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Well-Intentioned Islamophobia

By Heidi Morrison

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Current news headlines about the American presidential race focus on some republican candidates' anti-Muslim comments. Donald Trump warns of a Muslim problem in this country and Ben Carson states that he would not support a Muslim for president. Fortunately, democratic candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have openly criticized their opponents' anti-Muslim rhetoric. However, this expressed disapproval does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of latent Islamophobia in democratic campaigns.

While Republican inflammatory rhetoric steals the headlines, blue Islamophobia often masquerades as well-intentioned rhetoric. When hatred is subtle enough to be overlooked, it risks becoming normalized, i.e. organized and systematic. The routinization of ugly discourse means that banal evil becomes the way things are done.

The deconstruction of an image that is circulating among self-identified Democrats on Facebook provides a case in point. Receiving thousands of shares in just a few days, the image depicts President Obama holding a pint of frothy beer in what appears to be a lodge for National Park rangers. The caption reads: “Pro-choice, pro-gay, pro-women’s rights, shaves, eats bacon and drinks beer. Worst. Muslim. Ever.” In the image, Obama gives a thumbs up, with a frown of approval across his face, as if to say, “Not bad, not bad at all.”

While this image could be dismissed as just another offensive and irrational Internet meme, it is more than that. The image is part of the larger use of social media to build today’s political campaigns. Social media allows cultural ideas to spread between people like wildfire. As such, the routine and almost mundane act we have now of checking our Facebook – sometimes following the feed in real time – means we need to be all be most vigilant against perpetuating routine and mundane hatred.

For those who are not vigilant, the Obama image appears to achieve two positive goals. First, it uses humor to mock the far-right’s vision of Islam by showing that not all Muslims are bad; liberal Obama supposedly serving as an example. Second, and counterintuitive to the first goal, the image invalidates the unending rumors that Obama is a Muslim in the first place. The image claims that Obama does not practice the faith, as defined by a person’s stands on abortion, gender and sexuality, and food choices.

Unfortunately, the image feeds the anti-Muslim sentiment that reigns so heavily in the United States.

While the image sends the message that there are liberal Muslims, it also sends the negative message that Islam is incompatible with western liberal ideals of freedom of choice and equality for all. We know from Christianity’s inglorious past and present that Islam does not hold a monopoly among the world’s religions on misogyny and persecution of the weak, let alone dietary restrictions. There is a wide range of interpretations of beliefs within all religions. Anyone who knows any Muslims at all knows there are plenty of liberal Muslims. Even a cursory glance at Islamic law quickly reveals to a novice that concepts such as *ijma* (consensus) and *ijtihad* (interpretation) parallel western legal ideas of deliberative

democracy and independent reasoning, respectively. Additionally, law itself is not constructed solely through religion, as culture, economics, and history play a significant role.

The image also sends the damaging message that true Americans are not Muslims. By reassuring the viewer that Obama is not a Muslim (because he does not practice the supposed markers of the religion), this conveys a monolithic definition of citizenship. It is as if the image says, “Don’t worry everyone, the President of the United States is not a Muslim. You can breathe easy and focus instead on his job performance.” Regardless of Obama’s spiritual beliefs, there are as many ways of being American as there are religions in the world. The unwitting damage caused by the use of stereotypes to dispel stereotypes is a slippery slope.

The image also perpetuates the racist practice of defining a person’s identity by their physical appearance, a practice that leads to racial-profiling. This practice came to the headlines only too recently with the arrest of the Muslim-American high school student for bringing to class a homemade clock that his teacher deemed a bomb. In the Obama image, the beard is connected to Islam. There have been countless cases in which dark-skinned men with beards have been labeled terrorists, and unjustly punished as such. The image perpetuates the “bearded man-as-terrorist”/”terrorist-as-Muslim” stereotype.

Whether or not the Facebookers who share and like the Obama image are cognizant of its duplicitous impact, they are putting the liberal agenda on display at the expense of Muslims. This renders Muslims into objects to try to manipulate for one’s own personal gain. Such dehumanization of the Other falls dangerously close to the way the likes of Trump and Carson get things done.