

# DEMONIZING AUSTRALIA'S CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM ARABS IN CARTOONS

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AUSTRALIAN AND other Western ignorance about the Arab world—its people, religion, culture and literature—has mutated into many stereotypical forms: jokes, cartoons, TV commercials, serials, songs and films.

Cartoons are particularly a unique species. They require different criteria of assessment and approach. Unlike editors and news analysts, cartoonists may not feel obliged to present all sides of the story. Rather they make a blunt assault on the characteristics of their subjects, and pride themselves on being selective in their presentation.

Clearly cartoons are created for a quick fix of entertainment. They present information and transmit unambiguous messages. They have also played a significant role in the defining of racial stereotypes.

The long-term effects of racist cartoons are enormous. My intuition compels me to believe that the damage caused to Australia's Arab image—Christian and Muslim—is arguably beyond repair. Other minorities such as Aborigines, Asians, Greeks and Italians have been the cartoonists' delight since WWI, but with a difference. The pitch of imagery targeting Muslims finds no match. Its persistence has exceeded thirty years—the longest of what any other minority has endured. The extent of psychological maim may warrant a nationally funded survey. Admittedly, the so-called Arab (Christian and Muslim) community leaders have made bad lawyers in presenting their case.

Following the Six-Day War Australian car-

toonists adopted a different standard of assessment from those of ordinary journalists. To them an 'objective' political caricature has been considered a contradiction in terms. For a Muslim caricature to help sell more editions, the political or social comment must be graphic, blunt and succinct. It should also lead to a distortion of selected behavior or morals.

Cartoonists in the Australian/Western press tend to pride themselves on their independence, and so they consider protests from their victims as attacks on their own integrity. On several occasions they recognised that their success depends on their ability to reflect the prejudices and preferences of their readership. On most other occasions they seem to reflect those of their employers.

When the recent racial vilification laws were introduced most Australian cartoonists defended demonizing Muslims in cartoons as satire. A cartoonist of a regional paper rejected the accusation that he was a propagandist promoting a particular editorial posture. However, he recognized that Muslim caricatures were often more effective in influencing community attitudes than news and current affairs programs.

A 20th century Punch-like caricature of a bog Irishman or long-nosed Jew, or Norman Lindsay's grotesque Huns or Chinamen now seem repugnant. Not so the caricatures of Australia's Christian and Muslim Arabs. Clearly the cartoons are now infrequent, but are highly pitched when they surface. Early in the nineties a sign placed in the foyer of a

Melbourne theatre, where Barry Humphries' *An Evening's Intercourse* was being staged, offered an unequivocal directive: 'Arabs, use the dunnies [toilets] please'. Barry, despite undergoing wholesome education, lapsed in projecting a golden heart on this occasion. He triumphantly offered a full range of tired clichés concerning power-mad dictators and Middle Eastern squalor in his film *Les Patterson Saves The World*. The human side and grievances of ordinary citizens deprived of basic human rights remained untouched. Other ethnic groups (notably, of course, Jews) have protested admirably and steadfastly against such vilifications, aided by changes in community attitudes.

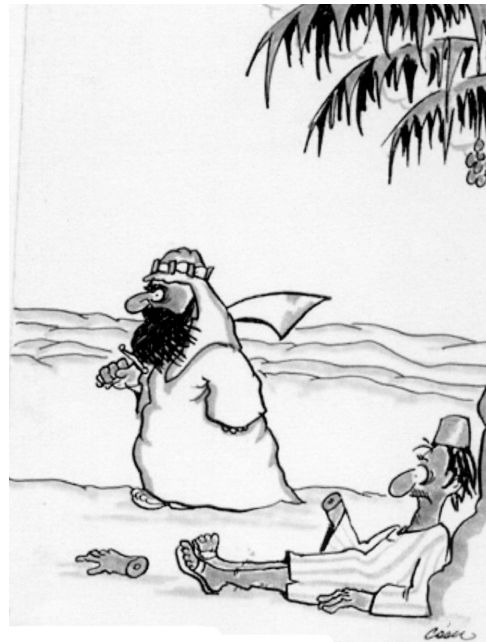
Why is such stereotyping still considered acceptable when it is applied to Arabs and Muslims? Part of the answer may lie in the inability of Australia's small Arab Christian and Muslim population to counter such propaganda. Occasional complaints made to the Australian Press Council or the Human Rights Commission appear to be brushed off. As a group, Arabs are an economically-deprived group within Australia. Arriving relatively recently, many of them (34%) are without a job—the highest among 144 ethnic groups. Arab and Muslim communities have an apparently limited understanding of the workings of Australian media and politics. And by extension, it seems, they are still novices in the art of public relations. One day I called a Muslim editor of a leading paper in Sydney suggesting ways to repair the damage inflicted by cartoonists. His immediate response was 'Why should we? We know the truth...'

The lecherous Arab has long been a pervasive stock figure in Western popular culture. This preoccupation with sexuality reflects images of the harem, the polygamist, the white slaver and the like. Even the old standby the 'Gypo' selling dirty postcards still seems to be potent enough to titillate cartoonists. Trading on these images a leading book publisher in Melbourne now sells postcards



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projecting Muslim obsession with sex for forty-five cents.



Another potent cartoon shows a Muslim-Arab oil sheikh holding the West to ransom. The image is rooted in mistrust of those oil sheikhs held responsible for threatening oth-

ers' lifestyles by controlling oil flow. (This scenario, of course, ignores the fact that only 10% of the world's Arab population lives in the major oil producing states). Pre-WWII German and French cartoonists caused similar damage on Jewish bankers and, by implication, the rest of their community.



*Oil Strike*

Thirdly, the myth propagated by the Western media is that all Arabs are Moslems and all Moslems are Arabs was equally damaging. Thus, Indonesians and Malaysians are not generally portrayed in cartoons bearing the appurtenances of Islam. This despite the reality that they are among those oil producers who held the West to 'ransom', and at times pose a vague 'threat' against Australia.



The well-being of some twenty-five million Christian Arabs minority worldwide who are minority groups (namely Palestinian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian and Syrian), is conveniently ignored. Presumably because all organised Christian-Arab activity is non-political and non-violent, the community hardly ever hits western headlines. Said an independent journalist: 'Islamists are equated with terrorists whose stories sell more copy than people who congregate for Bible study'.

There is little evidence that a direct hostility to Islam is part of the ideology of the secular Australia. This has little bearing on the prejudices that have survived from European history. They reveal a destiny to which an ordinary Muslim is chained—one that fixes him, and also students at school, to a series of set reactions. Several books in Australian school libraries were found to show that the ordinary Muslim does not escape the 'fanaticism' image of Ayatolla Khomeini in several school textbooks. One of these is *The Book of the Year* (Allan & Unwin, 1981). These books depict dozens of cartoons. They show various caricatures depicting greedy exploiters, terrorists

and arrogant nationalists—all subject to the irrationalities of religious belief. The book has never been banned from school libraries.



These cartoon stereotypes may eventually disappear if the media changes its approach to the situation. The media needs to report the very real pain experienced by Christian and Muslim Arabs in Australia, and their brothers and sisters who suffer daily due to the absence of human rights in the Middle East.

And whilst any cartoonist, Australian and others, must perforce deal in stereotypes, there are stereotypes which are outdated, insensitive and threaten community harmony. It is reasonable to suggest an end for satirists' pens in drawing these old images, and to withdraw such books from Australian schools.

Demonizing the cartoonists' prejudices is always a better option.

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*Oppression is the negative outcome experienced by people targeted by the cruel exercise of power in a society or social group. The term itself derives from the idea of being 'weighted down.'*

*(...) Oppression is most commonly felt and expressed by a widespread, if unconscious, assumption that a certain group of people are inferior. Oppression is rarely limited solely to government action. (Cf. 'Oppression' in Wikipedia.)*