

INTRODUCTION: THE DEBATE ABOUT ISLAMISM IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar

SOME PRELIMINARIES

On August 29, 1966, Sayyid Qutb, one of the original theorists of modern *Islamism*, was hanged in Egypt. The event was recorded on the inside pages of the international press and soon forgotten. Some sympathizers protested, as did former members of the Muslim Brothers, an organization dissolved in Egypt twelve years earlier and already consigned to the past by the world's newspaper editors and diplomatic corps.¹

Thus begins the first chapter of Gilles Kepel's popular book *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, which links a multivalent concept of Muslim religious practice (jihad) to the cluster of activist Muslim social movements in different parts of the world. Taken together these groups and their hastily assumed shared ideology have come to be known in global public discourse as the sociopolitical phenomenon of *Islamism*. Given that Sayyid Qutb was at first simply a little-known local Egyptian dissident, it is all the more ironic that after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and more so after the events of September 11, 2001, he received considerable attention from editors, diplomats, and the scholarly world, which earlier had dismissed him. In response to translations of his prison writings, such as *Milestones*, Western writers began to label him the "philosopher of terror," the "Marx of global jihad," and the veritable "ideologue of 'Islamism.'" ² For policy makers, academicians, and public intellectuals, he was the perfect piece in the puzzle: As the Soviet Union crumbled, what other than the "green menace" ³ of Islam would fill the adversarial void in the imaginations of Western leaders and pundits left by the failure of Communist ideology?

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The extent to which Qutb actually influenced the vast and multifaceted dimensions of Islamic resurgence in the modern world is as difficult to answer as the question of whether or not disparate Muslim activist movements around the world represent a distinct and unitary phenomenon in the first place. If they do, does it then not follow that together they warrant a single label? If not, what is the need for an all-encompassing label in the first place? These questions, movements, and the term *Islamism* itself have generated considerable debate among pundits and politicians, Jewish and Christian religious leaders, and Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. More important, however, is the fact that these intellectual debates and the ways in which they are resolved deeply influence the policy decisions and orientations of major political actors around the world.

Because the appropriateness and usefulness of the terms *Islamism* and *Islamist* are the very subjects of this debate, the reader might well ask: Is it even permissible for us to use concepts about whose meaning there is no consensus? Are we presuming the legitimacy of concepts and labels whose accuracy and validity have yet to be established? Does the debate itself already assume too much? What about alternative terms that might carry less baggage? Unfortunately, widely circulated substitutes for Islamism such as *fundamentalism*, *Jihadism*, or *Islamic extremism*, are themselves subject to even greater ambiguities. Rather than obfuscating what is to be done by dwelling on the lack of linguistic clarity, the immediacy and inevitability of such conceptual problems are the very motivation behind this project.

Regardless of semantic preferences, Islamism is a neologism that has come into popular and pervasive use. It usually refers to those Muslim social movements and attitudes that advocate the search for more purely Islamic solutions (however ambiguous this may be) to the political, economic, and cultural stresses of contemporary life. Islamists share the label *Muslim* with more traditional, liberal, modernist, mystical, and secular Muslims, with whom they may agree on many theological points but with whom they are often in vital disagreement on others. Those disagreements usually take place beyond the view and comprehension of Western reportage on Islam, often in Arabic and other Muslim languages, and in discourses and ways of arguing that are unfamiliar to most non-Muslims in the West. Ironically, much of what Islamists have to say is nonetheless only a few clicks away for readers of this book who are able to access the Internet (albeit many such Web sites are written in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, or other Muslim languages). However,

despite being a limited group within (but not the whole of) Islam, the strength of those referred to as Islamists in some areas, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Taliban in Afghanistan, gives them a disproportionate voice that has brought them to global attention in the public sphere. It is for this reason that the debate about Islamism in the public sphere draws our attention and compels us to reflect upon not just the term but the sociopolitical phenomena it purports to name.

ISLAM AND VIOLENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Mention of violence in connection with Islam is, in many ways, at the heart of the debate about Islamism and is seen very differently by various contributors to this volume. Although there is no necessary correlation, and in an ideal world it would be desirable to avoid any link between *Islam* and *violence*, such a move would simply ignore the elephant in the room. The fact is that *Islam* is seen by many non-Muslims in the West to be a religion of violence, and that identification has to be addressed.⁴ What, then, do these terms—*Islam* and *violence*—mean when they are made to qualify each other in the same phrase? For many journalists and writers, particularly in Europe and the United States, the reference is often to acts of violence by militant Muslims against non-Muslims, such as the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001; the beheading of the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Pearl; and the London train bombings in 2005. For most Muslims and many empathetic non-Muslims, the reference is to Western violence against Muslims, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the desperate situation among Palestinians living in the occupied territories, particularly Gaza, in Israel. For some writers and commentators, the mental association of Islam and violence also refers to violence between Muslim groups, such as in Darfur, Sudan; Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq; and among Pakistanis and Afghans in Central and South Asia. Although not bearing a clear correlation, the concepts of violence and Islam nonetheless are regularly embedded with one another in various realms of public discourse today. Such verbal associations and linkages affect the ways we teach, read, write, and speak. Because value judgments are deep seated in the public arena in which people around the world talk about Islam, we hope that this volume will inspire reflection and criticism by engaging one of the today's most imposing media and public concerns through the very names we use to describe it.

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The appearance of the film *Fitna* by the right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders in March 2008 is but one of many clear recent examples that the debate about Islam and violence has become globally entrenched.⁵ Taking its title from the Arabic term for discord, strife, and temptation, *Fitna* appeared on the heels of the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy. Wilders' disturbing pictorial essay juxtaposed militant-sounding verses from the Qur'an with gratuitous images of violence and destruction throughout its sixteen-minute duration. The message was clear: Muslim political violence is the product of Islam's religious texts and such violence is fueled by the ideology of Islamism; the film ends with the words, "In 1945 Nazism was defeated in Europe. In 1989 communism was defeated in Europe. Now the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation."⁶ Although many saw the film as nothing more than one politician's media stunt, *Fitna* and its message and the way in which the film was widely distributed and viewed electronically on the Internet remains emblematic of a deepening public concern about the perceived conjunction of Islam and violence.

Of course, the fact that the issues of Islam, violence, and freedom of political opinion were brought together in cyberspace is nothing new. The blogosphere is now teeming with sites that purport to identify Islamist groups and individuals that are considered to be dangerous to non-Muslims and to other Muslims. One such is IslamistWatch.org, which in 2008 announced on its home page that its purpose is to present a "catalog of the writings, beliefs, motives, and methods of the Islamist movement. While Islamists have many goals, the ultimate one is establishing a worldwide Caliphate (Islamic state): to overthrow and destroy democratic governments accross [sic] the globe and replace them with a single Taliban-style Islamic fundamentalist theocracy." The introduction to the site goes on to state that the "overall goals for Islamist groups like Al Qaeda, Al Fuqra, Islamic Jihad, Abu Sayyaf, the Muslim Brotherhood, Lashkar Jihad, Jemaah Islamiyah and many others are represented here, in excerpt and, where possible, in their entirety."⁷ Visitors to the Web site are then able to click on "What is an Islamist?" and find the following:

Non-Muslims throughout the world should be put on notice that whatever they may think of the arguments for or against Jihad as presented by the works reprinted on IslamistWatch.org, the Islamists themselves believe the arguments are valid, and have taken and are taking appropriate actions. Namely, to kill the infidel wherever and whenever they have reasonable opportunity.⁸

Setting aside the alarmism and hyperbole of this statement, similar Web sites, related publications, and associated think tanks constitute a virtual industry of “anti-Islamist” political action and public advocacy.⁹

Anti-Islamist advocacy on the Internet however is only the latest development at the intersection of Islam, politics, and the struggle to shape and control public opinion. Muslim political and religious groups have long made use of the Internet and other digital technologies to promote their ideas and provide a forum for an increasingly dispersed network of global sympathizers. Such technologies have been used by liberal, moderate, conservative, and radical Muslims alike and serve various functions.¹⁰ For example, whereas it is well known that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda have regularly used the Internet for getting their messages to the world, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt has a highly accessible English Web site that virtually doubles as a news service that retails a message of increasing moderation. The controversial Iranian President Mahmood Ahmadi-najad made headlines in 2006 when he announced that he would begin to maintain a regular blog, but he was a latecomer in a country with one of the highest per-capita rates of Internet use.¹¹ One organization that uses the Internet for international coordination, The Center for Islamic Thought, describes itself as the intellectual center of the “global Islamic movement,” whose aim is simply “to re-establish Islam as a source of power and justice in all Muslim countries, and throughout the world.”¹² The Center for Islamic Thought is an outgrowth of the activism inspired by Dr. Kalim Saddiqui, the late founder of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain and lifelong grass-roots Muslim activist.

Muslims have also used the Internet to challenge radical Islamic agendas as well as raise awareness about “Islamophobia.” In seeming response to sites such as *Islamistmonitor.com*, *Islamophobia-Watch.com* describes itself as a “project to document material in the public domain which advocates a fear and hatred of the Muslim peoples of the world and Islam as a religion.”¹³ The site catalogs instances of anti-Muslim discrimination throughout world and is increasingly becoming a site of pan-Islamic activism. As such digital interactions approach infinity, the dizzying nature of this hall of mirrors demonstrates just how pervasive and globally interconnected the debate about Islam, Muslims, and politics has become.

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Of course the debate is much wider and more consequential than what can be seen and heard in cyberspace. In fact, the debate over what exactly Islamism

is, and how it should be dealt with, reaches the level of national security policy, where the U.S. government has long been an active participant. Certain Muslim groups and elements of Islam—often referred to as Islamist—have been identified by various branches of the U.S. government, as well as by leading public policy institutes and lobbying groups, as requiring reform. This general interventionist trend often begins with a positive assertion that most Muslims are good citizens and neighbors and their practice of Islam is a constructive force in the modern world. This kind of approach to Muslim societies is by no means a new phenomenon, and it is often dubbed the good Muslim/bad Muslim theory.¹⁴ The implications of the theory are that good Muslims (liberals, modernists, progressives) should be supported in their conflict with bad Muslims (Al Qaeda, Salafis, and Islamist groups in general).

Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of this rhetoric, as Donald Emmerson points out in Part I of this book, has been President George W. Bush's consistent distinction between Islam as a "great religion" and the actions of terrorists who represent "evil and terror."¹⁵ Amir Hussein, one of the contributors to this volume, in his response to Emmerson is quick to remind us, however, that under politically expedient conditions, what might be considered a "bad Muslim" today might very well have been a "good Muslim" before—for example when mujahideen in the 1980s were willing to accept CIA training and fight the Soviets' military occupation of Afghanistan; in that context they were seen, at least inside the National Security establishment in Washington, as good Muslims—or at least contingently "useful" Muslims.

Such interventions in, and delimitations of, the good/bad Muslim dichotomy are an important and expensive part of U.S. foreign policy. In 2005 as a result of months of investigative reporting, David Kaplan of *U.S. News and World Report* announced the ambitious U.S. grand strategy to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world:

The U.S. government has embarked on a campaign of political warfare unmatched since the height of the Cold War. From military psychological-operations teams and CIA covert operatives to openly funded media and think tanks, Washington is plowing tens of millions of dollars into a campaign to influence not only Muslim societies but Islam itself. . . . Although U.S. officials say they are wary of being drawn into a theological battle, many have concluded that America can no longer sit on the sidelines as radicals and moder-

ates fight over the future of a politicized religion with over a billion followers. The result has been an extraordinary—and growing—effort to influence what officials describe as an Islamic reformation.¹⁶

Following the model established by the United States Information Agency (USIA) in its management of America's image abroad during the Cold War, the new program was given the name Muslim World Outreach. Among its projects aimed at Arab societies are Radio Sawa, an Arabic pop music station, and Al-Hurra, a satellite news channel with a \$63 million annual budget.¹⁷ In total, the State Department has an estimated budget of \$1.3 billion annually to fund these and other programs that rely upon “working through third parties—moderate Muslim nations, foundations, and reform groups—to promote shared values of democracy, women's rights, and tolerance.”¹⁸ Such efforts seemingly culminated in February 2008, when former president George W. Bush appointed Sada Cumber, a Pakistani born American Muslim entrepreneur, as the State Department's first ever envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an international body of representatives from the world's Muslim countries.

DEBATE IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

The reader should be warned that this book does not claim to resolve the debate about Islamism. Rather it represents an attempt to think through the usefulness of the term *Islamism*, which is now prevalent in popular and academic discourse by entertaining competing and even incommensurable points of view among leading thinkers and activists. Reasoned disagreement, however, is the hallmark of healthy intellectual activity. Contentious issues such as universal health care, the war in Iraq, and prayer in public schools are familiar culture wars on the American political landscape. Although some observers and critics believe that such debates generate more heat than light, such vitality is in fact a reflection of a society's vigor and dynamism.

In premodern times, Islamic religious leaders and other intellectuals cultivated a public appreciation of disputation and debate, with rules of engagement and canons of audience criticism. These efforts did not always ensure civility and even tempers. Nonetheless, arguing about what was important was an acquired skill, the possession of which exercised some degree of social management of the public airing of contentious issues. In this environment, schools of theology and law interacted in ways that were not unlike the ways

that some Islamist, liberal, modernist, progressive, and secular Muslim groups interact today. They negotiated their differences within particular frameworks, often with sharp language and hyperbole but seldom resulting in violence. Medieval historical accounts of these debates marked off aggressiveness and narrow-mindedness in discussion by noting that such a scholar was *ta'assubfi madhhabihi*, "tenacious in imposing his views." By the tenth century and probably much earlier, a genre of literature on how to argue theological points successfully and how to appreciate a good argument, setting forth rules of verbal engagement, began to be a part of the curriculum for Muslim students studying the religious sciences, such as Qur'an, hadith (sayings of the Prophet), Arabic grammar and lexicography, and most particularly the competing school positions in theology and law.

Reminiscent of this premodern culture of debate, the famous Al Jazeera Arabic cable television network, broadcasting out of Qatar to Muslims audiences globally, features no-holds-barred debates that welcome different points of view, whether religious, secular, or nationalist. Often Israeli, American, and other non-Muslim public figures are invited to participate in the debates and do so. Although such discussions sometimes extend beyond ideal expectations of "civil" conversation, the fact that wide, even antagonistic, differences of opinion are accommodated reminds one of the medieval debates just mentioned among Muslims, Christians, Jews, atheist philosophers, Hindus, and others. The cable news format, of course, is obviously inspired by and modeled after similar Western cable networks such as CNN International and the BBC, but it also is the case that the Islamic tradition of public disputation inspires an element of cultural appreciation of vigorous debate among its Muslim audiences, which is why Al Jazeera also regularly hosts forums with prominent religious leaders.

Understanding a diverse living religious tradition like Islam is not just about naming doctrines and practices that characterize its normative, moral, and ethical practices such as the Five Pillars or the Six Articles of Faith.¹⁹ Rather it also involves appreciating those putative religious practices and the concepts that derive from them as they inform and, simultaneously, are informed by the multidimensional human societies in which they reside. In this way it is important to remember that Islamist social movements can not be defined solely in terms of contention with non-Muslims and the West, antimodern angst, or the nostalgia of tradition. In fact, the Islamic tradition has for centuries been a sufficiently capacious mansion that has included

groups that today would be labeled “Islamist.” The question now before us is whether Islamism is a useful term for those Muslims who are so labeled and for public discourse about them and how best to understand their diverse claims and practices in light of the Islamic tradition more generally.

SOME MEANINGS OF ISLAMISM

Islamism, as we have seen, occupies a prominent place in the Western imagination and public discourse about the relationship between Islam, Muslims, and power. It connotes for most people who employ it stridently antagonistic Muslim attitudes toward the West, socially conservative and patriarchal attitudes, intolerance toward non-Muslims, and perhaps most fearfully for outsiders to Islamist causes, the ambition to establish Islamic law, *Sharia*, as a normative political goal. Although it should be stressed that narrow insistence on implementing such beliefs across Muslim societies has gained rather limited Muslim support around the world (with wider circles of sympathy more generally for conserving traditional Muslim values), Islamism is often a label applied broadly to some (and sometimes all) Muslims. This rhetorical move is known by the Greek term of art *synecdoche*—letting the part stand for the whole, as when Athens means all of Greece or Osama bin Laden is made to characterize all Muslims. The term *Islamism* has been used in common parlance since the latter decades of the twentieth century, but it has enjoyed wide use in the West since September 11, 2001. Its popularity and the ideas it evokes among those who explain it, and those who fear it, have become part of the culture of 9/11.

In the lead essay of this volume, Donald Emmerson cites and revises James Piscatori’s definition of Islamists as “Muslims who are committed to public action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda.”²⁰ Emmerson goes on to define Islamism, then, as “commitment to, and the content of, that agenda.”²¹ In Part II of this volume, Graham Fuller, citing his own 2003 book *The Future of Political Islam*, offers similarly a definition of Islamism, linking it to political Islam: “[A]n Islamist is one who believes that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim World and who seeks to implement this idea in some fashion.”²²

Interestingly, Islamism is not a concept derived from traditional Islamic theological discourse: It is not a term derived from the Qur’an, or the sayings (hadith) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions,

nor was it in the vocabulary of any of the classical jurists, such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) or Muhammad al-Shafi'i (d. 820), or any of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, such as Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1024) or Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). In fact, the modern Arabic term for Islamism, *islamiyya*, has been adapted to this usage by contemporary Muslim writers and intellectuals when writing about political Islam. In its classical and modern standard sense, *islamiyya* refers to things pertaining to Islam or to the status of being Muslim—in which case it is merely an adjective. Thus, even in Arabic, Islamism is not a classical Islamic religious or political term, such as *Sharia*, *ibadat* (religious duties), or *jihad*.

Nonetheless, as noted above, many of the characteristics associated with Islamism today have been present among Muslim groups and movements throughout Islamic history and particularly among those that drew the most impervious boundaries around their Muslim identities and practices. In medieval times, for example, activist groups affiliated with the Hanbali school of law among Sunnis or the Zaydi sect of Shiism were quick to take matters into their own hands in fulfillment of the Qur'anic injunction to "Command Right and Forbid Wrong."²³ Such vigilantism may have ranged from smashing unlawful musical instruments and wine barrels prized by Muslims in bacchanalian moods to promoting open rebellion against an unjust ruler or, more passively, judging in one's mind that an act or moral failing was contrary to the teachings of Islam. Thus, public action or private personal moral judgments against wrongdoing, even if such efforts form an interpretation of religion in conflict with other Muslims, has moral and legal import within the Islamic tradition, which becomes the social framework for debate.

Consider another definition of Islamism as simply *Islamic activism*. In this case it may simply be an integral part of the Islamic tradition more generally. Indeed, such is the opinion of Oliver Roy and Antoine Sfeir in their *Dictionary of Islamism* published in 2007.²⁴ However, several commentators in this book, such as Bruce Lawrence, believe that contemporary formations of religiously motivated political activism in Muslim societies have a distinct relationship to the modern world. Groups commonly called Islamist, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the late Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republican Party, it should be remembered, have doubled as populist, anti-imperial social movements and are thus embedded in the dynamics of modernity in differing Muslim and European colonial and postcolonial experiences—the colonizers versus the colonized. Such Islamist movements that have arisen out of

this experience have insisted that “Islam is the Answer” to what they regard as the failures of world systems and worldviews hostile to Islam, such as Western democracies, socialism, communism, and secularism, albeit in ambiguous or merely rhetorical terms. In this vein, Nadia Yassine, a Moroccan Islamist, activist, and respondent writing in this volume, offers a contemporary correction to a more common notion of an of East-West conflict: “The debate and the proper understanding of the term ‘Islamism’ can only progress by looking beyond these clichés and instead should be attributed to a North-South relationship underpinned mainly by economics, and not to a civilizational confrontation between Islam and the West.”²⁵

For many critics, such an approach is decidedly apologetic. They often have legitimate complaints, but what is at stake in the discussion of whether or not the alleged phenomenon of Islamism is modern or ancient, religious or political, economic or ideological, is identifying the role of the historical tradition of Islam in the diverse contemporary political practices of Muslims. It is on this axis that much of the discussion about Islamism takes place.

THE BOOK AHEAD

The following essays and responses are framed as a debate. In Part 1, two senior scholars of Muslim societies, Donald K. Emmerson (a political scientist at Stanford University) and Daniel M. Varisco (an anthropologist at Hofstra University) open the debate with essays that take opposing positions. They are then followed in Part 2 by a series of critical responses by several prominent Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, policy analysts, and activists who engage claims made by one or both essayists. In the final section, Part 3, the two original opponents take the stage again to restate their positions and engage criticisms advanced in the two preceding sections. The goal of the three parts as a whole is to provide an opportunity for readers to engage and reflect upon the implications of the language used in framing contemporary discussions about Islamism—whatever that might ultimately be determined to be.

In their respective openings, Professors Emmerson and Varisco argue the pros and cons of the proposition that, when properly qualified, understood, and sorted out, the terms *Islamism* and *Islamist* connote meanings that justify their continued use. In their opening statements, Emmerson and Varisco agree that “the term ‘Islamism’ should not be linked exclusively with political violence and militancy.”²⁶ Arguing for the affirmative, Emmerson holds that the term *Islamist* can be applied in a non-pejorative way to some Muslim

groups and movements. Why? Because it does not in fact refer to extremists only, but also it refers to Muslims who valorize Islam in public space as a source of tolerance, moderation, and democracy. Varisco argues against the proposition. He maintains that Islamist and Islamism have come to be monopolized in the media, the Internet, and all forms of public discourse by those who impute to them a purely extremist content, which is easily identified with violence. No other major religious tradition (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism), he avers, has a form of its name that carries the notion of violence and extremism in common parlance.

The arguments pro and con in Part I have both epistemological and ethical dimensions. Is Islamism a coherent and verifiable category available to public understanding and recognition? Does John Q. Public grasp what it is on its own terms? Equally important, several of the essays in Parts 1 and 2 ask: Do scholars, students, and journalists have ethical obligations to the human subjects they are writing about and to the audiences they are writing for? Are the obligations identical in relation to each audience?

Ranging from philosophers to policy analysts and tenured academicians to political activists, the respondents to the debate in Part 2 constitute, as noted already, a diverse group of thinkers. It is no surprise therefore that they bring to the table a great range of criticism, agreement, and disagreement. The respondents seem generally to feel that the concern over the proper choice of language in the current political moment also has important ethical implications. However, it is precisely their divergent interpretations of current events that inform their ethical postures. Some respondents feel that the debate is futile: either because it is an entirely (Western) Orientalist practice or because it is simply impossible to put the genie back into the bottle and return to the status quo ante when thinking and speaking about Islam. Others feel that tampering with the term would be to invite false consciousness about the political dangers of some expressions of Islamism and thus be detrimental to national security. The great diversity and intensity of opinions from our respondents reflects in fair measure, we believe, the passion and tenacity of global debates on Islamism.

We earlier suggested that readers who would like to find in these pages a solution to the problem of labeling and thus defining activist political Muslim movements will necessarily be disappointed, because that is not the purpose of this book. Many competing assertions, opinions, and definitions concerning Islamism are available in the public realm for readers of these pages

to consult; the suggested readings in the back matter of the book aid this endeavor. This volume, however, has aimed precisely at unsettling the conventions embedded in the variety of those existing positions in order to promote critical reflection on the public debate about Islamism. Nonetheless, we hope such conversations across differences as those found within this text will serve the purpose of greater public interest in framing and grasping the premises and reasons for the debate. We further hope the book will help to promote better understanding of why the debate exists and open pathways to more productive conversations.