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Ingrid Mattson (Photo courtesy of the Hartford Seminary)

VALUES AND PHILANTHROPY

Images of Prisoner Abuse Perfectly Attuned to Assault on Muslim Values

BY MARK O'KEEFE
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As soon as Ingrid Mattson saw the photo of the smiling American woman soldier pointing at the genitals of a hooded, naked Iraqi prisoner, she knew it would touch a deep, inner chord in Muslims, no matter where they are.

That image and others like it assault on a visceral level core Islamic values such as modesty and dignity while evoking feelings of humiliation that non-Muslims may not fully understand, say Mattson and other scholars of Islam.

"This is definitely symbolic," said Mattson, a professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. "This soldier is symbolic of American force and the prisoner is symbolic of Muslim peoples. For the broader Muslim public, this will be a symbol of the subjugation and rape of Muslim lands."

"That picture will become the recruiting poster of radicals trying to attack the West," said Akbar Ahmed, a professor of Islamic studies at American University in Washington. "If Osama bin Laden had come to Madison Avenue and asked for an advertising image to help him recruit, this would be it."

In the United States, the full power of the images are only beginning to be realized, said Ahmed, an anthropologist trained in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, and author of "Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World."

So far, he said, the picture that seems to resonate most in the West is one showing a hooded and wired prisoner with his arms outstretched, like Christ suffering on the cross.

But the image Muslims will have seared on their psyche is the photo of the female American soldier, because it depicts an interaction brazenly crossing spiritual, societal and cultural boundaries.

"Here, you're getting one person representing one civilization pointing to the most vulnerable part of another person representing another civilization," said Ahmed. "It's gloating. It's triumphant, with an element of sadism and stupidity."

The image, readily available on the Internet, has already been published in Muslim newspapers and broadcast on television not only in the Middle East, but worldwide.

The display of skin is shocking enough in cultures where women's faces and sometimes entire bodies are customarily covered, and where men don't wear shorts or T-shirts, but modest, loose-fitting clothing, even when it's hot.

When Muslims learn that the prisoners were put in compromising sexual positions and forced to masturbate, to the amusement of American soldiers, it's nearly incomprehensible, said Ahmed, who is also a columnist for Religion News Service.

If the prisoners had been killed instead of sexually abused, it would have been less inflammatory to many Muslims, he said.

The claim that the abuse was "un-American," as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Tuesday, and "does not represent the America that I know," as President Bush put it Wednesday, does little to mitigate the damage, say Islamic scholars. That's because the images play perfectly to stereotypes of morally decadent Americans.

"This is only going to reinforce the notion in Muslim countries that Americans have this kind of obsession with sexuality and sex," said Mattson. "I'm just afraid that it's going to be taken as a broader indictment of American society that somehow reveals something about what's wrong with America."

But more than just sexual mores were violated, said Ebrahim Moosa, co-director of the Center for the Study of Muslim Networks at Duke University in Durham, N.C. The abuse, which ironically occurred in the Abu Ghraib prison made notorious by Saddam Hussein, "highlights a widespread impression held by Muslims the world over that there is very little difference in the morality of the U.S.-led forces and the Baathists they claim to have unseated."

Moosa said blame must go to the top, to the people who created a climate that would allow for such abuse.

"When the commander in chief uses self-serving and overheated rhetoric proclaiming that every means must be used to defeat terrorism and that all means are legitimate, why would the foot soldiers not understand it to be legitimate to torture 'terrorists' in Iraq?" he asked.

In the 2000 presidential election, Agha Saeed, a lecturer at California State University at Hayward, urged Muslims to vote for Bush, and

many did, said Saeed, who chairs the American Muslim Task Force on Civil Rights and Elections, a coalition of nine national Muslim organizations.

But the images of prison abuse are so powerful they will not only turn many American Muslims against Bush, Saeed said, but might also discourage some from participating at all in American democracy.

"There's profound shock," said Saeed. "People thought things could go wrong, but not this wrong. People didn't think U.S. forces could stoop this low. This will be a painful memory that will resonate and echo in the collective consciousness. What I fear for is further alienation of people in the Muslim world from the West and the United States.

"What this has done is remove the fig leaf from the U.S. occupation in Iraq. Not only did it make the Iraqi people naked, but it made America naked in terms of its claims of abiding by the rule of law, maintaining human dignity, exercising self-restraint and having a government that's accountable and transparent."

May 6, 2004

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