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Orientalism: the constructed, violent Muslim “race”

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In media today, there has been a constant stream of the horrific acts of terror committed around the world by Islamist terrorist cells. Muslims, both in the United States and abroad, have been placed in a light of skepticism. However this discrimination appears to be racially based. Muslims of Arab descent have become the face of terrorism creating what has been coined “Islamophobia”, however this concept is not new to Western society. Historical associations and media coverage converge in order to construct Muslims as an ethnic or racial minority rather than a religious group. ‘Muslim’ has become synonymous with Arab, creating a racialized fear that extends beyond Muslims.

Orientalism was a theory presented by Edward Said to address the perspective of those in Western Europe. He defines the theory as “a way to come to terms with Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in Western experience” (Said 1). As scholars began to publish books on the history and culture of the Orient, there was a particular language used in the writing of authors from Western Europe and the United States that places the Orient in a lesser position, or in the position of the “other” (Said 7). Said attributed this to the interactions white Europeans had with those from the Orient that tended to be based in imperialism (Said 11); when they encounter those from a non-European culture, they approach it with the lens of their experience and understanding of the opposing culture. In the case of the Middle East and North Africa, Europeans would have generally been exposed to both regions via colonization and cultural studies. This theory finds much of its support through the history of Europe’s relations with those with heritage in Middle Eastern countries.

As previously stated, European scholars have historically understood non-European “others” through the lens of imperialism. This attitude stems from a historical conflict of

colonization; as European countries began to colonize Northern Africa and clash with the Ottoman empire, they were forced to address the Muslim faith (Grosfoguel et al 4). With Europe being historically Christian, there were clear differences among the societal values and social practices. As European governments took control of Muslim-majority countries, they began implementing systems that kept the culture of colonizers in a place of hegemony. They justified it by stating that those being colonized worshipped the “wrong God” or were “heathens” (Grosfoguel et al 3) with no God and therefore were inferior and in need of the moral guidance of Christian Europeans.

Spain serves as a prime model for the contention between European nations and Muslim rulers. For a period of Spain’s history, it was ruled by Muslims. After the Christian monarchy regained their power, it became necessary to re-establish the dominance of Spanish monarchy. This meant creating Islam as a cultural “other” that did not fit amongst their desired hegemony (Grosfoguel et al 3). This contributed to the idea that non-Christian traditions worshipped the “wrong God”. European nations used this to justify the maintenance of current power structures; Muslims could not worship correctly, and therefore serve a lesser role in society than Christian citizens do (Grosfoguel et al 4).

As Europe progressed from religion-centered society into the Enlightenment period, Christians needed a new way to maintain a dominant position within society. Motivation for discrimination that had previously been based on religious practice were no longer sufficient in a community based on science and reason; in order to maintain dominance, European Christians began to assign the same lower class status to non-white citizens. By using a common trait among the Muslims that Europeans were used to encountering, such as skin color, those in

higher social classes were able to maintain a position of dominance as the point of contention was now race instead of religion.

As immigration rose from the Enlightenment and during various wars, Europe became increasingly anxious about the continental demographics. In the 20th century, many feared that the influx of Muslims and brown people as a whole would bring about a deterioration of society and its values (Wintle 46). The tie between race and religion created a devaluation of Middle Eastern culture through the eyes of Europeans. As stated in Edward Said's theory of orientalism, Europeans used societal hegemony to come to terms with a culture that differed from their own.

The racial traits assigned to Muslims within a given European country varied slightly based on what Muslims in that country most frequently resembled. For example, France has historically associated Islam with both Arab and North African peoples, whereas in Spain the association falls more closely to Arabs. In the United States, Islam is most closely associated with people of Arab descent, which contributes to the growing fear of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Globally however, Islamist extremism is not localized to a particular ethnic group; Boko Haram is an Islamist cell that operates across Nigeria and other parts of West Africa. Black Muslims have not been portrayed as a constructed "other" in American values. These racial associations with Islam are still present in today's society, both in Europe and the United States, and only continue to be perpetuated.

While Said initially addressed those holding academic and political positions, as Orientalism and discrimination has progressed in Western society it becomes necessary to address the role the media has played in recent years. Since the terror attack in 2001, media representation of Muslims in America has become quite hostile. Said argues that, especially in

American media, because they have their own “experts” on Islam that are typically white, Christian Americans, they possess a naturally unfavorable lens towards Islam and those of Arab descent (Saeed 11). The media also has created a pattern of linking cultural or individual things that are not part of Islamic doctrine or practice to Islam. Not only does this create a false representation of the religion, but it also extends the title of ‘Muslim’ to those who do not practice or believe in Islam at all.

As discussed earlier, colonial Europeans formed their lens of the Arab world through their interactions with it and the opinions most prevalent in society. In today’s society, the media (news stations, papers, movies, etc.) controls how information is presented and how populations are represented. This creates an environment suitable for Orientalism to thrive; brown or Arab peoples are presented under a common, exotic “other” category that all carry similar values and traditions, including the practice of Islam.

Because we have created a world in which Muslims are not only second class but prone to violence and danger, this discrimination and push for secularism has lead Western society to construct Islam with characteristics of a racial minority rather than a religious group. The historical switch from a societal hierarchy based on worship of a “correct” God to one based on the races associated with each class led to the current racialization of Arab Muslims (Hellyer 68). The two words have become interchangeable within mass communication; despite the highest Muslim-majority countries being in southeast Asia, the mass media outlets often use Muslim as a characteristic for someone that is simply of Arabic descent.

During both of Barack Obama’s Presidential campaigns there was a push from the media to release his birth certificate. Republican party leaders and conservative political lobbyists

claimed that not only was Barack Hussein Obama born in Kenya and presenting a fake certificate, but he was also a devout Muslim with potential sympathy for terrorist cells. Donald Trump, the current Republican Presidential nominee, was a key leader among what was called the “birther movement”, beginning in 2011. Since then, Trump has publicly questioned President Obama’s religion and birthplace: “He doesn't have a birth certificate. He may have one, but there's something on that, maybe religion, maybe it says he is a Muslim...I don't know if he loves America” (Holmes et al NP). The birther movement strongly represents Said’s concept of Orientalism in that media and political figures assigned specific characteristics to Obama based on names and skin color associated with a non-white, non-Christian “other”.

Public movements like this that are spearheaded by public figures with influence become vital in the perpetuation of the hegemonic culture. The movement that questioned not only Obama’s birthplace but his loyalty to America followed the narrative that had already been constructed in the United States’ public sphere regarding Muslims. Post 9/11 and following the enactment of the Patriot Act, it became common practice among American media outlets to suggest that Muslims living in the United States were not “true Americans” and held sympathy for terrorist groups, making them likely to become terrorists themselves. Bill Maher went as far as to say “the liberal idea that Muslims share American values is bullsh-t” (Maher NP). Each of these comments, however, are addressed to people from a specific area of the world. They tend to follow election periods, terrorist attacks around the world, and in regards to refugee influx from Syria and Iraq (Fekete 9). Because names and faces fit the Western image of Muslim, it becomes a commonly held perception that all who fit these characteristics must, therefore be Muslim.

In both political discourse, such as election materials, as well as mass media communication, Arabic people are not categorized as their nationality but as a Muslim instead (Maher NP; Holmes et al). This creates an identity that replaces nationality and is race centered. Islam is practiced by all races and ethnicities and is the second-largest religion in the world; it has approximately 1.6 billion followers. Of the 1.6 billion, only 0.02% of Muslims can be categorized as extremist or terrorist (Desilver NP). However, Islam has been represented not only as being geographically and racially grounded, but as ideologically homogenous. This leads to nationalities and Muslims being consolidated into an ideologically homogenous mass, subsequently equated to the violence of an exponentially small fraction of both populations (Fekete 11). The constructed identity not only takes on a racially general lens, but it projects violence onto both Arab Muslims and Arab Non-Muslims; it becomes detrimental for both communities.

Western media in the United States and Europe have continued to portray Islam as geographically centered and ideologically homogenous racial group. Muslims are constructed as a non-white, non-Christian “other” that are incompatible with the dominant society. This construction is not a new concept, and is based in years of historical oppression and colonization of Muslims. As the world progresses, Western society will be continually forced to address its relationship with one of world’s largest religions.

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