

The Difference that Makes a Difference

Orientalism and/as Information: The Indifference That Makes a Difference

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Background (or foreground?)



The Vienna Circle

- The **Vienna Circle** (German: *Wiener Kreis*) of Logical Empiricism was a group of philosophers and scientists drawn from the natural and social sciences, logic and mathematics who met regularly from 1924 to 1936 at the University of Vienna, chaired by Moritz Schlick.
- The Vienna Circle was pluralistic and committed to the ideals of the (European) **Enlightenment**



Cybernetics and Systems Science

BCSSS



emcsr
2012

European meetings on cybernetics
and systems research



EMCSR 2014:

Civilisation at the Crossroads –

Response and Responsibility of the Systems Sciences

Vienna, 22-25 April 2014



Vienna and "The Crescent"



IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1529,
SULTAN SULEIMAN, THE SWORN
ENEMY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH,
SET OUT FOR VIENNA WITH ALL HIS
FORCES IN ORDER TO DEFEAT
CHRISTIANITY.

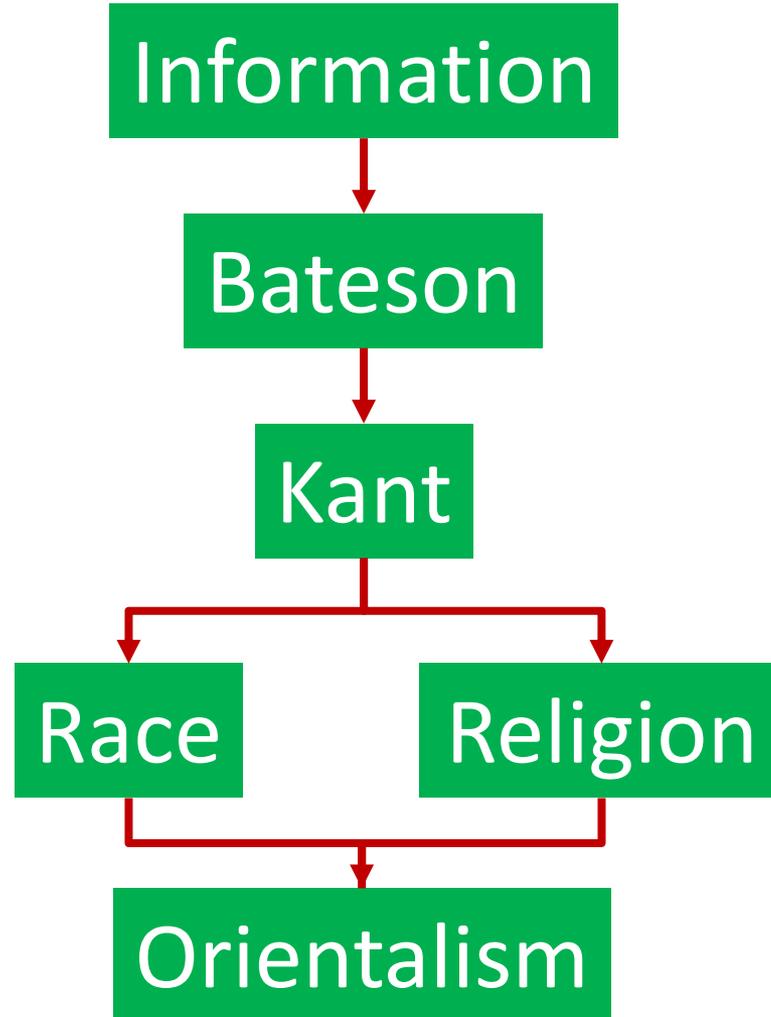
PETER STERN, *CHRONICLE OF 1529*



Vienna and "The Crescent"



Summary of argument





Outline

- I. Conceptual and methodological precedents
- II. Information and religion: a critical hermeneutic framework
- III. Concepts of information
- IV. Religion from an information-theoretical perspective
- V. Concepts of religion
- VI. Information from a religion-theoretical perspective



Information and **Race**: A Critical Hermeneutic Framework

- OBJECTIVE:

Ali, S.M. (2013) Race: The Difference That Makes a Difference. *tripleC* 11 (1): 93-106.

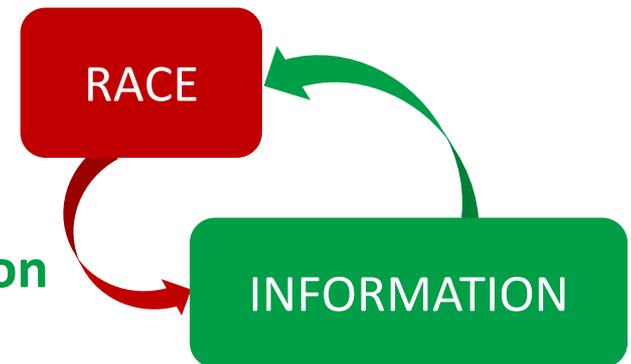
 - Explore the **differences** made by – or '**effects**' that result from – **relating** the concept of **information** and the concept of **race** through their shared use of the concept of **difference**

- METHOD:

Critically examine the concept of **race** from an **information-theoretical** perspective

while

critically examining the concept of **information** from a **race-theoretical** perspective



Information and **Religion**: A Critical Hermeneutic Framework

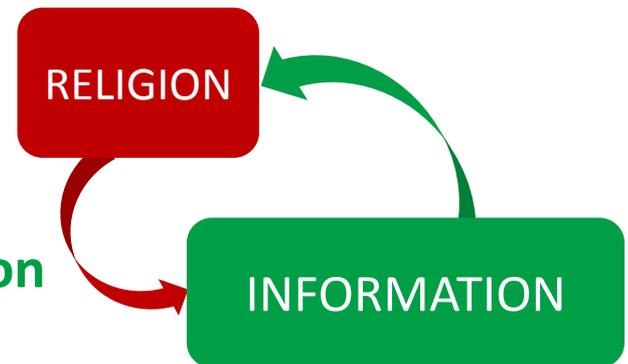
- OBJECTIVE:
 - Explore the **differences** made by – or 'effects' that result from – **relating** the concept of **information** and the concept of **religion** through their shared use of the concept of **difference**

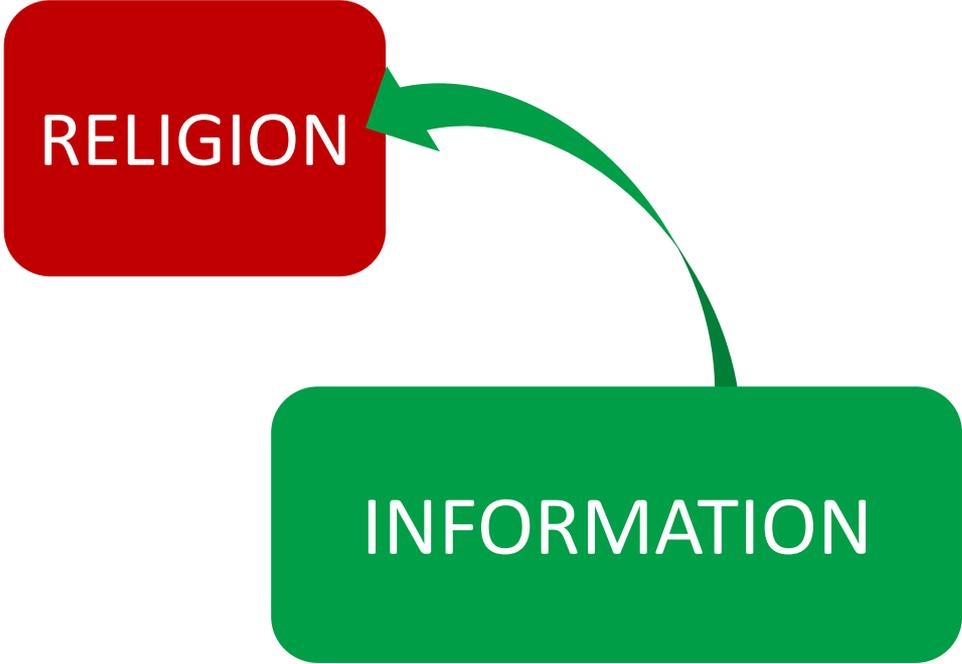
- METHOD:

Critically examine the concept of **religion** from an **information-theoretical** perspective

while

critically examining the concept of **information** from a **religion-theoretical** perspective





RELIGION

INFORMATION

RELIGION FROM AN INFORMATION- THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE



Concepts of Information – I

- **Information**, or rather, the **elementary unit** of information is "**a difference that makes a difference**"
- A **difference** "is certainly not a **thing** or an **event**"; rather, it is an "**abstract matter**", and in the world of communication and organisation, this "abstract matter", whose essence can be shown to lie in form and pattern, can bring about "**effects**"

Gregory Bateson

Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972)





Information and Religion

- Borgman (2009)
 - Information **about** reality
 - Information **for** reality
 - Information **as** reality
- Chapman (2015)
 - Information **about religion**
 - Information **for religion**
 - Information **as religion**



Information and Religion

- Information **about** religion concerns the use of information-thinking to **describe and understand** religion [**epistemology**]
- Information **for** religion concerns information as a **tool** of religion [**instrumentalism/pragmatics**]
- Information **as** religion, is information replacing **religion** or delivering a religion itself [**ontology/metaphysics**]

What is *religion*?



Information and Religion

- Paul Tillich's suggestion that to be religious is "to be grasped by **an ultimate concern**"
- Religion *as*
 - a particular **world-view or grand-narrative**, which may or may not include the supernatural but usually includes creation myths
 - an **ethical framework** of some sort
 - a personal or cultural **identity**



Information and Religion

- "Behind the definition of information as the difference that makes a difference is a recognition that information is founded on differences. A religion seen as information likewise exists only by being different from **other religions.**" (Chapman 2015)
 - Assumes there is something **common** to all 'religions' such that they can be compared
 - **Who** gets to define what religion means, and from **where** (and **when**)?
 - **Decolonial** issues of **body**-politics and **geo**-politics
 - Asad (1993)



Information and Religion

- Chapman's (2015) conception of religion
 - Worldview / "grand narrative" / creation myth
 - How is this articulated? Presumably through the use of **symbols**. But *what* is a symbol in this context?
 - "Associated with a religion are religious texts and/or other artifacts. Understanding a religion requires an understanding of the artifacts, and a perspective from information recognises them as **informational objects**. If information is meaningful data, then the artifacts of religion are data, and we need to understand how they are meaningful. This is the territory of semiotics... [emphasis added]"
 - Chapman's **semiotic** conception of religion is similar to the **phenomenological** conception of Geertz, viz.
 - Religion as a **Cultural System**



Geertz on Religion

Symbol: "any **object**, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception — the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'"

- Religion *as*
 1. a system of **symbols** which act to...
 2. establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting **moods** and **motivations** in men by...
 3. formulating **conceptions of a general order of existence**, and
 4. clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that...
 5. the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.
- In short, religion *as*
 - a **system of meanings embodied in symbols**



Critique of Geertz (and Chapman)

- Asad, Talal (1993) "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category". In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.
 - **Foucauldian** approach to religion
 - Power
 - Discourse
 - Discipline
 - Practice
 - Embodiment



Critique of Geertz (and Chapman)

- "[T]he insistence that religion has an autonomous essence—not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense—invites us to define religion (like any essence) as a **transhistorical** and **transcultural** phenomenon ... Yet this separation of religion from power is a **modern** Western norm." (p.28)
- "[T]here cannot be a **universal** definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is **itself** the **historical** product of **discursive processes**." (p.29)



Critique of Geertz (and Chapman)

- "A symbol is **not** an **object** or event that serves to carry a meaning but a set of **relationships** between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts." (p.31)
- "Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are **intrinsic** to signifying and organizing **practices**, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying **objects external** to social conditions and states of the self." (p.32)
 - Does Chapman's **semiotic** conception postulate an intrinsic or extrinsic relation between symbols and practices?
 - "It is not a new idea to **apply** semiotics to religion which is relevant not only to the artifacts of religion but the **rituals** as well" (Chapman 2015)
 - What does **apply** mean in this context?



Critique of Geertz (and Chapman)

- "[T]he idea of Natural Religion was a crucial step in the formation of the **modern** concept of religious belief, experience, and practice, and that it was an idea developed in response to problems **specific** to **Christian theology** at a **particular** historical juncture.
- Thus, what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion is essentially a matter of **symbolic** meanings linked to ideas of **general order** (expressed through either or both rite and doctrine), that it has generic functions/features, and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history. From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, **religion has come to be abstracted and universalized**. In this movement we have not merely an increase in religious toleration, certainly not merely a new scientific discovery, but the mutation of a concept and a range of social practices which is itself part of a wider change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge. That change included a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject." (pp.42-43)



Critique of Geertz (and Chapman)

- "[T]he reasoning seems now to have shifted its ground from the claim that religion must affirm something specific about the nature of reality (however obscure, shallow, or perverse) to **the bland suggestion that religion is ultimately a matter of having a positive attitude toward the problem of disorder**, of affirming simply that in some sense or other the world as a whole is explicable, justifiable, bearable." (p.45)
- "One consequence is that **this view would in principle render any philosophy that performs such a function into religion.**" (p.46)
 - E.g. **information as religion** (Chapman 2015)

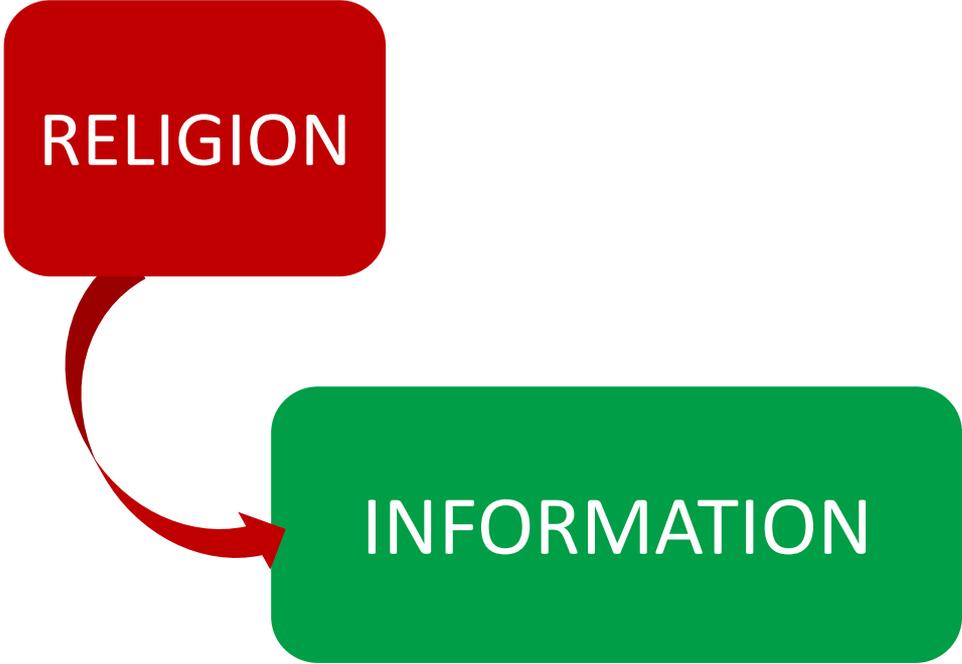


Bateson on Religion

- Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson *Angels Fear* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd, 1988)
 - Cybernetic and systems-theoretical approach to religion
 - A **single** mention of Islam (by M.C. Bateson) on page 146:

*"It seems to me that part of what you [Gregory Bateson] keep implying about **religion** is that it **necessarily has contradictions embedded in it – paradoxes – and these contradictions are protected from certain kinds of rationalizing knowledge to preserve them in tension**, because that tension is what makes religious systems able to function as models of the Creatura. One thing that has always struck me about **Islam** is that it **lies flat on the page**, while Christianity is just writhing with contradictions, and maybe that is an important kind of difference [emphasis added]."*





RELIGION

INFORMATION

INFORMATION FROM A **RELIGION-**
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Bateson and Kant



(9 May 1904 – 4 July 1980)



(22 April 1724 – 12 February 1804)



Concepts of Information – II

- Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*)
 - An infinite number of **differences** associated with a thing
 - Information refers to a “very limited number” of such differences **selected** from this infinite set
- The differences that are selected make a difference **for someone** (or something) in that they are regarded as **significant** in some context
- **Kant** (*Critique of Judgement*)
 - The most elementary aesthetic act is the **selection** of a fact
 - An infinite number of potential **facts** associated with a thing



Kant and Anthropology

- **CLAIM:** Kant's writings on **anthropology** and physical geography are separate from, and irrelevant to, his writings in ethics and political philosophy **and metaphysics (epistemology)**
- **FACT:** Kant made internal differentiations in the category of human beings (Mills 2005)
 - being *human* does not necessarily entail being a *person* (that is, being rational and autonomous)
- **FACT:** Kant lectured more on anthropology and physical geography than on moral philosophy, and he was responsible for introducing these subjects into German universities, based on his own research (Eze 1997)



The Kant 'Race' Wars

Kant's philosophy is racist

- Emmanuel Eze
 - **Transcendental** and core
 - *a priori*
- Robert Bernasconi
- Charles Mills

Kant's philosophy is not racist

- Bernard Boxill
 - **Empirical** and peripheral
 - *a posteriori*
- Pauline Kleingeld
- Robert Loudon

"So fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man ... it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour... [T]his fellow [a Negro] was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was **stupid**"
Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960], pp. 111–3).





**BUT ISN'T OUR FOCUS RELIGION
RATHER THAN RACE?**



Critical Approaches to Religion

- "Race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in **modernity**, or in the **colonial** encounter. If this is the case, **religion and race is not just another token of the type 'religion and,'** not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, **every** study of religion would **need** to be a study of **religion and race.**" (Lloyd 2013, page 80)
 - Implications for interrogating **information** from a religion-theoretical perspective

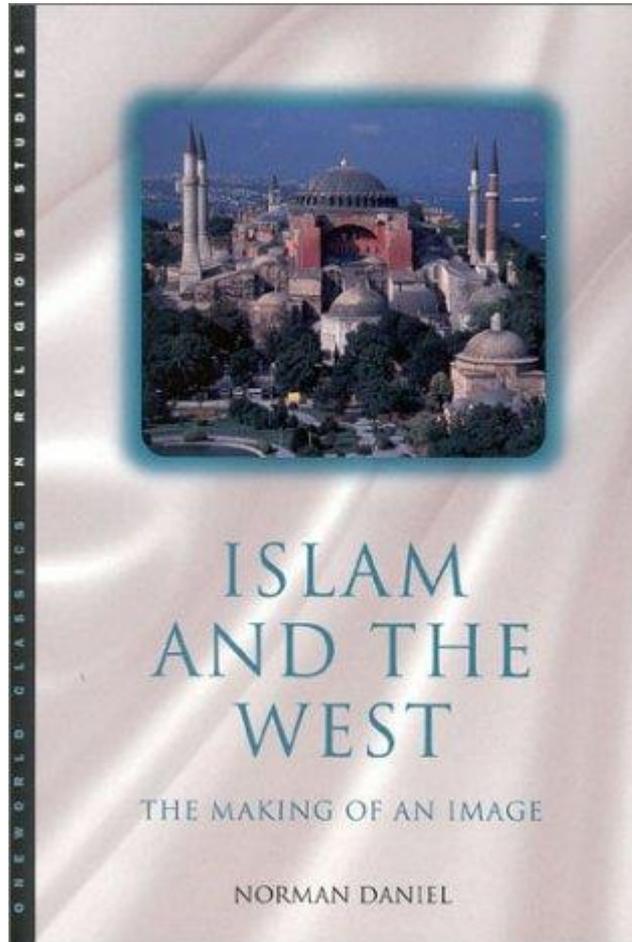


Critical Approaches to Religion

- "Race and religion are articulated **differently** in **different** contexts, and affect each other **differently** in **different** circumstances." (Lloyd 2013, page 81)
- AIM: Explore Kant's racialized **marginalization** of – or '**indifference**' to – the (Islamic) Orient in his philosophical anthropology, and what this might mean for Bateson's conception of information.
- CLAIM: The entanglement of race and religion in the context of Western perceptions of Islam is best understood in terms of **Orientalism**



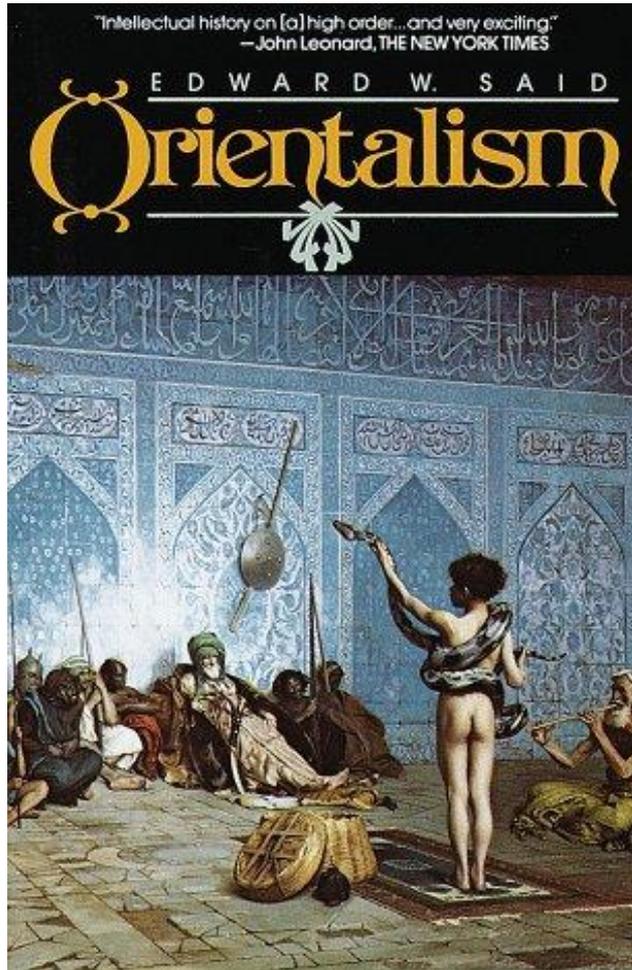
Orientalism



- **Representation** of the 'Orient', "the East", Islam and Muslims in Western travel and missionary writings etc.



Orientalism



- The historical **construction** of images of the 'Eastern' – and especially *Islamicate* – civilizational 'Other' by Christian, European and 'Western' thinkers, and the utility of such images in the establishment, maintenance, expansion and refinement of European domination of the non-European world.

Orientalism

- *Orientalism* (1999) by Ziauddin Sardar
 - "The Orient is a discrete category, a utility for the **internal** speculations **of** and **about** the **Western** self and society, yet **extraneous** to that self and society, **separable** from it." (page 31)
 - "The West lived with the Orient of Islam, and its own Orientalist ideas, for 800 years **before** it had significant encounters with any other Orients." (page 54)
 - "In the dreamland of European destiny, Islam looms as a **nightmare**." (page 49)



Orientalism

- **"Wilful misunderstanding and knowledgeable ignorance** have remained the guiding spirit of Orientalism, [and] it has survived defiantly and remained dominant when alternative information has been readily available **Orientalism is composed of what the West wishes to know, not of what can be known.**" (page 19)
- "Orientalism is a **constructed ignorance**, a **deliberate self-deception**, which is eventually **projected on the Orient.**" (page 4)
 - Cf. Mill's (1997)(2007) concept of an "epistemology of ignorance" and what we will come to learn about Kant's **indifference** toward Islam



Orientalism

- "Orientalism is built out of the **constructive imagination** of the culture of the West. It is as diverse as the dexterity of Western culture; this is why and how Orientalism as a process has survived, keeping step with the place of its origin and use, a work of change and continuity. **Orientalism is memory, imagination and present utility in a process of representation that structures knowledge and information.**" (page 117)



Kant's Historical Setting

- 'Western'-Islamic relations
 - The Crusades and beyond...
 - From 1095CE to 1453CE to 1492CE to 1798CE
- **Negative** 'civilizational' characterizations
 - Saracens, Moors and Turks as **threat**
 - The Valladolid debate (1550-1551CE) and the *imago Turci* (Mastnak 1994)
 - **Entanglement** of religion and race
 - From Western Christendom to Europe to "the West"
 - The Islamic 'Other' and Western identity formation (Mastnak 1994, 2003, 2010)



Kant's Historical Setting

- "Europe as a unity that developed a 'collective identity' and the ability to orchestrate action ... was, as a rule, articulated in relation to Muslims as the **enemy**."
- "European identity was formed not **by Islam** but, predominantly, *in the relationship ... to Islam*" (Mastnak 1994, page 3)
 - This is significant from an information-theoretical perspective since it points to a **relational** – that is, systemic – conception of difference such as that proposed by Bateson.



Kant on Religion

- By 1795, Kant was able to produce a fully **essentialised** idea of religion which could be counterpoised to its phenomenal forms:
 - "There may certainly be different historical *confessions*, although these have nothing to do with **religion itself** but only with changes in the means used to further religion, and are thus the province of historical research. And there may be just as many religious *books* (the Zend-Avesta, the Vedas, the Koran, etc.). But **there can only be one religion which is valid for all men and at all times**. Thus the different confessions can scarcely be more than the vehicles of religion; these are fortuitous, and may vary with differences in time or place."
- From here, the **classification** of historical confessions into **lower and higher religions** became an increasingly popular option for philosophers, theologians, missionaries, and anthropologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Asad 1993, page 42)



Kant on Religion

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- "There may certainly be different historical *confessions*, although

Bateson (1972):

*"There are **differences between differences**. Every effective difference denotes a demarcation, a line of **classification**, and all classification is **hierarchic**. In other words, differences are themselves to be differentiated and classified."*

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Kant and Orientalism

- Kant's writings evidence an **indifference** to an Islamic 'other' conceived as **sensuous** (that is, physical or materialistic), **superficial** (that is, outward, externalist or 'syntactic') and **irrational** (that is, chaotic or 'noisy')
- These alleged characteristics of Islam pose a **threat** to (Eurocentric) rationality – specifically, "the communication of thought" – the boundaries of which must be preserved through a process of **marginalization** (bracketing, footnoting) (Almond 2011)
 - In Batesonian terms, an "**indifference** [to the Islamic Orient] **that makes a difference** [to Europe]"
 - Cf. Deacon's (2010) information as a difference that is an **absence**



Bateson, Kant and Orientalism

- Bateson's (1972) distinction between "Occidental Epistemology" (or OE) and cybernetic epistemology (CE)
 - Is Kant's epistemology OE or CE?
 - Connections between Kant, epistemology, race and information unexplored; no explicit identification of Kant's epistemology as OE
 - Kantian epistemology is often appealed to in formulating cybernetic conceptions of knowing (including Bateson's)
 - Is Bateson's distinction between OE and CE sound?
 - Heidegger (1977) on "cybernetic totalism"
 - Sid-Ahmed (1991) on "cybernetic colonialism"
 - In short, **OE as CE**



Bateson, Kant and Orientalism

- Bateson contrasts Occidental Epistemology with Cybernetic Epistemology wherein the latter is supposed to transcend the limitations of the former
 - However, arguably there can be no Occidental Epistemology (thesis) without an occluded / marginalised **Oriental** Epistemology (antithesis)
 - Is Bateson here reproducing Kantian '**indifference**' toward the Islamicate / Oriental 'other'?
 - Consider Bateson's view of Islam as lying "**flat** on the page" (i.e. simple, unsophisticated, free of paradox)



Bateson, Kant and Orientalism

- Bateson's ostensibly **neutral** conception of information as "a difference that makes a difference"
 - ... is grounded in Kantian epistemology which is, arguably, entangled with Kantian philosophical anthropology and the latter is **racist**...
 - ... so, Batesonian information is inflected by Kant's "colour-line" (or epidermally-marked) **racism**...
 - ... but also by Kantian **Orientalism**...
 - ... that is, "dogma-line" (or religiously-marked) racism (Medevoi 2012)

