

Linking Obama with Islam and Terror Is a Double Offense

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The cartoon cover page of The New Yorker July 21 issue depicts Obama, the “Muslim”, and his wife the “terrorist.” While the Obama campaign finds the cartoon unfair, Muslims find it pejorative and profane. Muslims wonder: “Is Islam considered a plague in America?”

In this cover cartoon The New Yorker has taken an aggressive editorial step against Obama and against Islam. Obama’s opponents have been trying to ruin his reputation in one media scheme after another. Early in the primaries the alleged problem of Obama was his “shady” real estate dealer, then his “anti-American” pastor, then his Muslim father, then his “mixed” faith, and most recently his “militant” wife.

The significance of Obama’s association with Islam has been artificially manufactured. Psychology 101 comes to mind. Every college student learns how Pavlov trained dogs to salivate when they heard a bell ring. The effect of the bell ringing on salivation is a result of repeated episodes of associating the bell ringing with rewarding the dog with food.

Social psychologists have shown how Pavlovian conditioning is often exploited in both political image making and stereotyping of communities. The effect of repetitive association in conditioning is often the cause of irrational fears, prejudice, racism, and brainwashing. Today, Muslims make perfect targets for provocative American artists, writers and television anchors.

There is a historical background for prejudice against Muslims in the West, and reciprocally for prejudice against Christians in the East. Despite extended periods of interfaith harmony, tense international relations between Islam and the West go back to the seventh century. In modern times, over the last six decades, Muslim societies have been in direct conflict with the Western world, culminating in 9/11. Contemporary conflicts mirror the hatred that the Western Crusaders had for Islamic societies in the eleventh and twelve centuries. In turn, the Crusaders were influenced by the rivalry between Byzantium and the Islamic East starting in the era of rapid Mohammedan expansion.

These age-old animosities make today’s front page news. Following the historical bias and the current political climate, US mass media and power brokers habitually condition Americans to associate Islam with violence and evil. Similarly Arab and Muslim communication agents have conditioned their public to view the West as morally decadent, imperialistic and materialistic.

It is now well known that Barack Hussein Obama, an African American, has some connection with Muslim society - and not with Islam- through his Kenyan father who abandoned the family when Barack was very young. As a young child Barack also lived in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country. Barack's secondary school education in Hawaii added to the richness of his international background. Obama's mixed heritage tempts bigoted opinion makers to project their bias on his public image.

It is also known that Obama is a serious Christian with ecumenical ideas of liberation theology: forgiveness in peace making, sensitivity to social justice and respect for the integrity of creation. His political critics have taken his theological ideas out of context to portray them as anti-American and pro-Muslim.

What his critics miss is that Obama is privileged with a unique constellation of attributes. He had a white mother and a black father. He had a Christian upbringing and varied exposure to Muslim society. He has an American identity and an international background. The popularity of the Afro-component in Obama reflects America's yearning to move to the final stage of integration of its black minority. The Muslim connection, though remote and largely cultural, gives him the capacity to better address the issues of the third world. And finally, the ecumenical orientation in his Christian faith empowers him to embrace world religions to promote international peace.

Obama's life record is a rare juxtaposition of fate, personal achievement, cultural diversity and politics. While his opponents try to translate his racial, religious and cultural diversity into a liability, Obama's supporters promote him as an agent of reform for America.

Back to The New Yorker, Obama's Cartoon does not qualify as artistic satire. For many it qualifies as hate literature.