



Societies Without Borders

Volume 4 | Issue 3


Article 3

2009

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Tagg

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Recommended Citation

Tagg. 2009. "Jihad, Race and Western Media, Post-September 11." *Societies Without Borders* 4 (3): 317-342.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol4/iss3/3>

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Societies Without Borders 4 (2009) 317–342

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Jihad, Race and Western Media, Post-September 11

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Abstract

The article examines jihad within what is loosely referred to as “the Western imagination.” Through the analysis of both popular stereotypes and the broader historical context of religious antagonism and (neo)colonialism, the paper discusses both contemporary political rhetoric and a pair of liberal post September-11 political cartoons. While European and North American political leaders have often stereotyped Muslims in order to justify various “axis of evil” bandwagons and further political and economic interests throughout the Islamic Crescent, I argue here that the liberal media’s critiques also often rely on fallacious embodied stereotypes. The pervasiveness of such representations has important implications for the lived realities and human rights of both Muslims and non-Muslims globally because these stereotypes mask Muslim’s legitimate concerns regarding (neo)colonialism and because of the human rights abuses that result from Islamophobia.

Keywords

body, Islam, jihad, race, terror

The need for better understanding of Islam and of Muslim politics is as great as ever. In the midst of explosive headline events and acts of violence not only in the Muslim world but also now in the West, the temptation remains to view Islam through the prism of religious extremism and terrorism.¹

The idea of Islam as an anti-Western monolith is absurd; cultural and political diversity is evident throughout both the Islamic Crescent and major “Westernized” regions such as North America, Western Europe and Australasia. While journalists and academics often speak of a clash of civilizations between Islam and “the West,” they themselves can also be “accused of regarding ‘the West’ as homogenous and of overlooking the

¹ Esposito 1992, p. ix.

fractures and fissures that have always existed within it.”² Increasing global mobility and the growing ascendancy of various indigenous rights movements highlight the fragmented and partial nature of cultural identities; indeed although I am ethnically White and “Western-educated,” I live in Malaysia, which markets itself as “truly Asian,” and in the state of Terengganu, where most people are Muslim.

While the terms “Western” and “Muslim” are in many ways theoretically problematic – people increasingly identify with multiple cultural traditions³ – the terms do still have some usefulness within the context of political and religious extremism. The link between the racialized body and human rights discourses is evident through the increased stigma that overtly Muslim people have faced in Westernized nations in recent years. And while Muslim extremists are as responsible for the injurious caricatures as “Westernized” media sources, many more Muslims (and even some non-Muslims) suffer from injurious stereotypes than support such religious extremism. This article focuses explicitly on the Western media, not on religious extremists, since they should, perhaps, be held to a higher intellectual standard.

Polemical and simplistic classifications such as “good” and “evil” marginalize the similarities between the Islamic faith and Christian belief; parallels acknowledged by both Prophet Muhammad and Pope John Paul II.⁴ Crude religious labels such as “evildoers” and the “axis of evil” alienate Muslim governments, hide the legitimate political aspirations of Muslim people, and construct Western sensibilities as the only legitimate way of life. For example, when former US President George W. Bush mocked the Taliban for living and hiding in mountainside caves, he promoted the injurious and historically fictitious stereotype of Islam as primitive and Afghans as subhuman. These representations are also supported by spurious and ahistorical popular media representations of Afghanistan as “frozen in time.”⁵

² Murji 2002, p. 240.

³ After all, it is possible for an individual to identify as, for example, an Afghani citizen, a Muslim, and a US resident all at once.

⁴ “In his early preaching, Muhammad had looked to the Jews and Christians of Arabia as natural allies whose faiths had much in common with Islam.” Esposito 1991, p. 17; Pope John Paul II embraced Muslims as ‘God loving people’ since it “flows from our fidelity to God and supposes that we know how to recognise God by faith.” John Paul II 1991, pp. 42-3.

⁵ See for example, Fathers 2000, pp. 36-41.

Although there are often significant religious differences between Islam and Christianity and cultural differences between Muslims and Westerners, the effects of these differences are also often overstated. Across both the Islamic Crescent and throughout the more Westernized nations there are many variations that do not preclude social cohesion and peaceful interaction, but which are important for theories about and treatment of Muslim bodies; compare Afghanistan, which is poor and conservative, and the United Arab Emirates, which is wealthy and liberal. This has particular implications for human rights discourses surrounding racial embodiment as a particular facet of human corporeality; sensationalized media coverage constitute racial discrimination in its own right, but the idea of ethnic embodiment as a marker of religious faith also increases the stigma and hostility that many Muslims face in non-Muslim nations. In this article the relationships between ethnic embodiment, Islamic faith and human rights discourses are detailed at two separate levels; firstly, international politics and the body, and secondly, the body and individual practice.

Representing Islam

Stereotypes and sensationalist depictions of Other cultures alienate these people from those living in and/or identifying with the more Westernized parts of the world.⁶ Aside from famines, civil wars and accusations of political corruption that intermittently strike African nations, most people in “Westernized” nations often hear very little about places such as Sierra Leone, Somalia, Ethiopia and Rwanda. For similar reasons, and with specific reference to this article, there is also little discussion about everyday Central Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims except for the occasional news story about terrorism and human rights abuses in Afghanistan, Iran and the Palestinian territories. Because we rarely hear about Africans when they are not starving or Muslims when they are not terrorizing, these people’s everyday lives and legitimate aspirations are subconsciously forgotten.⁷

More specifically, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ most “Westerners” misunderstand jihad. In spite of the hundreds of books and thousands of articles published on topics such as Islam, Afghanistan, and jihad since 11

⁶ Said 1978.

⁷ One notable challenge to this mindset is Joe Sacco’s outstanding political cartoon, *Palestine*. See, Sacco 2001.

⁸ See Tagg 2002, pp. 50–76.

September 2001 (over 150 books were published within the first year), there still seems to be a great deal of confusion about even the most basic concepts. For example, the translation of the Arabic word jihad into the English phrase (and Christian concept) “holy war” is problematic for more than one reason. Firstly, “holy war” is most appropriately used to describe the Crusades *against* Muslims during the late Middle Ages, and secondly it is basically incorrect. Political analyst Fiona Symon suggests “struggle” as a more reasonable translation, given the explicit distinction between this Arabic word and the concept of qital (war).⁹ Western representations of jihad pay scant attention to the scriptural support for peaceful jihad; both the hadith suggesting jihad should only be a defensive act, as well as the hadith highlighting Prophet Mohammad’s distinction between *al-jihad al-asghar* (the lesser jihad; armed conflict) and *al-jihad al-akbar* (the greater jihad; the battle within one’s soul), which so central to liberal Islamic thought.

There are real implications associated with the way that the “Western” popular media – particularly news media and mainstream film – reduces jihad to a one-dimensional caricature of terrorism as religious martyrdom. Such representations, combined with the stereotype “of the dreadful Turk, clad in a long robe and brandishing his scimitar”¹⁰ are partly based on cultural assumptions about the polarity of white and black (European and African embodiment) so typically used to distinguish good and evil.¹¹ Edward Said, for example, described the popular image of “the Arab leader (of marauders, pirates, “native” insurgents) snarling at the captured Western hero and the blonde girl (both of them steeped in wholesomeness).”¹² Popular films such as *True Lies* include representations of terrorist leaders as fanatical psychotics.¹³ Such representations – “why else would anyone hate the US?” – dismiss legitimate grievances many Muslims (and non-Muslims) have with US foreign policy. Representations of terrorists as psychotic are also quite incompatible with actual security footage showing al-Qaeda terrorists on 11 September 2001 as focused, inconspicuous and calmly methodical. The realization that militants could make a carefully

⁹ Symon 2001.

¹⁰ Peters 1979, p. 4.

¹¹ Entman and Rojecki 2000.

¹² Said 1978, p. 287. See the Epilogue, in particular, for further discussion of the purported relationship between moral purity and blonde embodiments.

¹³ See Cameron 1994. Script courtesy of Carlton College Media Studies.

calculated decision to kill innocent US citizens, and that such organizations can attract new recruits, raises a challenge to take more seriously Muslim's legitimate grievances.

While in many ways suicide may seem both incomprehensible and totally irrational, many cultures sometimes privilege group solidarity over individual wellbeing in certain circumstances. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Choe Sang-Hun recently argued that through suicide, disgraced former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyan “transformed [his public image] into that of an honorable man who chose suicide to defend his reputation.”¹⁴ Despite the obvious justification for a rational ethical critique of such cultural norms, Roh may have acted rationally given this social context. The degree of irony that can be read into the article's title – “In death, Roh reverses his fortunes again” – may simply depend on one's cultural perspective; just a few days later the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* read “Brown fights for his life,” as members of the British Prime Minister's Labour Party attempted to force him from office.¹⁵

Furthermore, the development of religious extremism seems to demand not only fundamentalist ideology but also extreme poverty, and in this sense attacking the centre of global capitalism makes as much sense as killing oneself and one's family in what Susan George describes as Thailand and Korea's “IMF suicides” during the Asian economic crisis.¹⁶ While violence against innocent civilians is utterly reprehensible, the reality is that in a world where the distribution of economic capital is increasingly uneven, global military and economic centers will be prone to attack. The following section further discusses the relationship between militant jihad and (neo)colonialism.

Islam, Jihad and Colonialism

Charles Adams argues that the “groundswell of disillusionment with the path that most Muslim societies have traversed during the modern period” emerged as early as the 1930s;¹⁷ according to Fiona Symon this intensified into the modern anti-Western militant jihad sentiment in the 1950s.¹⁸

¹⁴ Choe, 2009, p. 16.

¹⁵ See Porter and Kirkup 2009, p. 1.

¹⁶ George 2003, p. 22.

¹⁷ Adams 1986, p. xii.

¹⁸ Symon 2001, n.p.

Sayed Qutb, an intellectual in the Egyptian *Muslim Brotherhood* triggered this transformation.¹⁹ Qutb made a public claim that even “people of the book” should now be considered infidels, marking a decisive move away from support for military jihad only against foreign occupiers of Muslim lands.²⁰ Qutb’s line of thought originally emerged from being tortured in former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Naser’s jail, and from reading the fourteenth century writings of Shaykh Ahmad Ibn ‘Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiya, a man who had hardline views about militant jihad and a tendency to challenge authority. Taymiya argued that any “ruler who fails to enforce the shari’a rigorously in all its aspects, including the performance of jihad, forfeits his right to rule.”²¹ Controversially, he also asserted that all Muslims must follow strict Islamic law or risk being cast as infidels, thus setting the foundations for the contemporary hardline Islamism movement.

If such interpretations of Islamic theology seem immoderate, when placed in the context of the historical and material conditions of mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century Egyptian society, it reflects a simple detestation of British imperialism. Although pre-colonial Egyptian society was far from egalitarian, the British exasperated the poverty of the majority while simultaneously giving rise to a small prosperous Western-friendly upper middle class. Issues of economic disparity quickly led to debates centered on the future of traditional Egyptian culture.²² Naturally the politics of body culture were crucial to this transformation, and both ethnicity and veiling came to be seen as key issues.

Qutb’s condemnation of Westernization became a matter of concern for Egypt’s liberal political establishment. In 1966 Qutb was executed for calling Naser an infidel, and for urging his assassination. Qutb’s death by no means affected the popularity of his philosophies: they surged in the aftermath of Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war with Israel.²³ Many Muslims became disillusioned during this period, and a number of them are today influential figures; for example, former Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini and Abdullah Azzam, a prominent Palestinian scholar, PLO fighter and

¹⁹ Sivan 1985, p. 21.

²⁰ Supported by the argument that democracy implies acceptance of the rulers, and implicit support for them.

²¹ Streusand 1997.

²² Ahmed 1992, p. 148.

²³ Azzam Tamimi cited in Symon 2001, n.p.

Afghan *mujahedeen* fighter. In fact, the latter's involvement in the Afghan war against the Soviets is central to understanding contemporary terrorism-as-jihad, because he was a university lecturer of Osama bin Laden, and together they traveled to Afghanistan to resist the Soviet invasion.²⁴

For their own individual political reasons, many nation states supported this successful Afghan war-as-jihad against the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia's ruling family was having difficulty selling their pro-Western stance to the populace, the United States was intimidated by the Communist threat, and Pakistan used the jihad movement to promote the fight against India for Kashmir.²⁵ While according to Saudi Islamist Saad al-Faqih, great care was taken by his country's scholars to avoid talking "in terms of a jihad against anyone other than the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan," the dramatic success of the war nurtured a broader "mentality of jihad."²⁶ After defeating the Soviets, nothing seemed impossible. Even though Abdullah Azzam advocated Middle Eastern fighters' return home after the war in Afghanistan, the Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* – an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood – promoted very different ideas. In particular the Egyptian Islamist Ayman al-Zawahri wished to continue fighting until the entire Islamic world was liberated from foreign influence.

Prior to his assassination in 1989, and the eruption of the Gulf War in 1991, Azzam's view was very much a minority opinion. These two events and specifically "infidel" troops stationed on the Arabian Peninsula to fight Iraq – a fellow Muslim country – provided legitimacy to appeals for anti-Western policy; after "devoting their lives to the liberation of Muslim territory from foreign occupation, it was a bitter blow for Bin Laden and his Arab mujahideen to see land they regarded as sacred occupied by "infidel" soldiers."²⁷ Douglas Streusand maintains that the "Palestinian question" is another central concern of Islamists, including extremists such as Osama bin Laden.

²⁴ "It was there [King Abdul-Aziz University] that bin Laden first became associated with the Muslim Brotherhood [and]... came under the spell of two prominent teachers of Islamic studies, Abdullah Azzam and Muhammad Qutb," even if Azzam might not approve of bin Laden's subsequent terrorist activities. Berger 2001, p. 52.

²⁵ *Afghanistan*, Amnesty International Publications.

²⁶ Saad al-Faqih, cited in Symon 2001, n.p.

²⁷ Symon 2001, n.p.

Jihad and the Liberal Media

In light of this brief historical outline, this section examines the relationship between physical embodiment and human rights discourses within the context of a political cartoon published in late October 2001. Although political cartoons are generally taken less seriously and interrogated less rigorously than other forms of political commentary, the combination of visual imagery and written text actually means that they can be very rich sites for textual analysis. Political cartoons are an important medium for analysis; consider, for example, the publicity received by inflammatory depictions of Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

I am particularly interested in analyzing this cartoon (shown below) because it was published in *Critic*, a small liberal/radical student newspaper based at the University of Otago in New Zealand; in a sense, precisely because it seems to have little popular appeal. Yet despite appealing primarily to an intellectual audience (and a generally liberal/radical one at that), this cartoon still relies on a number of injurious and racist assumptions about Muslim people in order to make its point.

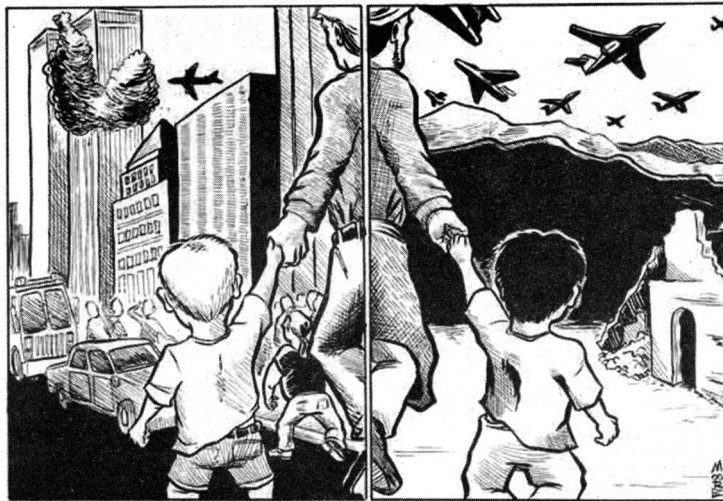


Figure 1 Political cartoon emphasizing the humanity of ordinary Afghans²⁸

²⁸) In *Critic* 2001, p. 8.

The central theme in the cartoon (above) is the apparent inequality between Westernized people and those of Other cultures within the “Western imagination.” An image of a man and child walking near the collapsing World Trade Centre has a very clear meaning: the indominability and unity of US society, even in the face of great adversity. But this image has a very different and more specifically political meaning when mirrored by an Afghani man and child under a US-sponsored air raid; it reflects the moral price that people in the US must pay in order to preserve their freedom.²⁹ Cleverly, the cartoon draws attention to our own inherent attitudes about the relative acceptability of Westerners and non-Westerners under fire, based upon racist stereotypes that justify the foreign policies of powerful Western nations. For example, while Westerners are understandably horrified by the destruction of the World Trade Centre, the mainstream media in Westernized nations tend to be relatively apathetic to warfare and poverty in third world countries, assuming perhaps that this is simply the “natural” order. It is only when these two images are placed beside each other that the contradiction become clear.

But yet even this progressive cartoon reinforces many popular stereotypes of Westernized and Afghani lifestyles, and of Westernized and Afghani bodies. To begin with, it is interesting to note the ethnicity of the two men, the boy and all seven of the background figures on the US side of the cartoon. In particular, note the classic “all American” image epitomized by snowy blonde hair. That the US is represented this way is fascinating, because most New Yorkers do not have hair this color; according to the 2000 US Census, only 67.9% of people in New York State were even of “White” ethnicity.³⁰ My own personal experience (as a blonde man) visiting New York City in late 2002 confirmed my suspicion that the dominant phenotypes of black or brown hair are widely prevalent, even among White New Yorkers. That the three New Yorkers featured in the first cartoon have uncharacteristically blonde hair is significant because of the cultural associations traditionally linked to blonde embodiment, most pertinently the concept of innocence.³¹ Even though the purity of the blonde (as compared to the passion of dark people) is traditionally described within the context of female sexuality, the link between

²⁹ See Smith 2000, for a similar argument.

³⁰ *US Census Bureau website*, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=04000US36&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U.

³¹ Warner 1994.

innocence and blondness is also apparent within a number of other contexts, none less than representation of nation. Since the US is a multicultural society,³² it seems as absurd to reduce its citizens to a blonde stereotype as it is to define all Muslims as terrorists.

It is interesting to consider why the cartoonist has chosen four males to represent the people of Afghanistan and the United States. While Afghanistan's city markets are almost exclusively a male preserve, in the countryside women enjoy greater freedoms. Yet if the point is to highlight the general "invisibility" of women in Afghani social and political life, then it is curious that all the characters on the US side of the cartoon are either clearly male or of indiscernible gender. Even without seeing the man's face (and although he is walking the boy down the middle of a busy Manhattan street), he appears thoroughly trustworthy: tall, strong and stereotypically attractive, his hands clasp firmly around the boy's, symbolizing trust and security in the face of adversity. In spite of the plethora of representations in the Western media of Afghanis as starved, crippled and fanatical, the man on the right hand side of the cartoon does appear rather "wholesome." Yet the young Afghani boy's hand is held relatively loosely, in far weaker style, suggesting perhaps that the Afghani man is less willing to protect his child; and there is a certain feeling that the boy might get left behind.

The clothing that adorns the men and boys also tell a certain story about what sort of people they are. While a cartoon is a far less explicit form than most representations of Afghani people, the marks on the back of the boy's shirt suggest that people from Afghanistan are unclean; the dirt and rubble near the building reinforces this. Groomed in typical and appropriate dress for his part of the world, his face is unshaven and his hair is covered with a turban. While the New York man is tidy, i.e. wholesome, he does not wear a suit that might imply he is the cliché urban city workaholic; neither is the man drawn in bohemian style, which could taint his "all-American" appeal. This man appears *thoroughly* clean cut – the stereotypical image of the ideal father effortlessly balancing his work and family life. Although it appears the man is a working professional – he has the financial resources to purchase tidy clothing, maintain a highly groomed appearance and function in an expensive part of town – he still has sufficient free time to take that Tuesday morning off to spend with the child. Finally, the belts that the boy and the man wear represent a physical asset the Afghani lacks, but more importantly symbolizes the comfort, support and perhaps

³²) Wynter 2002.

superiority of the Westernized lifestyles (the belt is obviously not simply a matter of representing national dress, since the Afghani boy also wears one of the US's cultural icons, a t-shirt).

The scenery and environment also tell a story of the relationship between society and nature that reinforces the idea of Muslims as socially, economically and morally primitive; itself a tacit assumption that demands a post-colonial critique. While skyscrapers, people and cars dominate the image on the left, mountains and empty desert feature on the right.³³ The implicit message is that while people from Western nations control and dominate their environment, nature dictates to Afghanis. Manhattan is obviously an enormous metropolis, yet – for a cartoon emphasizing similarities between US citizens and Afghanis – it is bizarre that a rural setting is chosen to represent Afghanistan; Kabul is a city with many cars, buildings, busy marketplaces, crowded streets, and had, at the time, almost one and a quarter million residents.³⁴ The representation of New York as necessarily a “centre of empire” and Afghanistan as peripheral is also historically incongruous, considering that Kabul is an ancient city strategically located at the apex of the major trade routes between Africa, Asia and Europe. Furthermore, the images of tall buildings, expensive cars and busy people highlight an apparently obvious – yet totally fallacious – distinction between Westerners' natural creativity and rationality in contrast to the irrationality and petty destructiveness of the Muslim Afghani. It is far too easy for people living in Westernized nations to blame the Taliban for all Afghanistan's woes, and forget the critical role of US-Soviet relations during the Cold War, and the role of the CIA in creating and supporting the Taliban.³⁵ It is also tempting to assume that material success is the only credible criterion for judging a rational political ideology. Despite these racist characterizations of Afghanis, the inability to deal with rational arguments is as much of a problem for US citizens as for Afghanis.

³³ Despite this representation, Afghanistan is not totally barren; indeed as Afghanistan's interim leader, Hamid Karzai points out it is “a country that has mountains, snow, deserts, forests, lakes and wonderful rivers.” Karzai, cited in *British Broadcasting Corporation News* 2002.

³⁴ According to Fazil Karim, Mayor of Kabul, that city's population nearly doubled to 2.3 million residents after the fall of the Taliban administration. Karim, cited in the *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific website*, http://www.unescap.org/unis/press/2002/jul/g_19_02.htm.

³⁵ Rashid 2000; El Guindi 1999, p. xii.

The only major feature I have yet to discuss with regard to this cartoon is, of course, the aircraft. Even though it is obvious that there are aircraft on both sides of the cartoon, the meanings we associate with these two sets of planes are radically different. Indeed, while the aircraft on the right side stand out as the only objects of modern technology, those on the left symbolize the alleged backwardness and simplicity of the Muslim world. While al-Qaeda is arguably the most complex and international terrorist organization in history, and although the World Trade attacks required extraordinary planning, organization and discipline, the actual event is often remembered as a simple “box-cutter” incident; one of the first anti-terrorism measures implemented was the removal and banning of all metal butter-knives from many airlines.

The central message of this cartoon is clearly that both Afghans and US citizens suffer as a result of acts of violence. But that the cartoon is both necessary and so striking suggests an underlying belief that US military action serves to liberate people, and that all terrorist attacks are an attempt to undermine freedom; yet scant reference is made to the argument that both attacks were a simple response to a direct political threat.³⁶ The idea that all terrorists are terrible “evildoers” will be discussed and refuted within the context of the next cartoon, which was published on the same page as the first cartoon.

Stereotyping Muslims

The man in the following cartoon represents the popular belief and convenient stereotype within polite society and echoed by Western diplomats that all terrorists are fanatical extremists, terrible “evildoers” and most penitently, the enemies of freedom and reason.³⁷ This position is irreconcilable with the personal histories of many liberal political icons such as Nelson Mandela and George Washington, who also fit the popular – although

³⁶ At least one New Zealand newspaper cited a senior US diplomat who said that “far from launching the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon out of the blue 10 days ago,” the terrorist attacks were “a pre-emptive strike” in response to direct and specific threats. *New Zealand Herald* 2002.

³⁷ It is interesting to compare the physical and ethnic embodiment of the man in this cartoon (balding/Jewish) with that from the previous one (handsome/White).



Figure 2 Political cartoon highlighting ignorance about Muslims' grievances³⁸

politically and emotionally charged – contemporary definition of terrorist, even though their progressive agendas were incomparable to Osama bin Laden's.³⁹

Indeed it appears that any Muslim who takes part in political activities can now be freely accused of terrorism;⁴⁰ the suicide bombers in Israel and elsewhere sustain the myth that Islamic activists – even legitimate ones

³⁸ *Critic* 2001, p. 8.

³⁹ The South African Government effectively labeled Mandela a terrorist; he was convicted of incitement to sabotage, treason, and violent conspiracy. Initially, it was a category that most Western governments accepted. Mandela 1994.

⁴⁰ "A former Afghanistan Government Minister [Dr Najbullah Lafraie] given refugee status in New Zealand a year ago is a guerrilla leader who was involved in a bloody holy war, says National leader Jenny Shipley." Roughan and Gleeson 2002. The accusations were later proved groundless, and Dr Lafraie continues to work in New Zealand.

such as Yasir Arafat – fight only for tyranny. But in order to present the military response as virtuous, right wing politicians in Europe and North America also resorted to racial religious stereotypes of Muslim terrorists as ranting madmen. Less than a month after the 11 September attacks, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi pointed out “the superiority of our [Western] culture [over Islamic culture].”⁴¹ In 1996, Jean-Marie Le Pen – the runner up to the 2002 French presidential elections – described Islam as a “frightening phenomenon” that threatens to steal the souls of Frenchmen.⁴²

The religious and racial stereotyping of Muslims that is still evident in contemporary Westernized political cultures gives tacit support for a whole range of human rights abuses – both in the political vacuum of Guantanamo Bay and in Westernized nations themselves. In 2002, a close friend of mine grew a liyah (a long beard) as a mark of solidarity with his fellow Muslims. However, he found it problematic to wear such an overt symbol, so often associated with radical Islam, in both a small New Zealand city and when travelling to academic conferences. Ironically, just a few months later (with beard shaved) he returned to his homeland and became a legitimate militant; a Captain (now Major) in his nation’s armed services.

Extremist rhetoric about Islam is only possible in “post-September 11” society because the media conflate the distinction between terrorists, Muslims, and Arabs.⁴³ Bush, for example, claimed that the terrorists “hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, [and] our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”⁴⁴ Broad sweeping statements such as these play on our emotions, particularly our encultured religious perceptions of a clear distinction between what is “good” and what is “evil” (it would be rather difficult to argue that former “terrorist” Nelson Mandela resents freedom). While these accusations might be true of al-Qaeda, it is unlikely that this is why they destroyed the World Trade Centre. Bush simply wished to dehumanize those Muslims who threatened him, and marginalizing legitimate grievances associated with US “imperialism” was crucial to justifying a violent reaction.

⁴¹ Berlusconi, quoted in *TIME Magazine* 2001, p. 11.

⁴² This “frightening phenomenon imposes its customs, values, its religion, and steals our souls . . . the tide of immigration will submerge us after first having ruined us.” Jean-Marie Le Pen quoted in Crumbie 2002, p. 35.

⁴³ Said 1996.

⁴⁴ Roy 2001a.

Ironically, while Bush defended the war as protecting freedom, some scholars proposed an alternative interpretation; as the US becomes more and more globally dominant, the less and less “democratic” its foreign policy appears.⁴⁵ It is also paradoxical that the US Government implemented unprecedented restrictions on civil liberties to protect their nation against an alleged threat against freedom.⁴⁶ If terrorists do resent the US for its freedom and democracy, and that was why they launched the attacks, then we need to consider why buildings so symbolic of the US’s, and in indeed all “Western,” global *military* and *economic* “imperialism” were targeted. The Statue of Liberty, in contrast, is the definitive symbol of Western-style freedom and democracy. In the shadow of this argument, persuading US citizens that their nation’s freedom was under attack (as opposed to its foreign policy), appeared to be an easy means for rallying political support for a military response: Bush’s statement can be read as essentially a strategic political response.

It is absurd to discriminate against all Muslims simply because a very few are terrorists. But perhaps rather naively, I expected tension with Arab Muslims would be negligible within the stable and isolated geopolitical region containing Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, a number of events in the six months after the attacks proved me wrong. I found the belief that “people are just a little weird over there” easy to reject as overly simplistic and fundamentally racist, yet its popularity in everyday discourse was rather disconcerting. I am still not entirely sure exactly where “there” is, or whether it is not actually a place but rather anyone who holds different religious beliefs or cultural values, and whether, perhaps, it is inextricably tied to ethnic embodiment. Geraldine Brooks, an

⁴⁵ “Could it be the stygian anger that led to the attacks has its taproot not in American freedom and democracy, but in the US government’s record of commitment and support to exactly the opposite things – to economic and military terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry, and unimaginable genocide (outside America)?” Roy 2001a.

⁴⁶ By just November 2001, eleven thousand suspects and material witnesses had been detained in America; many who had been cleared of terrorist connections were still “held under harsh conditions for prolonged periods, and denied a chance to notify relatives of their whereabouts.” *New York Times* 2001. According to Kate Martini, the director of the Centre for National Security Studies, this was “frighteningly close to the practice of disappearing people in Latin America.” Martini quoted in Williams 2001a.

⁴⁷ For example, two British tourism polls cited New Zealand as the safest in the ‘post 11 September’ world. *Otago Daily Times* 2001, p. 21.

Australian journalist, described how people from such a politically stable and geographically isolated environment often have the most difficulty comprehending incidents of religious extremism in Muslim countries; which “come at us from so deep in left field that we, as Westerners, have no coherent way to think about them. We shrug. Weird foreigners. Who understands them? Who needs to?”⁴⁸

The woman in the cartoon (above) represents moderate Muslims (particularly those affected by British imperialism and US foreign policy), and attempts to debunk the “weird foreigner” stereotype. Despite Bush’s assertions, and his government’s actions,⁴⁹ empathizing with this cartoon woman does not necessarily suggest a lack of patriotism. As the Iranian religious leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei pointed out, it is possible to be neither “with” Bush (in supporting the war) nor with the terrorists (supporting the trade centre attacks). He said this in rather unequivocal terms: “No, we [the Iranian government] are not with you, and we are not terrorists.”⁵⁰ Indian essayist, activist and Booker prize-winning author Arundhati Roy agrees, asserting, “The world doesn’t have to choose between the Taliban and the US Government. All the beauty of the world – literature, music, art – lies between these two fundamentalist poles.”⁵¹ In summary, Westerners should not only have been shocked by this unimaginable catastrophe; they should also be horrified that it is a global political crisis only when it happens to a powerful Western nation.

Interestingly, many people I talked to in the days after the attack expressed outrage that I thought that the incident might be based on (but crucially, not justified by) legitimate grievances, and that a military presence would provide convenient access to gas and oil reserves in nearby Turkmenistan.⁵² In fact it was only as the initial Afghani casualties began to emerge (and that their tales were quite different to those proffered by US

⁴⁸) Brooks 1995, p. 227.

⁴⁹) Edward Said and philosopher Anatole Anton complained about harassment from government and university authorities because they opposed the methods of the Afghan war. Both men had “been threatened and attacked for speaking out.” Vulliamy and Helmore 2001.

⁵⁰) *Time Magazine* 2001, p. 11.

⁵¹) Roy 2001b.

⁵²) Turkmenistan holds the third largest gas reserves in the world and some six billion barrels of oil. In 1997, to negotiate the construction of an oil pipeline across Afghanistan, “a delegation of Taliban mullahs travelled to America and even met US State Department officials and [oil giant] Unocal executives.” Roy 2001b.

officials), that a more mainstream anti-war sentiment began to grow. This is because Western Orientalist discourse makes little distinction between Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, Afghans, and at times even Muslims in general.⁵³ For example, I can still remember a customer in a Turkish Kebab shop in New Zealand jesting to the worker “so that was you guys causing trouble in New York, eh?” The irony is that Turkey is a modern democratic secular nation, having more in common with the liberal West than radical Islam.

Despite the plethora of genuine criticisms of the Taliban, some reactions to Afghani life simply reflect differences in the priorities and values of the liberal West and conservative Islam. Aside from Western materialism and individualism there are many different – and potentially equally legitimate – parameters for judging the “worth” of a nation, culture, or way of life. For example, when US citizens declare their nation “the number one country in the world” they are clearly referring to their unparalleled economic and military dominance.⁵⁴ It is not surprising that Westerners who look at the desperate poverty and restrictive way of life in pre- or post-Taliban Afghanistan are stunned that many middle class Pakistanis revere their neighbors as “perfect,” and are prepared to fight and risk their lives to protect it.⁵⁵ To a Western value system this makes absolutely no sense.

In fact what many Pakistanis admire about Afghanistan is precisely the opposite of what most Westerners admire about the US. This includes an ability to survive in an unimaginably harsh and tremendously unstable region of the world, compared to the generally high standard of living in US; Afghans’ phenomenal generosity and hospitality,⁵⁶ compared to Western culture of individualism and personal responsibility; and Afghani’s rigid adherence to politico-religious principles contrasts to Western alliances based on changing national interests (particularly their relationship with Pakistan). Essentially, while Westerners place ultimate value on material wealth and political stability, we should not be surprised that Afghans are often interested in other matters.

⁵³ See, for example, Roughan and Gleeson 2002.

⁵⁴ For a general critique, see Schiller 2000.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Kristof described the threat of Pakistan becoming ‘Talibanized.’ Kristof 2001, p. A39.

⁵⁶ Former British senior diplomat in Afghanistan, Sir Martin Ewans, describes how the people “carry hospitality to extremes, but are implacable as enemies.” See, Ewans 2002, dustjacket.

The next section will discuss how our assumptions about socio-religious difference across the globe relate to racialized differences and the politics of Islamic bodies within the Western environment. After reiterating global social inequalities and their relationships to stereotypes of Muslims, I highlight some ways that racist stereotypes of Muslims in Islamic states also affect the treatment of Muslim (and Muslim-looking) people living in Westernized nations.

The Needs of the Rich and the Needs of the Many

Arundhati Roy was among the earliest critics of the military response within Afghanistan. Central to her “algebra” is the profoundly unequal value placed on human life, depending on whether individuals live within a “friendly” or “unfriendly” nation state. She drew parallels between the “War on Terrorism” and the Gulf War; and queries, “How many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place? How many dead Afghans for every dead American?”⁵⁷ The US military, in particular, is both widely revered and strongly criticized for the enormous lengths it takes to protect its soldiers’ lives, partly because at times it demonstrates an almost palpable disregard for indigenous casualties:

In 1996 Madeline Albright, then the U.S. secretary of state, was asked on national television what she felt about the fact that 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of U.S. economic sanctions. She replied that it was “a very hard choice,” but that, all things considered, “we think the price is worth it.”⁵⁸

It is unlikely that such a cost in *US* lives would have presented such a difficult choice. This is partly the case because news broadcasters in the developed world often gloss over major human tragedies where Western citizens are not directly affected. This is important for understanding the political significance of the Islamic body because it reinforces what Edward Said describes as a “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism,

⁵⁷) “...How many dead women and children for every dead man? How many dead mojahedin for each dead investment banker?” Roy 2001a.

⁵⁸) Roy 2001a. Peter Bergen notes that bin Laden also refers to these children when saying “a heart that kills hundreds of children definitely knows no words.” Bin Laden, cited in Bergen 2001, p. 22.

dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim,”⁵⁹ which reduce our empathy for those in crisis.

Indeed there seem to be plenty of examples of Western rejection of Muslims in crisis, even before 11 September. When a large boatload of Afghani asylum seekers entered Australian waters, that country’s Federal Government passed controversial legislation designed to limit refugees from entering the country, despite criticism from the United Nations, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the Refugee Council of Australia and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid.⁶⁰ Yusuf Hassan of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights believed the Australian public accepted this legislation because of fallacious stereotypes of refugees as economic migrants or queue jumpers.⁶¹ Hassan added that in his experience of race relations within Australia, not even highly skilled migrants are made to feel particularly welcome.⁶²

Even though Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed that the “War on Terrorism” was not a war against Islam, it is still, at least, being constructed as being between peaceful and caring Westerners and the “evil doers” of the conservative Islamic world. For this reason, the novelist Salman Rushdie wrote an article called “Yes, this is about Islam,” highlighting how in order to maintain support for the coalition against terrorism and war in Afghanistan, Western leaders must constantly assert that this fight is not about Islam.⁶³ While politically necessary, Rushdie argues that this argument is a farce: “If this isn’t about Islam, why the worldwide Muslim demonstrations in support of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda?”⁶⁴ Rushdie’s underlying theme is that in a subtle way this war is

⁵⁹ Said 1978, p. 27.

⁶⁰ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation News* 2001.

⁶¹ *British Broadcasting Corporation News* 2001. Despite the stereotypes (which make sense to individualistic Westerners), many desperately poor children in refugee camps are determined to stay in Afghanistan and to rebuild their country: they were only prepared to make this journey – fraught with danger – because of the horrific situation in Afghanistan. The popular argument is that while asylum seekers cost taxpayers, foreign immigrants steal Australians’ jobs.

⁶² Although, in the New Zealand business context there is evidence to suggest Asian immigrants are considered both extremely productive and disciplined; see Heeringa 2002, p. 8.

⁶³ Rushdie 2001. Rushdie has been living in exile since the late Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini deemed his novel *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous and issued a fatwa calling for his death.

⁶⁴ Rushdie 2001.

precisely about Islam: specifically about its heart and soul as well as the path of its political future.⁶⁵ Just as British colonialism sought to dominate the political structure of the Orient, US neocolonialism is presently ensuring free access to Middle Eastern oil; demonizing the Arab nations and propagating the myth that they are incapable of managing their own affairs is the most effective means towards this end.

But while Western leaders maintain the war is not about Islam, they increasingly draw attention to and help promote the most radical elements of Islamic society. While only a small proportion of Muslims who resent Western support for Israel and troops in Saudi Arabia are prepared to take violent action, there is increasing widespread popularity of what Rushdie calls paranoid Islam, “a jumbled, half-examined” version of the faith, hijacked for political purposes, and epitomized by the widespread popular support for Osama bin Laden.⁶⁶ Muslims across the globe increasingly find themselves having to choose between what is for them two radical extremes: liberal Americanism and radical Islam.

Racial Profiling and Homeland Defense

Certain Muslims and non-Muslims in the US, Britain, Australia and even New Zealand face discrimination and abuse because of their ethnic identity and religious beliefs. Traditionally race-related issues in the US have been dominated by the extent to which racial profiling of African Americans occurs, particularly by White police officers within the political context of the US’s “war on drugs.”⁶⁷ Yet, since the 11 September attacks, and in response to a phenomenal surge in allegations of anti-Islamic hate crimes and alleged discriminatory practices against Muslims in the US, the focus has changed markedly.

Alleged cases of racial profiling involved lawsuits against American, Continental, United and Northwest Airlines.⁶⁸ Such instances include a

⁶⁵ Perhaps it is also proving to be very much about the ‘heart and soul’ of America; the balance between protecting from external attacks on ‘freedom,’ and the rapid diminishing of civil liberties from within. See, *New York Times* 2001.

⁶⁶ Rushdie added that this, the fastest growing version of Islam, abhors the modern Western lifestyle and “blames outsider, ‘infidels’, for all the ills of Muslim societies.” Rushdie 2001.

⁶⁷ See Meeks 2000.

⁶⁸ See *CNN News* 2001a, and *CNN News* 2001b.

number of passengers of various ethnic groups, but including people of Iranian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Filipino, and Indian origin. Despite the wide range of physical appearances, these men shared a common experience; after passing through security measures, each was escorted off their flight, and, in a number of cases detained and questioned about their religious faith, work and marital status. Many of the complainants reported that the pilots, flight crews and other passengers commented that they did not like how they looked, or that they were uncomfortable flying with them, and, unsurprisingly, all were non-White US citizens. These extreme cases reflect a pattern of stigma that spread far beyond US shores; in 2002, as noted earlier, a New Zealand-based friend and colleague elected to grow a long beard in order to express solidarity with his Muslim “brothers.” However, overt stigma and open harassment – both on international flights and in day-to-day life – meant that this expression was relatively short-lived.

Of clear interest in relation to lawsuits cited above is the historical and political context in which they have occurred; but of further, and less obvious interest, is the legislative context for claims of racial discrimination. When the US Congress passed an “End Racial Profiling Act” on 6 June 2001, President Bush said that racial profiling is “wrong and we will end it in America”; Senator Jon Corzine added that it is also ineffective for combating crime.⁶⁹ Yet, less than four months later, and in response to the 11 September terrorist attacks, the United States Congress passed the controversial USA Patriot Act. According to Professor Susan Herman, the “thrust of the USA Patriot Act surveillance provisions is to provide federal agencies with more surveillance options, and less judicial supervision.”⁷⁰

The specific importance of criticism of the US Patriot Act regards the *type* of people who tend to be suspected of terrorist activities within “post-11 September” United States, as well as the potential effectiveness of such legislation. According to Herman, some “5000 Arab residents between the ages of 18 and 33 have been summoned for interrogation by the FBI.”⁷¹ Columbia University Law Professor Patricia Williams confirmed this figure, adding that it appears these individuals “have been selected according

⁶⁹ See Bush, quoted in Mucchetti 2005, p. 12 and Corzine, quoted in Mucchetti 2005, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Herman n.d.

⁷¹ Williams 2001a.

to their ethnicity or religion.”⁷² Furthermore, Williams argued that the US Patriot Act has only been justified within the post-September 11 political climate, where a significant proportion of US citizens “suddenly seem willing to embrace profiling based on looks and ethnicity; detention without charges; searches without warrants; and even torture and assassination,” all of which the US Patriot Act either explicitly permitted or subtly implied.⁷³ This is despite Corzine’s position that racial profiling is both ineffective and morally wrong.

As I pointed out as early as 2002, it is hardly surprising that racial profiling of terrorists was no more successful than racial profiling of drug traffickers.⁷⁴ Crucial to the success of Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, Florida suicide pilot Charles Bishop⁷⁵ and the recent al-Qaeda terrorists was that each man was remarkably inconspicuous. In light of the alleged international nature of the terrorist organization, and the fact that they have already made obvious their efforts to blend in, it seems absurd to simply screen people on the basis of their ethnic identity.⁷⁶ While a lone microbiologist probably caused the anthrax scare in the US, the FBI did not question the relatively small number of microbiologists within the country, but it felt the need to interview an enormous number of Arab and Muslim US citizens even though the FBI had no evidence of their involvement with al-Qaeda.⁷⁷ The passing of the USA Patriot Act and its functional superseding of the End Racial Profiling Act within the context of the war on terrorism suggest that the Muslim, Arab and ethnic body is precariously placed within the contemporary Western imagination. In what was, and in many ways still is, a paranoid political climate, forms of “Otherness” are viewed with staunch scepticism; ethnic embodiment and physical characteristics, whether biological or cultural, provide an unassailable marker of those for whom a vocal minority claim do not “belong” in Western society.

⁷² Herman n.d.

⁷³ Williams 2001b.

⁷⁴ Tagg 2002: 126.

⁷⁵ Koch 2002.

⁷⁶ Indeed Charles Bishop was an US citizen who simply sympathized with al-Qaeda.

⁷⁷ Patricia Williams 2001a.

Conclusion

Western media interests that concentrate on conflicts in the Middle East play a role in creating the illusion that all Muslims are radical fundamentalists. By rarely acknowledging anything other than turmoil in these states, they subtly portray a narrow, albeit newsworthy, monolithic expression of Islam as primitive, flawed and oppressive. Muslims propagating an inherently peaceful view of Islam must first unravel a multitude of stereotypes before they can lay their arguments, and despite the growing global significance of Islamic fundamentalism, too often little effort is made to consider the historical roots of the current anti-Western sentiment. So even if these grievances are now simply a rhetorical troupe to legitimate al-Qaeda actions, they remain key issues that capture Muslims imaginations.

Many contemporary media representations of Muslims often negate the lived realities and day-to-day aspirations of Muslim people; it is in this sense that all representations of Islam, even those in seemingly trivial contexts such as cartoons, may perpetuate racist stereotypes. While it is hardly surprising that the offensive cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten* were offensive to Muslims, this article has shown that even overtly progressive cartoons published in liberal academic-affiliated publications also often rely on shallow caricatures in order to present their arguments.

Finally, media representations of Islam have profound effects on the lived experiences of Muslims across the globe. While progressive liberal commentaries perform a crucial role in undermining racist representations furthered by both (neo)colonialism and extremism alike, this article outlines a framework for considering some of the ways in which even progressive commentators may themselves inadvertently rely on injurious stereotypes. Without all liberal political commentators critically interrogating their own latent sensibilities, Muslims will continue to face persecution from ignorant Westerners and will be continually pressured to choose between two polemical caricatures of the Islamic faith. The path to greater understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and non-Muslims lies through a full and frank discussion of the issues concerning all parties, and I would like to suggest that the continued consideration of injurious stereotypes in both mainstream and liberal media should form an integral part of this process.

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