

Defeating Stereotypes Through Liberal Arts ~ TAMARA SONN, *William R. Kenan Professor of Humanities*

Muslims have been negatively stereotyped since their earliest encounters with European Christians, who often denied the validity of their religion. The old saying, “If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, Muhammad will go to the mountain,” for example, comes from a medieval European myth about a failed effort by Islam’s Prophet to demonstrate his legitimacy. Since the rise of terrorism over the past few decades, the problem of stereotyping has become especially acute. Demonstrated most blatantly in the 2006 Oscar-nominated movie *Borat*, stereotyping Muslims has become pervasive in our society, so much so that scholars write about it and comedians joke about it.

“There is never justification for transforming an entire people into an object of ridicule and hate.” — EBOO PATEL

There is even a post-*Borat* independent movie about it. *Driving to Zigzagland* is the story of a Palestinian actor in Hollywood who can only get roles playing a terrorist — which he refuses to do. Based on real-life experience, the movie then traces the life of the actor as he supports himself driving a cab and is subjected to endless harassment when passengers find out he is Palestinian. The musical score includes the 2005 hit “Stereotypes,” by the Iraqi-Canadian hip-hop group Euphrates.

But stereotypes thrive on ignorance, and it is a tribute to students’ curiosity and intellectual integrity that they flock to courses about Islam in an effort to go beyond crude stereotypes purveyed in pop culture. Among the things they discover is that Muslims themselves are struggling with the tendency to stereotype. The above quote, in fact, is not directed against stereotyping of Muslims, but against the reciprocal problem of Muslims’ stereotyping of

non-Muslims, particularly Jews. Eboo Patel, Muslim community leader and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core (www.ifyc.org) in Chicago, says that anti-Jewish statements “blacken the heart of anyone who says or thinks or feels them, and I want my religious community to have nothing to do with those sick attitudes.” Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, among the most prominent young American Muslim leaders, insisted in a recent article in *Tikkun Magazine* that Holocaust denial undermines Islam. Patel reports that the voices of people like Shaykh Hamza “are having an increasing influence within the American Muslim community for a very simple reason — they reflect the attitude of the majority of American Muslims, who have felt

both sickened and silenced by the minority of Muslims who speak of anti-Semitism as if it were a core tenet of Islam.”

Ironically, such condemnations of prejudice against Jews fly in the face of standard stereotypes of Muslims. The same is true of the countless condemnations of terrorism, by virtually every religious leader in Islam. Unlike the horrific atrocities committed by terrorists claiming to be acting in the name of Islam and the outrageous statements of the likes of Iran’s Holocaust-denying President Ahmadinejad, these mainstream voices rarely make the headlines (although they are available online at www.unc.edu/~kurzman/terror.htm). So it is not surprising that students respond with palpable relief to find that Muslims, although a diverse community of well over 1 billion people, are themselves struggling against terrorism, injustice and negative stereotyping.

Yet it must be noted that the academic study of Islam remains controversial. Its



detractors accuse scholars of a variety of offenses, from blurring the separation of religion and state, to offending the sensibilities of non-Muslim students, to misrepresenting Islam by ignoring its radical elements. Advocates of the scholarly study of religion respond that such accusations are based on failure to recognize the nature of liberal arts education. Undermining stereotypes (and the ignorance they feed upon) is, after all, among the goals of liberal arts education. The term “liberal,” so maligned in the politicized commercial media, actually refers to free people; the liberal arts are subjects studied by those who have the right to make political choices. Or, as our illustrious alum Thomas Jefferson 1762, LL.D. 1783 might put it, the liberal arts are training for citizenship. Those who have no democratic rights need only be trained for specific jobs. But those who have the right to choose must — if their rights are to be used responsibly — be educated about the world in which they exercise their democratic rights. With conflicts in the Muslim world absorbing more of our political attention, consuming our economic resources, and taking American lives, students’ efforts to understand that world reflect very positively on their civic responsibility.

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