... to keep the Muslims in spiritual serfdom. (X2i/iii)

Apartheid, then, is equally despised, but for varying reasons that reflect the highly polarized positions that each category is advancing. Category Y deftly juxtaposes its aversion for apartheid tyranny with its preference for “progressive” themes – specifically, the cherished ideals of debate, knowledge, democracy, tolerance and cultural sensitivity – a move that is designed to annex the sympathies of a westernized public. This does not suggest, however, that Category Y is selling out on traditional Islamic values, because Sufism is grounded in a humanitarian and liberal philosophy anyway. Yet “tolerance” is not invoked purely because it is a virtue of sorts: rather, for Category Y, it accomplishes three crucial functions. Firstly, calls for “tolerance” are the politically correct way to silence criticism. Pleas to “agree to disagree” are not barometers of magnanimity – on the contrary, they smother dissension beneath an avalanche of pretentious benevolence. Secondly, accusations of intolerance transport the debate to the realm of the pathological, thereby postponing the engagement of whatever grievances *are*

actually made (Wetherell and Potter 1992). Thirdly, since the other is intolerant, the self becomes, by default, relatively more tolerant – and since the virtues of tolerance are presumed, the self needn't legitimate its position (Wetherell and Potter 1992). We are accepting and caring, but They are temperamental and vindictive. The issue now has nothing to do with shrines, but everything to do with goodness of character, and since We inhabit the positive end of that continuum, Our way of life is necessarily beyond interrogation.

Not surprisingly, Category X's aforementioned concessions towards "debate" and "tolerance", appear to have been disingenuous. Any unconditional embrace of such notions is unashamedly missing from the agenda:

43. ... no amount of debate, cultural heritage or tolerance can add one iota to Divine Perfection. (X2ii/iii)

44. True, Islam teaches tolerance. But it also teaches one to enjoin good and forbid evil. (X5i/ii)

45. [Muslim Views] publishing these uncouth assertions are as guilty as the writers ... (X6)

Tolerance and its lightweight surrogates take a backseat when Allah and His Prophet are invoked. When God and His Messenger speak, respectful silence – not rigorous dialogue – is the appropriate rejoinder. There is no need for Category X to appeal to a plethora of secular themes to reach the Muslim audience – the singular approval of Allah Himself is all the authority that is required. Moreover, since the larger part of the dispute is played out in *Muslim* newspapers, spontaneous acculturation is unnecessary anyway.

What is emerging, then, is a sense of the Cape Muslim community being home to a profound bifurcation of sensibilities – historically rooted in an ethos of humanism, it is equally loyal to an overarching Islamic ethic of uncompromising divine rule. Each social category is simply addressing opposite yet coexistent sentiments. Allah, the Qur'an, "debate", "tolerance" or the like are variously invoked depending on who it is that one wishes to address. The substance of truth claims changes all the time, because "truth", in this postmodern world, has become decidedly local. Due to the proliferation of media technologies (in our case, newsprint), it is now possible for people of all persuasions to be reached at once, and the homogeneity of the audience is no longer a guarantee (Meyrowitz 1986). It is then no longer possible to pander to the inclinations of the *entire* mob – and so propagandists have realized that their bandwidths can only extend over a *selection* of enclaves within it.

History is another topic of profound significance in Islam (Smith 1981) – and as we have been reading in the newspapers recently, Muslims seem to have remem-

bered recent history better than most. By the same token, both parties' arguments are buttressed by incessant references to events of the recent or remote past:

46. The shrines are the only remnants of a proud history that came under severe pressure by colonialism and apartheid. (Y1)

47. For centuries people have been trying to discredit Allah's [Friends] but they have failed miserably ... (Y14)

48. But there are a number of things that impede this [exonerating Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab]. Firstly, there is – even if we remove Abdul Wahhab from the equation – Wahhabism's historical unfolding. (Y9vi/vii)

49. ... the Prophet of Islam waged wars against those who wanted him to be tolerant towards their misguided beliefs. (X2ii/iii)

50. Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has outlined saint/grave worship as one of the causes of the Romans' decay. (X5i/ii)

51. But Allah be praised! No generation beset by innovations (*bid'a*) and abominable *shirk* [idolatry] was ever devoid of sincere reformers ... (X4)

History, like tolerance in the West, need not provide its credentials – it speaks for itself, and since it deals with documented “facts”, it becomes especially difficult to contest and overthrow it. It may be used to eulogize the self or demonize the other, and as for those who are confident enough to cite the history books, they are generally believed, since their putative currency is ‘factual truth’. What is more, such people as know their history cannot be biased – because they are simply telling it like it was. Of course, depending on the ideological permutations at stake, certain histories will be more privileged in relation to others, but in spite of that, *everyone* has internalized some or other history – if not, one would lose all sense of time. And for those, then, who seek to persuade, it's just a matter of locating which history is the operating one – because nothing has quite the presence of history.

Concluding Remarks

We have engaged the “Sufi”-“Wahhabi” debate from three fronts. At its most basic level, the dispute cuts to the heart of Islamic cosmology by forcing a rethink of what it means to profess the existence of no god but Allah. At another level, the rhetorical features of the vying discourses serve to remind us that more than just ideas, but the loyalties of several hundred thousand Cape Muslims, are at stake. In turn, this forces an appraisal of the material in terms of Van Dijk’s (1998) “ideological square”, which circumscribes the various discursive options open to each party as it moves towards legitimation and, ultimately, a position of religious hegemony.

However, this debate must *not* be considered as being principally about “Sufism” or “Wahhabism”. For, to do so, would be tantamount to privileging an ideologically lopsided version of events. The “Sufi”-“Wahhabi” couplet is a rhetorical device that goads the observer into viewing this controversy as a struggle between Good and Evil. Category Y presents Sufism as the embodiment of all that is good, whilst demonizing the “Wahhabite” position to such an extent that it becomes a morally indefensible one. Yet, despite these concerted efforts of the dominant Category Y to discredit the dissenting Category X, veridical descriptions of “Sufis” and “Wahhabis”, assuming they even exist, remain out of earshot. The synergistic interaction of, on the one hand, the spoiling tactics of Category X and, on the other, the inconsistent accounts of Category Y, has rendered impossible the emergence of a coherent understanding of either of these terms. On a personal note, we have even heard the unsettling remark that it is conceptually possible to be a “Sufi” and a “Wahhabi” at the *same* time! The immediate implication of these observations is that the oft-cited “groups” of “Sufis” and “Wahhabis” are not unproblematic ontological givens. Muslims may speak automatically and mindlessly about these social categories, yet their extra-discursive referents are at best, elusive and, at worst, illusory. “Groups” are by no means “out there” waiting to be discovered: in this case, “groups” have been reworked and their differences exaggerated in order to simplify the task of separating Them from Us. Mainstream theories of intergroup relations must take this issue of constructedness into account, or risk compromising explanatory power.

When a debate (like this one) erupts almost out of nowhere, texts are typically produced that attempt and claim to comprehend the phenomenon. But, as is customary of the discourses that inhabit such texts (Parker 1992), they can *create* “the very reality they appear to describe”. (Said 1991: 94). Yet, even though we experience “reality” firsthand, we nevertheless place a greater trust in these texts that, at best, can only deliver a “reality” that is vicariously experienced. What is in the text becomes reified, and soon enough, it seems almost absurd to question its veracity. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the written word is an abstraction from the “real” – which raises the issue of meaning. Experience and its narrative may not coincide, which makes the task of deciphering meaning a monumental

one – not to mention the fact that, in discourse analysis, we may not “cheat” by imputing mental states to our participants. And so we are left, without recourse, to mourn the “reality” that words by themselves are not sufficient indicators of meaning: language is a filter through which the phenomenological passes, and therein lies the impoverishment of written communication.

So just what is “out there”? It is difficult, if not impossible, to say. We all “know” that the “Wahhabis” are “out there”, in the same way that we use the word “Sufism” oh so carelessly. Analysts are beginning to “suspect” that the “Wahhabis” are behind the World Trade Center disaster, except, as this study has shown, we don’t know who, or what, they are. Can accusations be levied at phenomena that, despite our best efforts, avoid definition? Or should we simply not take the relativist ontology of the social constructionist seriously?

For the outsider, it must seem surprising, perhaps even amusing, that the nationally televised scene of a forehead on a concrete slab should cause such a stir. Yet, in the final analysis, the outrage that ensued may have been a response to the interrogation of what was thought to be beyond question (Moscovici 1987). Shrine rituals have been institutionalized over the centuries through the appropriation of spaces whose precincts were widely felt to have been cathected with something sacred. And to question the privileged status of the *sacred* is about as close to blasphemy as anyone can get. Fortunately (or unfortunately), the dispute shows signs of being on the wane and, in the wake of the recent Trade Center carnage, the feeling is now widespread amongst Muslims that Islam is under siege by infidels – “real” ones, this time. And because the preservation of Islam is the ultimate superordinate goal, the most urgent cause that any Muslim can ever be called upon to defend, we can expect it to displace all other concerns.

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