# ‘You Can’t Hide from the Things that You’ve Done Anymore’: *Battlestar Galactica* and the Clash of Civilizations Debate

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**Abstract**

This article examines the science fiction television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–9) as a complex allegorical exploration of the ways in which Islam is understood and misunderstood in the West. While it never refers directly to Islam, by trading on the metaphoric distance offered by the genre conventions of science fiction, the series radically questions the binary logic of the influential ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, which presents ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ as distinct entities at war with one another. With its constantly shifting perspective on two fictional warring civilizations, *Battlestar Galactica* undermines such simplistic understandings of contemporary religious and political violence. More radically, the series seriously attempts to answer the question posed by a key character representing the West: ‘Why are we as a people worth saving?’

**Keywords**: *Battlestar Galactica*, clash of civilizations, Islam

On the surface, the television series *Battlestar Galactica* tells a thrilling story about a futuristic human civilization at war with a race of genocidal robots. On another level, the series is a highly complex, deeply subversive allegorical exploration of the events of 11 September 2001 and the American-led ‘war on terror’ that followed. A remake of a cult favourite television series which ran from 1978 to 1980, the new version of *Battlestar Galactica*, which ran on the American cable-television Sci-Fi channel (a division of NBC/Universal), from 2003 to 2009, has a good deal to say about war, peace and religion at the dawn of the twenty-first century. For the astute viewer, the series offers an incisive critique of both US foreign policy and the mainstream mass media’s stereotypical portrayals of Islam. It is crucial to understand from the outset that *Battlestar*

*Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2011 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 8(2): 154-177. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

*Galactica* deals with Islam not as a historical and cultural reality, but as a *discursive object*: Islam as it is represented in Western, largely non-Islamic cultures. To work out precisely how the series works to undermine dominant codes of representation, I want to place it in opposition to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, an influential model for understanding international conflict which postulates a state of necessary and absolute conflict between two broadly imagined entities, 'Islam' and 'the West'. After examining the clash of civilizations model and exploring some of the ways in which *Battlestar Galactica* seeks to correct the sorts of reductive and ultimately harmful vision of history that it represents, this article ends with a brief speculation on a closely related question: how did *Battlestar Galactica* get away with this subversion at a time when even the mildest criticism of the 'war on terror' was treated as deeply suspect?

## The Clash of Civilizations

The language of the 'clash of civilizations' is perhaps most familiar from the work of Harvard political scientist and former US National Security Advisor Samuel Huntington; however, the idea pre-dates Huntington's highly influential 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' Three years earlier, as theorists grappled with the ever more visible end of the Cold War, Bernard Lewis wrote in *The Atlantic* of a growing conflict between the West and Islam:

> It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival. (1990, 9)

For Lewis, this clash is very real, and, at least from the perspective of the West, it is profoundly threatening. Though Huntington tempered Lewis's work slightly by presenting the clash of civilizations as a thesis, there is little doubt that he and Lewis were very much in agreement about the causes of international conflict. The political upheaval of the day lends to Huntington's work, even more than Lewis's, a distinctly epochal tone:

> World politics is entering a new phase…. It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (1993, 22)

Huntington defines 'civilization' very broadly as 'the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species' (ibid., 24). There are, according to Huntington, 'seven or eight civilizations', namely, 'Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization' (ibid., 25). He admits that there are sometimes great differences within civilizations, which can include a number of 'subcivilizations'; nevertheless, these civilizations are again very real – they are, in his words, 'meaningful entities'. As does Lewis, Huntington argues that conflict would most likely erupt at the fault line between 'Islamic' and 'Western' civilization.

Huntington's thesis has been wildly popular, seeping into and influencing the general discursive construction of Islam. Even if they do not use Lewis's or Huntington's language, many writers nonetheless reinforce the general structure

of the clash model. To cite one of what could be a great many examples, Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith*, writes:

> We are at war with Islam…. It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been 'hijacked' by extremists. We are at war with precisely the version of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the sayings and actions of the Prophet. A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam. (2004, 9–10)

Harris's language is hyperbolic and alarmist: 'Islam must find some way to revise itself, peacefully or otherwise. What this will mean is not at all obvious. What is obvious, however, is that the West must either win the argument or win the war. All else will be bondage' (ibid., 30–1). It is worth highlighting here something that is present also in Lewis's and Huntington's work; if this conflict is to end, it is Islam that must change, not the West.

It will be instructive to examine briefly how the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations was reinforced during and after the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, given that they form a crucial part of the background against which *Battlestar Galactica* plays out. The mainstream mass media (to use an admittedly problematic phrase) were indispensable players in reifying this model of conflict and warfare. As Bruce Lincoln (2003) has argued, the news media were active in presenting a very simplistic picture of those who organized and carried out the attacks, a picture which tended to focus myopically on the extremist form of Islam practised and encouraged by the organizers of the attacks, giving the American public little more than 'a cartoonish stereotype of Orientalist fantasy … whose innate irrationality precluded taking him [Osama bin Laden] seriously but makes him a serious danger' (2003, 20). This focus, as

Lincoln also notes, was fostered, if not mandated, by the United States government, which encouraged news media organizations to limit the public's exposure to the video materials released by bin Laden and to show only brief excerpts, accompanied by 'appropriate commentary' (2003, 19), essentially preventing a more nuanced understanding of the underlying causes of the attacks to reach a mainstream media audience.

Though this sort of simplistic representation was never universal, the kind of binary logic exemplified by the clash of civilizations model can be found even in more balanced and less polemical writing about Islam. We can see it, for example, in the following passage from Tom Junod's otherwise admirable 2006 *Esquire* article about John Walker Lindh, a 25-year-old American man captured with Taliban soldiers in Afghanistan:

> His search for purity within himself eventually led him to search for a pure Islamic state – and to serve the comprehensively oppressive Taliban. And now he is supposed to be pure in thought and in word and in deed. Well, that purity is what makes him problematic to Americans, because it's Muslim purity, and Muslim purity and American freedom seem to be on a collision course. Indeed, they have *already* collided in the person of John Walker Lindh, and American freedom was the worse for it, while Muslim purity found its perfect, silent spokesman. (2006, 109)

There are three primary weaknesses of this kind of reductionist thinking. First, there are no such things as 'Islam' or 'the West', at least not in the static, universal forms that the clash model relies upon. Each of these broad generalizations encompasses such a range of diversity that they have little descriptive value. After all, Islam is the world's second-largest religion, practised in radically different forms the world over. As for 'the West', this label flattens the very considerable differences between cultures in Europe, the Americas and parts of the South Pacific. Even in Junod's relatively narrow context, it would be all but impossible to find a definition of 'American freedom' or 'Muslim purity'

that all Americans or all Muslims, or even all American Muslims, could agree with. Second, there are deep historical and cultural connections between Islamic and European societies that cannot be ignored and which render any attempt to draw sharp lines between the two inherently problematic. Fatema Mernissi, in her criticism of the clash model, points to a particularly troubling connection that exists between Western powers and precisely the kind of oppressive Islam that the model seeks to demonize. Saudi Arabian Wahhabi Islam, an extreme revivalist sect which had long been marginalized in the Muslim world, rose to prominence and then came to positions of considerable power in the last century only with the *aid* of Western democracies in the interests of protecting their access to petroleum resources (Mernissi, 2003, 52). She concludes that such a historical connection necessarily 'destabilizes the comfortable duality according to which the West is rational and progressive, and the East is a dark hole of irrationality and barbarism (ibid., 52). Third, the authors of the clash thesis are equally guilty of uncritically re-establishing what Jacques Derrida called the 'metaphysics of presence', given that they, like the Wahhabis, assume the existence of an identifiable and unchanging core of Islam free from the corruptions of history and culture.

A number of scholars have quite rightly critiqued the clash of civilizations thesis. Edward Said, for one, accuses Lewis of 'lazy generalizations', 'reckless distortions of history', and 'the wholesale demotion of civilizations into categories like irrational and enraged' (2003, 71). He in turn writes of Huntington: 'we are forced to conclude that he is really most interested in continuing and expanding the cold war by other means rather than advancing ideas about understanding the current world scene or trying to reconcile between cultures' (ibid., 69). More seriously, Said argues that the clash model tends to naturalize, and even reify, an inaccurate and ultimately harmful picture of the world (ibid., 75). Likewise, for Roy P. Mottahadeh, the clash model serves a normative rather than an analytic purpose and is 'far more a description (and prescription) than an explanatory system' (2003, 145). Given that this representation of Islam has had distinct, identifiable consequences in the realm of lived human cultures, all of this is far more than an academic debate. Emran

Qureshi and Michael Sells point out the dangers of the clash thesis, which they see as nothing short of a 'call to arms':

> The assertion of a clash of civilizations, whether or not it is valid, has become an undeniable force as a geopolitical agent. Even if it is mistaken, the hypothesis is read and believed in military and foreign policy circles both in the U. S. and internationally. It was cited by Balkan nationalists in defense of their effort to create enthoreligiously pure states in the Balkans. It is cited by radical Islamic ideologues who find in it a vindication of their own claims of essential incompatibility between Islamic and Western values. The assertion, regardless of its merits, has become an ideological agent that may help generate the conflict that it posits. The sweeping generalizations of the clash hypothesis may also strengthen and embolden those parties that do pose serious threats while at the same time making us less able to precisely locate and counter them. (2003, 2–3)

While the media have no doubt played an important role in the construction and maintenance of the clash model, it is important to note that the rhetorical framing of 'war' was a deliberate creation of the Bush administration in the hours and days immediately following 11 September and thus carried with it the authority of an official governmental pronouncement. Framing the response to the attacks explicitly as a matter of war, rather than of international law enforcement or otherwise, has had profound implications for the ways in which these events are presented in the mass media and received by audiences; indeed, as Stuart Wright argues, 'war framing endows the struggle with virtue and moral courage in the face of killing, aggression, and violence' (2008, 19). This rhetoric of war, moreover, further underlines the essentializing and reifying tendencies inherent in the very idea of the clash of civilizations. After all, in its use of strategies of cultural and moral distancing, the frame of war, Wright argues, 'involves a dehumanization of the enemy in preparation for inflicting harm or death' (2008, 19). That the mass media have been implicit in adding legitimacy to

this war framing is without question; however, despite all of this, there have been articulate voices of opposition, to the continuing conflicts encompassed under the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. One of the most pointed of these voices of criticism – if, admittedly, not the most visible – to which we now turn, articulates its critique by clothing the matter in fictional garb.

## The Transformations of *Battlestar Galactica*

Although it never evokes the particular language of the clash of civilizations, *Battlestar Galactica* undermines dominant strategies in the representation of Islam, particularly those most supported by the clash thesis. Dan Dinello quite rightly calls it 'the most politically relevant and disturbing show on television' (2008, 186). For *Rolling Stone* magazine's Gavin Edwards, it is 'the smartest and toughest show on TV', as well as its 'most vivid depiction of the post-9/11 world and what happens to a society at war' (2006, 1). As re-imagined by executive producers Ronald D. Moore and David Eick, *Battlestar Galactica* managed to become something that the campy original series, which aired on the American Broadcasting Company television network from 1978 to 1980, never managed to be: socially, politically and religiously relevant. While the original series clearly reflects the relatively simple strategic and discursive realities of its Cold War context, Moore's re-imagining is an emotionally potent, intellectually involving and intensely subversive allegory of the reaction of the United States to the attacks of 11 September and of the ongoing American-led 'war on terrorism'. *Battlestar Galactica* is that rarest of things in contemporary popular culture, a television programme that conforms to what Roland Barthes calls a 'writerly text', one that both demands a good deal from its audience and actively interrogates the dominant order. In the course of its initial run, which included an introductory miniseries, 74 hourly episodes, two television films called *Razor* (2007) and *The Plan* (2009), and numerous short 'webisodes' that ran on the channel's webpage, *Battlestar Galactica* grappled with serious matters such as religious conflict, torture, terrorism and genocide. It poses difficult questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean for a society to believe that it is at war? Is it possible to be moral during times of profound crisis?

The narrative focuses on a technologically advanced, interplanetary human civilization called the Twelve Colonies of Kobol. The series begins when the Colonial worlds are destroyed by an enigmatic robotic enemy known as the 'Cylons'. A few thousand Colonists escape the Cylons' devastating nuclear attack and flee in a motley collection of spacecraft protected by a military Battlestar called the *Galactica*, perhaps best imagined as an aircraft carrier in space. The original series employed a visual language familiar from *Star Wars* and the original *Star Trek*, featuring sweeping visuals, a stirring, fully orchestrated score, and – oddly given that it begins with a nuclear holocaust – an almost palpable sense of optimism. The new series makes a number of changes to this comfortable, recognizable formula; gone are the mechanical dog, the flowing suede capes, and the visit to the casino planet. Gone also are the bright colours, the comic relief and the sense of moral clarity. The new series is dark and claustrophobic, even grim, perfectly capturing the apocalyptic mood in the United States after the turn of the twenty-first century. At times, the new *Battlestar Galactica* makes for uncomfortable viewing; indeed, Kevin McNeilly argues that 'hard watching is what [*Battlestar Galactica*] is all about' (2008, 187). The series is shot with hand-held digital cameras, which give it a gritty, quasi-documentary feel, even when the virtual cameras venture out into deep space. Moore coined the term 'naturalistic science fiction' to describe his intentions for the series, writing that his goal was 'to introduce realism into what has heretofore been an aggressively unrealistic genre' (quoted in Marshall and Potter, 2008, 5).

At the same time, the show's visual language is densely intertextual, referencing everything from specific moments in the original series to the radical New Left speeches of Mario Savio to the infamous 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson 'Daisy' television campaign advertisement to the recent prisoner-abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib in American-occupied Iraq. While the narrative and moral structure of the original series was deeply indebted to creator Glen A. Larson's involvement with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Wolfe, 2008), the new series engages with religion on a more sociological level. For Moore, whose approach to religion has distinct resonances with that of seminal French sociologist Emile Durkheim, religion's most important task is that of cementing

and authorizing human society. That the new series is heavily concerned with religion and religious ideas is evident even from a brief look at the titles of the individual episodes, which include among others 'Act of Contrition', 'The Hand of God', 'A Measure of Salvation' and 'Revelations'.

By far, the most important changes the new series makes are in relation to the Cylons. In the 1978 series, the robotic antagonists were the creations of a long-dead race of lizard people called the Cylons. Philosopher John Scott Gray quite rightly notes that this left little room for moral ambiguity:

> The original 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* presented a cut and dried world in which the viewers found themselves collectively supporting the Colonials as they were pursued by the clearly mechanistic Cylons. This enemy represented a class of beings that could easily be disregarded, in large part because the glaring differences between us and them allowed us to view the Cylons as a totally alien outsider. (2008, 163; see also Muir, 2008 for more on the series' Cold War context)

In Moore's re-telling, the Cylons were created *by the Colonists themselves*. In a devastating war, these robotic slaves rebelled against their creators, retreating into the black reaches of space to pursue their own ends. Living autonomously before their attack on the Colonies, the Cylons evolved so that some of them appear to be human. There are twelve human models and many copies of each, some of whom live among the Colonists as spies or, programmed to think they are human, as 'sleeper agents'. As Hal Shipman notes, this seemingly simple change has far-reaching consequences for both the narrative and the ways in which it is perceived:

> In the new series, the root of the conflict with the humans and the Cylons is the robots' revolution against their status as slaves in human society. The Cylons have shifted from being clearly evil to occupying a more morally ambiguous position…. In altering the relationship between

> human and Cylon, the new series also changes the relationship between the viewer and the two groups, putting us in a space somewhere between the two, where we were previously firmly in the humans' camp. (2008, 155)

This transformation is also the key to the way in which the series uses allegory to deconstruct the clash of civilizations image of Islam.

## *Battlestar Galactica* as Religious and Political Allegory

Though we must be careful not to put excess weight on authorial intention, it is worth noting that the new series is self-consciously allegorical, as Eick told the *Calgary Herald*:

> To me, the old sci-fi novels – the [Robert] Heinleins, the [Isaac] Asimovs, the [Ray] Bradburys, the [Philip K.] Dicks and so forth – were all about allegorical sociopolitical commentary. So it really wasn't so much about coming up with a new idea. It was going back to an old one, which is, 'Let's use science fiction as the prism or as the smokescreen – as it was sort of invented to be – to discuss and investigate the issues of the day.' ('Battlestar', 2006, D4)

More generally, science fiction is, in the words of Peter Nicholls, 'the great modern literature of metaphor' (1978, 180). Fredric Jameson, recognizing this, argues that serious science fiction requires that interpreters pay attention to both metaphoric construction *and* ideological content:

> I would [base] the necessity of ideological analysis on the very nature of SF itself: for me it is only incidentally about science or technology, and even more incidentally about unusual psychic states. It seems to me that *SF is in its very nature a symbolic meditation on history itself*.... If this is the case, then, surely we have as readers not been equal to the capacity of the

> form itself until we have resituated SF into that vision of the relationship of man to social and political and economic forces which is its historical element. (1974, 275–6)

*Battlestar Galactica* is precisely such a symbolic meditation on history and is in other ways exemplary science fiction; in a formal sense, Moore's 'naturalistic science fiction' corresponds precisely to Darko Suvin's classic definition of science fiction as literature that hinges on the collision between what is known and what is unknown, or in his words, the '*literature of cognitive estrangement*' (2005, 25). It is interesting to note that *Battlestar Galactica* also supports Suvin's argument that science fiction is a literature for times of uncertainty, for 'the great whirlpool periods of history' (ibid., 26).

As I am reading it against the clash of civilizations debate, the political and religious allegory in *Battlestar Galactica* breaks down as follows. The Colonists represent what Huntington calls 'the West', and more specifically the United States. The identification of the Colonies with American culture is highly specific, down to the telling detail that the Colonial soldiers refer to Cylons as 'toasters', a label which echoes the dehumanizing and casually racist terms like 'gook' or 'towelhead' used by American soldiers in real-world conflicts. The ways in which the Colonial religion blends seamlessly into their civil and military culture are also, arguably, distinctly American. The Colonists follow a polytheistic faith that recognizes a number of deities – with names (Athena, Apollo, etc.) that recall figures from the pre-Christian Greek pantheon – but is nonetheless a unified tradition. Despite how deeply embedded it is in Colonial language and history, the majority of the Colonists take what might be called an Enlightenment view of their religion. The Colonial tradition fits nicely into what Lincoln calls 'minimalist' religion, which is defined by 'the position taken by Kant at the culmination of the Enlightenment, which restricts religion to an important set of (chiefly metaphysical) concerns, protects its privileges against state intrusion, but restricts its activity and influence to this specialized sphere' (2003, 5).

On the other hand, the Cylons are militant monotheists. Religion informs the whole of Cylon life and culture and offers the justification for their attacks on

the Colonies. The Cylon religion thus corresponds to what Lincoln calls 'maximalist' religion, which is defined by 'the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence' (ibid.). That the Cylon religion looks a good deal like the popular image of maximalist Islam is no coincidence. The Cylons represent not Islam *as it exists*, but instead represent the stereotypical and highly critical understanding of Islam that Huntington, Harris and Lewis would readily recognize. Let us look a bit more closely at the ways in which the series forces the identification between the Cylons and commonly held ideas about maximalist Islam, particularly as it manifested itself in the attacks of 11 September 2001. The structure of the genocidal attack on the Colonies is telling: the Cylons, using Colonial technology against itself (in several senses, not least in that the Cylons *are* Colonial technology), and activating sleeper agents living among Colonial society, launch a devastating and unexpected – at least for the insular Colonists – attack that brings an end to life as they know it. The identification of the Cylon attack with the relatively minor attacks of 11 September is reinforced by a repeated visual trope throughout the series. At intervals, the camera visits a section of hallway deep in the *Galactica* that is plastered with photographs of the dead, everyday objects, and hand-written messages from survivors, an unmistakable analogue of the spontaneous memorials that appeared in New York City in the days and weeks following the attacks. *Battlestar Galactica* is interested, however, in something far more subversive than a simple, uncritical act of mourning.

## *Battlestar Galactica* as Religious and Political Subversion

This metaphoric structure is what allows the *Battlestar Galactica* to slowly deconstruct the understanding of Islam that the Cylons seem, on first encounter, to embody so exactly. The series seeks to complicate this portrayal, which has clear echoes of the clash of civilizations thesis, in a number of ways. Most importantly, the series makes clear that the conflict between the Cylons and the Colonists – and thus metaphorically between America and a vaguely defined Islam – is far more complex than an irrational, murderous antagonism between two well-defined opponents. This crucial strategy is made explicit in a brief scene early in the first act of the miniseries which re-launched the series. Before the

Cylon attack, an ageing Colonial military commander, William Adama, who will go on to command the *Galactica* on its flight across space, addresses a crowd of minor dignitaries. He begins by reading from his prepared remarks; however, he soon sets down his script and improvises the remainder of his speech:

> The Cylon war is long over, yet we must not forget the reasons why so many sacrificed so much in the cause of freedom. The cost of wearing the uniform can be high, but [he pauses] sometimes it's too high. You know, when we fought the Cylons, we did it to save ourselves from extinction, but we never answered the question why. Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed, spite, jealousy. We still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept responsibility for anything that we've done, like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God, create life, and when that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves with the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play God and then wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore. (*Battlestar*)

What begins on familiar ground – and Adama's language of the necessity and nobility of military sacrifice in the name of freedom bears a distinct resemblance to the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' – quickly changes into something far more challenging. By placing this scene at the beginning of the narrative, Moore and his collaborators make this point very clearly: the Cylon attack is not random, meaningless or incomprehensible. Nor are the Colonies innocent; they are in fact deeply implicated in the complex causes of the attack itself. In evoking the narratives that were constructed about 11 September 2001, Judith Butler provides us with a good context for understanding why Adama's words are so radical:

> In the United States, we begin the story by invoking a first-person narrative point of view, and telling what happened on September 11. It is that date and the unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence that propels the narrative. If someone tries to start the story earlier, there are only a few narrative options. We can narrate, for instance, what Mohammed Atta's family life was like, whether he was teased for looking like a girl, where he congregated in Hamburg, and what led, psychologically, to the moment in which he piloted the plane into the World Trade Center. Or what was bin Laden's break from his family, and why is he so angry? That kind of story is interesting to a degree because it suggests that there is a personal pathology at work. It works as a plausible and engaging narrative in part because it resituates agency in terms of a subject, something we can understand, something that accords with our idea of personal responsibility. (2004, 5)

*Battlestar Galactica* subverts this tendency directly by beginning its story *before* the Cylon attack with a self-critical reflection on the broader and deeper historical context of the attacks themselves. Starting in this way, the allegory intimates not only that America is in some measure responsible for the violence that is aimed against it, but also that American society is flawed, dangerously destructive and perhaps even ultimately unworthy of survival. That the show pauses on occasion to explicitly answer Adama's question, and often answers it *in the negative*, is a deeply subversive act, in essence asking the fundamental questions that were tacitly but conspicuously absent in mainstream media discourse.

As the series progresses from this point, it continues to challenge the dominant construction of Islam as irrational, monolithic, backward and inherently violent. It does this by gradually allowing the viewer into the world of the Cylons. It also gradually, almost imperceptibly, fleshes out a sympathetic portrait of the Cylon religion by adding nuance to the original monolithic portrayal and showing that there are great internal debates among the Cylons about the character of their faith and what it demands of them as moral agents.

These divisions grow so pronounced as the series progresses that the Cylons undergo a vastly destructive civil war, in which a more moderate faction forges a fragile peace with the human survivors. In making explicit that there are at time profound divisions within Cylon monotheism, *Battlestar Galactica* recognizes something that many media outlets still refuse to do when considering Islam. To its credit (and there are scholars of religion who could learn from this example), the show also refuses to gloss over the uglier aspects and incarnations of Cylon religion. Nor does the series present any one interpretation of the Cylon tradition as definitive, authoritative, or correct. C.W. Marshall and Matthew Wheeland sum up the effect of this approach when they write that the series 'offers viewers a rich tapestry in which degrees of faith and differing doctrinal positions are treated sympathetically and sincerely' (2008, 100–1). In its incessant drive to present a more balanced and complex picture of the world, the series treats the Colonial religion with the same mix of suspicion and sympathy.

Marshall and Wheeland also underline the important fact that the Cylon and Colonial religions are interrelated (ibid.), which metaphorically points to the equally important fact that Islam shares a narrative tradition with Judaism and Christianity and that Muslim cultures played important roles in the history of the Western world. As we saw earlier in the case of Saudi Wahhabism, these continuing historical connections are something that the clash of civilizations model seeks to minimize or ignore. The interconnections between Colonial polytheism and Cylon monotheism will likely be explored in more depth in the upcoming spin-off series *Caprica*, which deals with the creation of the original Cylons. In the feature-length *Caprica* pilot (released direct to DVD), we learn that the first Cylons were created with the unwitting help of a young Colonial girl who is part of an underground monotheist movement. *Caprica* dramatizes the many different interpretations of monotheism when she is killed in a horrific act of sacrificial violence perpetrated by an extremist within her group, who detonates a bomb on a crowded train with a cry of Tthe one true God shall drive out the many' (*Caprica*). This alone is enough to make *Caprica* (which began airing on the newly renamed SyFy Channel in 2010) an ongoing object of academic interest.

*Battlestar Galactica* definitively undermines any simplistic binaries of aggressor and victim with a narrative arc beginning at the end of the second season. In the space of a single edit, the narrative skips series ahead a full year to find the Colonists eking out a hardscrabble existence on a marginal planet. The Cylons eventually discover the new colony and land as invaders with a civilizing mission in the service of their God. Here the series reverses the polarities of its metaphor to offer an even more radical critique of dominant modes of representation of all Muslims as inherently violent. The allegory that the show has so patiently pursued takes a radical turnaround and the Colonists are forced into a situation very much like those living in American-occupied Iraq during 2006, when the episodes first aired. By turning the diegetic world on its head, the show effectively, even shockingly, literalizes the old adage that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. When the Colonists stage a suicide bombing against the Cylon occupiers and the humans who collaborate with them, the viewer is confronted with the uncomfortable possibility that the bomber's actions – and thus those of the Iraqi resistance – are morally justified. Adding further nuance to its critique of the popular conception that Islam is the determining factor in the ongoing violence in Iraq, we see the bomber cradling a Colonial religious icon as he prepares his attack, suggesting that Colonial polytheism is just as capable of being put to violent, morally questionable use as the Cylons' monotheism (for more on religion and tolerance in the series, see Klassen, 2008). As Dinello notes, the implications of this narrative turn are far-reaching:

> *Battlestar Galactica* made a starling, mind-boggling shift – morphing the hated Cylons into American Occupiers and the beloved Humans into Terrorists … the show's geopolitical focus shifted from terror alert America to war-torn Iraq and, in the process, went where no other work of fictional pop culture dared. It provided a devastating, incisive, and subversive critique of the American occupation of Iraq. It did so by dramatizing an unprovoked invasion, portraying the damaging effect on those occupied, sympathizing with a morally ambiguous but legitimate

> insurgency, and aligning itself with the violent radical philosophy of black French revolutionary Frantz Fanon. (2008, 186–7)

In forcing the viewer to re-examine their own reactions to acts of violence that are portrayed in the public discourse as indefensible, irrational actions motivated by a uniquely Islamic drive often mistakenly (or narrowly) labelled as *jihad*, the series undermines the dominant modes of representation of both Islam and its role in international conflict.

As the narrative approaches its climax during the final season, the Colonists and more moderate Cylons make a desperate bid for peace. In the final episode of the series, the deeply conflicted Colonial scientist Gaius Baltar confronts Cavil, the leader of the Cylon hard-line faction, over the barrel of a loaded gun. In a remarkable speech that mixes language from a number of different religious traditions – including Deism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism – with more secular philosophies, Baltar admits to what looks very much like a religious worldview:

> *BALTAR*: I see angels, angels in this very room. Now, I may be mad, but that doesn't mean that I'm not right. Because there's another force at work here. There always has been. It's undeniable; we've all experienced it. Everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can't fathom, let alone explain away by rational means. Puzzles, deciphered in prophecy. Dreams given to a chosen few. Our loved ones, dead, risen. Whether we want to call that God, or gods, or some sublime inspiration, or a divine force that we can't know or understand, doesn't matter. Doesn't matter. It's here. It exists and our two destinies are entwined in its force.
>
> *CAVIL*: If that were true, and that's a big if, how do I know that this force has our best interests in mind? How do you know that God is on your side, Doctor?
>
> *BALTAR*: I don't. God's not on any one side. God's a force of nature, beyond good and evil. Good and evil, we created those. You want to break the cycle? Break the cycle of birth, death, rebirth? Destruction, escape, death?

> That's in our hands, in our hands only. It requires a leap of faith. It requires that we live in hope, not fear. (*Battlestar*)

Here the series undermines the classic Orientalist binary of the rational West and the irrational other, a binary implicit in the clash of civilizations thesis. Furthermore, as Lorna Jowett notes, Baltar, a man of science who is nonetheless given to irrationalities of all sorts, 'explodes the opposition of science and religion' (2008, 64). More broadly, Baltar's final speech is clearly a plea for peace, towards which the show slowly builds as it deconstructs its original portrayal of the Cylons as fanatical, closed-minded and inherently violent. In direct contradiction to Harris and Lewis, who see Islam as the cause of conflict and the barrier to peace, the series in its final hours implies that peace is possible only through the melding of the two civilizations, not though the capitulation of one party to another.

This moment is also emblematic of the deliberately ambiguous nature of the series, which constantly questions the clear divisions of the clash model. Is Baltar professing to a truly religious viewpoint or is he merely stating that rational inquiry and scientific experimentation have inherent limits? Is Baltar admitting to a traditional theistic view of the universe or advocating a neo-Romanticist veneration of the natural world? Perhaps what is going here is simpler than all of this: perhaps Baltar is simply acknowledging that religion has a place within most human cultures, even that religion is necessary for peace. It is interesting to note that the prominent sociologist of religion Mark Juergensmeyer, when confronting contemporary religious violence, reaches very much the same conclusion:

> Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two – some assertion of moderation in religion's passion, and some acknowledgement

> of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life. In a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself. (2003, 248–9)

*Battlestar Galactica* goes this one step further; the final minutes of the narrative imply that *neither* the Cylons nor their creators can ever be fully human without the other. The final images of the series, shot in contemporary New York City, clearly indicate that the same is true for those of us in the real world.

**Conclusions**

*Battlestar Galactica* initially aired on American cable television from 2003 to 2009, a time defined by a deeply conservative political atmosphere and by narrowly prescribed mass media portrayals of Muslims as people and Islam as a religion that were largely coherent with the clash of civilizations model. Mark Huband summarizes the situation:

> The primary role of most Western media during the period between the 11 September attacks and those in London almost four years later has been to provide definitions: what it is to be of one nationality or another; what it is to be democratic; what it is to be Muslim; what it is to be a suicide bomber; what it is to be 'hate-filled'. Without these characteristics, the 'war on terror' would have no shape. To meet this formidable challenge required the media itself to be extremely well informed. Not only would it have to accurately identify the source and purpose of the terrorist threat, but also accurately describe the nations that were being threatened. Why do they hate us? It was a question the media had to be able to answer accurately and without hesitation. In these endeavours, most media has completely failed. In fact, most have never sought to provide such a service to the public. (2009, 187)

If we concede that this question – Why do they hate us? – is very closely related to Adama's question – Why are we as a people worth saving? – or concede even that these two questions are one in the same, then it is possible to argue that *Battlestar Galactica* succeeds in offering a service which the news media have failed to provide, perhaps which the news media simply *cannot* provide. Indeed, it is not too much to imagine that the 11 September attacks and the 'war on terror' that followed provide a valuable test case for the limitations of the mainstream news media, at least in the United States, a test of what the media can and cannot say in the contemporary economic and political context.

The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* is a resolutely, at times almost perversely open text. There is thus a good deal more that could be said of the series; however, this article will address only one further question: just how did *Battlestar Galactica* manage this subversion? I want to suggest that *Battlestar* was able to say the things that it said with relatively little backlash because its allegorical structure provides it with, to use Eick's language, a 'smokescreen'. The distance provided by the genre conventions of science fiction – space travel, artificial intelligence, etc. – allow it a leeway to make pointed social criticisms that many other types of storytelling are not granted. Literary theorist Barry N. Malzberg turns this on its head when he speculates on why science fiction is not more popular or more accepted as serious literature: 'Science fiction is too threatening. At the centre, science fiction is a dangerous literature' (2005, 40). As a vehicle for the metaphoric exploration of modernity, science fiction can also inspire its audience to rethink their place in that modernity. In the final analysis, *Battlestar Galactica* is just such a dangerous fiction, one that undermines commonly held representations of Islam and the Muslim world. Perhaps the greatest irony here is that *Battlestar Galactica*, a work of allegory and a work of fiction, gives us a far more accurate picture of Islam and its place in the world than the clash of civilizations thesis, regardless of the latter's pretensions to objectivity.

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