Common Anti-Muslim Tropes

The following are some of the main anti-Muslim tropes used to characterize Muslims and their religion, Islam. Many of these tropes mirror underlined stereotypes and claims made about other minorities groups throughout American history like Jews, Japanese-Americans, and Catholics. These narratives are communicated in explicit ways, but more often they are manifested subtly. They are conveyed not only through text and speech, but also through the juxtaposition of images, music, and words.

- **"Inherently violent."** One of the most common tropes is that Muslims have a unique penchant for violence or that their religion encourages it. This narrative is often reinforced by media coverage that primarily reports on Muslims in the context of terrorism. Bound up with this narrative is the idea that the more religious a person is, the more violent he/she is likely to become. The demand for Muslims to condemn violence committed by other Muslims assumes that Islam, at its core, must be about violence.

- **"Oppressive to women."** Another common trope is that women, whether they be Muslim or not, are oppressed by Islam and by Muslim men. Face or head coverings, like the hijab, are viewed as manifestations of this oppression. This trope is often conveyed through coded language about "honor killings." Because of this Islamic oppression, the narrative goes, women must be saved, presumably by the West. Related to this trope is the notion that Muslim men are tyrannical and sexually deviant.

- **"Intolerant toward other religions."** In this narrative, Muslims are portrayed as being in a religiously-mandated, existential conflict with those of other faiths, particularly Christians and Jews. Singling out instances of Muslim aggression, this narrative ignores mainstream Islamic teachings, evidence of interreligious coexistence both present and past, and wrongs committed by other groups.

- **"Islam is a political ideology or totalitarian regime, not a religion."** This narrative takes Muslims' belief that their religion is a "way of life" and warps it to argue that Muslims are compelled to impose "Sharia" on all others. Sharia is portrayed as a harsh, unchanging legal system. The implication of this narrative is this: If Islam is not like other religions, or is not a religion at all, than Muslims' right to freely practice it does not need to be protected.

- **"In the West, Muslims are using non-violent, stealth jihad with the goal of implementing sharia law."** This narrative casts suspicion on all Muslims by claiming that Islam encourages deception. *Taqiyya*, it is said, allows Muslims to lie about their real motive, which is instituting "Sharia" through participation in government institutions, appearing in media, and working for civil rights and interfaith understanding. According to this narrative, "stealth" or "civilization jihad" is the way Muslims wage war on the West.

- **"Islam is medieval, foreign, and odds with Western modernity."** Though younger than Judaism and Christianity, Islam is often portrayed as an ancient, backward religion, incompatible with Western values. This narrative ignores Islam's shared origins in, and Muslims' contributions to, the West.

- **"Islam is a monolith."** Though usually not stated explicitly, Islam (and the world's Muslim population of 1.6 billion people) is often treated as monolithic. The use of generalizing phrases like "the Islamic world," "the Muslim mind," or "Muslim women" reduces individuals' nuanced, complex experiences to adherence to a faith tradition, and ignores the diversity of experience around the world.

- **"All Muslims are Arab and/or 'Brown.'"** Usually not stated explicitly, this assumption that conflates followers of Islam with those of Arab, South Asian, or other ethnicities. This assumption reveals ignorance of the global Muslim community's diversity; most Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region, not the Middle East. The confusion over who is Muslim, and who is not, has had serious consequences for non-Muslim Arabs, South Asians, and others who have been targeted in anti-Muslim crimes.

- **"Islam needs to be reformed."** This narrative says that there are fundamental and innate flaws in Islam that prevent Muslims from living up to Western standards. This claim ignores the internal diversity, range of interpretations, and history of renewal (*tajdeed*) in Islam, and relies on the aforementioned tropes to justify a call for a "Martin Luther"-style overhaul of Islam.

IMPACT: These tropes are not only found on anti-Muslim blogs online, but also in news and entertainment media. They can also be manifested in political speech and can serve as assumptions underlying government policy.

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