CHAPTER 6

Perceptions about Muslims in Western Societies

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Introduction

In today’s world we rely heavily on the media for knowledge and information about people, cultures, and actions around the globe. However, most often we fail to acknowledge the media’s influence and become desensitized to their tendencies of stereotyping and framing. The conceptual media frames structure public perceptions in society (Goffman, 1974). The mainstream media continue to be a major source of information about Islam and Muslims for Western audiences (Eid & Khan, 2011). Muslims worldwide represent around one-quarter of the global population. One-fifth of the world’s Muslim population inhabits countries where Islam is not the majority religion, including Western societies where Islam is the principal minority faith, and Muslims are the fastest growing religious groups. While this belief system involves a myriad of practices within the general scope of its tradition, Islam is also misunderstood and misrepresented in various contexts.

Despite some efforts by Western mainstream media to provide fair and objective portrayals of Muslims, the dominant portrayals tend to be negative. In fact, while a variety of different sources of information contribute to negative public perceptions with regards to Muslims, many scholars argue that the media are the most influential (e.g., Aguayo, 2009; Gerges, 1997; Trevino, Kanso & Nelson, 2010). The media have perpetuated negative stereotypes about Muslims, resulting in distorted public perceptions of the religion and its followers (Christensen, 2006). The systematic media stereotyping of Muslims can be a result of individual prejudice by media practitioners or can be traced to the institutional operational dynamic of media outlets. Indeed, the
emergence of different media platforms, regimes of power, and empires has resulted in significant change in Western media portrayals of faith groups (e.g., Aguayo, 2009; Bailey, 2010).

The dominant tendency of negative depictions of Muslims in Western mainstream media enhances the Self/Other dichotomy between Western and Muslim societies. Edward Said (1978) establishes a link between the manner in which perceptions of the Other are conceived through the individual learning process and the institutions that influence societal views. In addition to the academy, the corporations, and the government, the media play a fundamental role in this regard (Said, 1981). Therefore, it is important to study the perceptions about the Other that have resulted mainly from media images and portrayals.

Literature on the intersections between Western and Muslim societies includes perceptions about each other in relation to media portrayals and governmental policies. This chapter aims to provide a critical review of the recent literature on the most dominant perceptions about Muslims in Western societies—mainly Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States—primarily in relation to media portrayals. It discusses how: (1) Western societies perceive Muslims within the Self/Other dichotomy; (2) Western (mis)perceptions about Muslims fall within two main categories: a homogeneous community and rooted in fanaticism/oppression; (3) Western media portray Islam and Muslims within two main frames: in clash with “the West” and associated with terrorism/extremism/violence; and (4) Muslims in Western societies face the heat of racism, discrimination, and dehumanization.

**Muslims Imagined by Western Societies: The Other**

Muslims are most commonly represented as outsiders in Western societies. While fair and informed discourses exist, stereotypical discourses and media portrayals about the followers of Islam are widespread, characterizing the existence of Muslims in Western societies as exterior to the dominant group; thus, Muslims are perceived as lacking the ability to participate as equal citizens. Western political discourses and media portrayals tend to promulgate racialized Orientalist stereotypes, create a Muslim enemy Other, and depict Muslims as irrational, uncivilized, backward, threatening, corrupt, oppressive, deviant, exterior to the dominant culture, and uniquely fundamentalist Others (e.g., Jackson, 2005; Khan, 1998; Macdonald, 2003; Malcolm, Bairner & Curry, 2010; Martin & Phelan, 2002; Muscati, 2003).

A suspicion of the Other and a need to control the definition of that Other-ness have been integral elements of the creation and legitimation of British