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The Early Australian Press and the Middle Eastern “Other”

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Abstract

In recent years, and particularly since the events of September 11 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror”, much scholarly attention has been paid to the Australian news media’s role in stereotyping, homogenising, victimising and demonising people of Middle Eastern descent or of the Islamic faith. However, contemporary Australian journalists have not so much invented the tropes and stereotypes that they have used to construct this negative image and limited discursive field, as they have invoked a rich tapestry of pre-existing notions about the non-Western world. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the relationship between Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism and the Australian press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beginning with its deplorable coverage of Australia’s Indigenous people and the paranoia surrounding the “Asian Invasion” this paper sheds new light on the coverage of Islam and the Middle East in the early Australian press and the emergence of the “Muslim Menace”. Finally, this chapter concludes by noting that such a racist history raises a host of questions and challenges for the contemporary Australian news media.

Keywords

Orientalism, Australia, Media, Islam, History, Newspapers, Middle East

Introduction

In recent years, and particularly since the events of September 11 2001 and the subsequent “war on terror”, much scholarly attention has been paid to the Australian news media’s role in stereotyping, homogenising, victimising and demonising people of Middle Eastern descent or of the Islamic faith (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Isakhan, 2005; Lewis, 2002, 2006; Lewis & deMasi, 2007; Manning, 2004b, 2006; McCallum & Blood, 2006; Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins, 2004; Rane & Abdalla, 2008). One very specific example is Peter Manning’s investigation of the reporting of issues related to Islam, Arabs and the Middle East for a two year period including 12 months before and after the 9/11 attacks, in two major Sydney newspapers. Although this period included coverage of events as diverse as the Palestinian Intifada, the controversial “ethnic” gang rapes in Sydney, the arrival of asylum seekers in Australia, the events of September 11 and the Australian federal election of 2001, Manning found that there was a “remarkably consistent view of Arab people and people of Muslim belief” which relied on racist stereotypes that portray them as “violent to the point of terrorism” and “as tricky, ungrateful, undeserving, often disgusting and barely human” (Manning, 2004b: 44-45). In *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other* the authors go one step further to argue that these media discourses have served to create a climate of fear and paranoia surrounding issues relating to Arab / Middle Eastern / Islamic “others”. These people have been reduced to the role of “folk devil”, caught up in an ongoing cycle of “moral panic” where “Middle Eastern can become conflated with Arab, Arab with Muslim, Muslim with rapist, rapist with gang, gang with terrorist, terrorist with “boat people”, “boat people” with barbaric, and so on in interminable permutations” (Poynting et al., 2004: 49).

Arguably, this construction of the Middle Eastern / Arab / Islamic “other” has also played a role in the Australian news media’s coverage of broader global events such as the Iraq War. Indeed, a recent body of literature has accused the Australian news media – particularly the Murdoch controlled newspapers¹ – of displaying “an intellectual orthodoxy and an ideological uniformity that is remarkable, overt and long-standing” (McKnight, 2005: 54). For many of these authors, this “ideological uniformity” is best illustrated by the coverage of the Iraq War in the Australian newspapers owned by News Corp (Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, & Trammell, 2005; Hirst & Schutze, 2004; Isakhan, 2007, 2008; Manne, 2005b; Manning, 2004a; Tuckwell, 2006). Along these lines, Robert Manne states that “On the road to the invasion of Iraq, and through the...bloody chaos since Baghdad’s fall, almost every Australian newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch has supported each twist and turn of the American, British and

¹ The vast majority of Australian papers are owned by Murdoch’s News Corporation.

Australian policy line” (Manne, 2005a: 75). In this way, the contemporary Australian news media has not only played a part in propagating racialist discourses concerning the people of the Middle East and of the Islamic faith, it has also failed to offer a robust discussion of Australia’s role in the “Coalition of the Willing”. Instead, it has provided the Australian populace with a limited discursive field that continues to engender the kind of myths and images that have long demarcated the divide between Oriental backwardness and Western civility.

However, contemporary Australian journalists have not so much invented the tropes and stereotypes that they have used to construct this negative image and limited discursive field, as they have invoked a rich tapestry of pre-existing notions about the non-Western world. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the relationship between Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism and the Australian press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beginning with its deplorable coverage of Australia’s Indigenous people and the paranoia surrounding the “Asian Invasion” this paper sheds new light on the coverage of Islam and the Middle East in the early Australian press and the emergence of the “Muslim Menace”. Finally, this chapter concludes by noting that such a racialist history raises a host of questions and challenges for the contemporary Australian news media.

Orientalism and the early Australian News Media

It was Edward W. Said who first noted that the colonial period saw the West (or more specifically the European colonial powers) approach the East (and here Said focuses on the Islamic / Arab world) with a sense of superiority – intellectually, politically, culturally and militarily – and that this superiority therefore justified the domination and domestication of the Orient. Via his discourse analysis of an astounding number of academic, bureaucratic and literary texts from the colonial period, Said was able to demonstrate that this sense of superiority was underpinned by a matrix of interdependent discourses, institutions and practices which he termed Orientalism (Said, 2003 [1978]: 2-3). The net output of Orientalism was to homogenise, demonise and stereotype the Middle East according to fairly reductive and negative terms, such that the Oriental was viewed as the “other”. During the nineteenth century, this process of “othering” was distilled down from “essential ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness – into a separate and unchallenged coherence” (Said, 2003 [1978]: 205). In this way, Said concluded that the people of the Orient have been “rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems

to be solved or confined or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory - taken over” (Said, 2003 [1978]: 207).

The Orientalist legacy of distinguishing between the enlightened and righteous forces of the Occident and those of the nefarious and benighted Orient has a host of implications for a large but sparsely populated, predominantly Anglo-Saxon nation on the fringe of Asia. Modern Australia is, of course, a direct result of the colonial era, a nation forged and designed by a European power at the very height of its grandeur. It is thereby also the direct legatee of the matrices of discourses which underpinned Eurocentrism and drove the colonial project. Embedded into this narrative was a staunch belief in the implicit superiority of the “white man/woman” and little more than contempt for those who stood in the way of his/her mission to recreate the world in Europe’s image. At the same time, Australia also inherited from Europe the technology of the printing press and the sincere belief in its positive role within society. However, the first Australian newspaper extant, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* from 1803, can hardly be considered indicative of a free press; instead the tawdry four-page weekly was used as a vehicle for disseminating information about, and endorsements of, the administration of the time (Blair, 2003: 11-12; R. B. Walker, 1976: 3-4). The *Gazette* was soon followed by several similar governmental organs across Australia as well as a host of independent and quite forthright papers, such as the Sydney-based *Australian* in 1824, the *Sydney Monitor* in 1826, the *Sydney Herald* in 1831, the Melbourne-based *Argus* in 1846 and the Brisbane-based *Boomerang* in 1886 (Blair, 2003: 19-20; Carroll, 2003: 20; Hand, 1990: 4; Vine, 2006: 68).

Throughout these early Australian organs, as Michael Meadows has amply demonstrated in his *Voices in the Wilderness*, Indigenous Australians became the first peoples to be constructed according to the racially-driven reportage of the time. Despite the sheer volume of articles concerning the Aborigines, early Australian journalists played a constituent role in developing and propagating an overwhelmingly negative image of Australia’s indigenous people, reducing them to exotic savages, “at “the far end of the scale of being”” (Meadows, 2001: 39). In addition, much of the early Australian press took for granted the long-held divide between Europe and its “others”, where “it was usual for Indigenous people to commit “atrocities” while white settlers applied policies of “dispersal”” (Meadows, 2001: 41). As just

² Not to be confused with the Murdoch owned national broadsheet of today.

³ The *Sydney Herald* eventually became Australia’s first daily paper in 1840 and today the renamed *Sydney Morning Herald* stands as Australia’s oldest newspaper.

one example, the Gazette painstakingly documented the deplored idiosyncrasies of the “natives” which were juxtaposed against the civility of the European colonialists. Consider for example a letter written by A Woodman and published in the Gazette on 21 August 1808, in which he makes a clear distinction between “The civilized adventurer and the uncultivated barbarian [who] discover in each other perhaps a universal difference, save only in the human shape” (Woodman, 1983 [1808]: 51).

While Indigenous Australians remained (and arguably remain today) a topic of much racial-driven media coverage, a new framework of xenophobia gradually unfolded across the pages of the Australian news media, the fear of an “Asian Invasion” (Burke, 2001; Hage, 1998, 2003; Hage & Couch, 1999; Jayasuriya, Walker, & Gothard, 2003; D. Walker, 1999). In this narrative, Australia was constructed “as an isolated White British colony in the heart of a non-European (read also uncivilised) Asia-Pacific region...[gradually developing] a fear of being “swamped” by what is perceived as a surrounding hostile and uncivilised otherness” (Hage, 2003: 52). This perhaps began with the arrival of scores of immigrants, including many Chinese, following the onset of the Victorian gold rush in the 1850s. As the Chinese population grew and spread out across the country many of the familiar discourses concerning the Oriental “other” were reiterated in popular parlance, including the news media. Perhaps the best example of this is the coverage found in *The Boomerang* where, as early as 1888, journalists such as Francis Adams and William Lane were arguing that “The Asiatic and the Turanian must either conquer or be conquered by, must either wipe out or be wiped out by the Aryan and the European” (D. Walker, 1999: 40).

Interestingly, while the early Australian press featured report after report on the “natives” and on the threat of an “Asian Invasion”, references to Islam and the Middle East are few and far between. This may, to some extent, be explained by the fact that, in a typically Orientalist example of homogenising the “other”, the Muslims of Australia were “tarred with the same brush”, viewed as just another example of a degenerate lower breed. Indeed, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, this had become official policy, when “anti-Chinese legislation had been extended to all Asiatic and coloured persons”, including Muslims of a variety of backgrounds (Monsour, 2002: 16).

Despite this homogenisation and the little that Australians of this era seem to have known about Islam, the early colonial period was no stranger to Orientalist imagery regarding Muslims and the Middle East. For example, in her study of Orientalism in Early Australian Theatre, Veronica Kelly demonstrates that Orientalist motifs “consistently pervaded theatrical forms as diverse in their class appeal as opera, pantomime, burlesque, Shakespeare, drama

and melodrama, besides living a vigorous extra-dramatic life in fashion, art, architecture and literature” (Kelly, 1993: 32). Interestingly, Kelly does not mention that these same Orientalist motifs were evident in the early Australian press. This is perhaps in part because an exhaustive study of the early Australian press and its coverage of the Middle East or the broader Islamic world is yet to be written. However, preliminary investigations by the author suggest that many of the familiar tropes and stereotypes are evident in the Australian press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Indeed, early coverage in the *Argus* includes reports on a series of lectures given by the Reverend T F Bird at the Oxford Street Congregational church in Collingwood, Melbourne, in mid 1875. The first such lecture, entitled “Mahomet, the Arabian Moses” reveals much admiration and knowledge of the doctrines of Islam and the life of Mohammad who is thought to be:

not only great in the sense that he left the impress of his life on the history of his country, and that he united the wandering hordes of Ishmaelites by the bonds of a common faith and purpose, but he was great in the wider sense that he aroused a nation by the potent lever of his personal influence to a higher level of intellectual life, and to a nobler sense of destiny. (“Mahomet, the Arabian Moses,” 1875: 5)

In his second lecture however, Rev. Bird is reported to have taken to task the Qur’an and its author by describing “the utter monotony and weariness that fell upon the mind in studying the Koran, which, he said, seemed to have been written by a man who was sadly deficient in thought and knowledge” (“Islam, the Mahometan Gospel,” 1875: 5). From here, Rev. Bird goes on to argue that Islam had degenerated from “Mahomet”’s success” down to the “stagnant fatalism of to-day” (“Islam, the Mahometan Gospel,” 1875: 5). By the third lecture, Rev. Bird gave “a graphic and interesting description of the rise of the Ottoman Empire” and of “Oriental magnificence” (“Islam, or the Crescent and the Victories of the Sword-armed Faith,” 1875: 5) and by the fourth lecture, he had begun to argue that “Moslemism was exhibiting increased vitality in the Turkish empire” (“Mohammedanism,” 1875: 5). Rev. Bird concludes by arguing that “The only way to deal successfully with it [Islam] would be to gradually leaven it with the spirit of Christianity” (“Mohammedanism,” 1875: 5).

In a far less scholarly fashion, these themes are developed further in the anonymous reportage of a lecture given by another member of the local clergy, Reverend W R Fletcher, at the Kew Congregational Church in 1877, entitled “Mohammedanism and the Turkish State”. Here, Rev Fletcher argues that Mohammad’s influence had “in many respects...been the reverse of

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a blessing” (“Mohammedanism and the Turkish States,” 1877: 5). In making a distinction between the worlds of Islam and Christianity and predicting their ultimate battle, Rev Fletcher is reported to have said:

The rule of the crescent in Eastern Europe had grown feebler and more feeble; retrogression had been its characteristic, whilst progress had been that of Christendom; and he believed that in the last supreme conflict that must ensue between the Turk and his European foe, the “crescent would bow before the cross”. (“Mohammedanism and the Turkish States,” 1877: 5)

In building his case regarding the ultimate battle between the Ottomans and Europe, Rev Fletcher also utilises a typically Eurocentric picture of world history in which the Orient is seen as prone to retrogression and ineptitude while the Occident continued in its civilisational progress. Indeed, this theme of an ultimate battle between Islam and Christendom resurfaces a number of times throughout the early Australian news media. For example later in 1877, in a lecture given by Mr Peebles at the Opera house on “the Mahomedans, their doctrines, worship, wars” (“The Mahomedans,” 1877: 5), the speaker is reported to have invoked the oft-cited but rarely understood notion of jihad. Here, Peebles argued that the Muslims, “at the cry of “The Prophet,” under the banner of the crescent...felt it duty done to defeat and overthrow the cross” (“The Mahomedans,” 1877: 5).

While it should be duly noted here that in the following year, 1878, the *Argus* published similar reports on a series of overwhelmingly positive lectures given by a Professor Strong on the topics of “Mahomet and His Followers” and “Mahomedanism” (“Mahomet and His Followers,” 1878: 5; “Mohammedanism,” 1875: 5), the predominant picture of Islam and the Middle East in the Australian news media of the late nineteenth century can be seen to foreground the kind of racialist discourse that is indicative of Orientalism. Overwhelmingly, it is concerned with the potential threat that Islam poses to Christianity. To reiterate and reinforce this in the minds of its readers, newspapers such as the *Argus* focus on familiar but widely misunderstood notions of jihad and “holy war” to posit that a battle between the two faiths is inevitable. Invoking the Crusades, this battle transforms from the annals of medieval history into a contemporary reality, taking the form of the Ottomans against Europe. Indeed, this was to carry through into the early 20th century as the earth moved towards the events of the First World War.

This becomes startlingly evident in an anonymous *Sydney Morning Herald* article of 1908 entitled “Asia’s Movement”, in which the author describes the various socio-political changes

that Asia had recently undergone, including those in Persia, Morocco, Egypt, India, China and Japan. “Never since the dawn of the Christian Era” claims the author, “have the minds of non-Christian peoples been so much exercised upon problems of internal condition and external attitude” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12). According to this particular Australian journalist, this has a number of consequences for the world and especially for the British Empire. One such concern is the fact that the British Empire was host to “some 82 million Mohammedan subjects” making it “in a political sense, the greatest Mohammedan power in the world” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12). The problem, however, is not British hegemony over the people of Islam, but that these subjects of the British Empire owe their allegiance not to the King, but to the Sultan who “has spiritual jurisdiction over orthodox Mohammedans” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12). This sentiment was in fact rather common in Australia. Indeed, the notion that Muslims posed an internal threat to the British Empire and its colonies due to their allegiance to the Sultan was tabled in the Western Australian Parliament as early as 1898. Here, early Afghani settlers were banned from working the gold-fields on the premise that they were traitors-in-waiting, ready to side with the Ottomans should a jihad be declared (Jones, 1993: 64). This is particularly problematic for this Sydney Morning Herald journalist because there is a marked difference between the attitude of the Ottoman Empire, “which is prompted by considerations of material gain in territory or otherwise, and the attitude of Britain, which is dictated by purely Christian motives” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12).

Building on this distinction between the Ottoman and British Empires, the journalist moves forward to discuss another key divide between Occident and Orient, namely that constitutional government is “a purely Western invention” that is merely impossible in countries like “India, China, Persia, Egypt, bred as they have been for hundreds, we could say thousands, of years in an atmosphere of autocracy” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12). Once again the assumptions made throughout such journalism rely heavily on the pervasive nature of Orientalism, and its pejorative picture of the Orient and Islam as antithetical to social change, and incapable of civil institutions and governments. Indeed, the author goes on to concentrate on the contemporaneous political situation of India – home to a significant minority of Muslims - arguing that “the Indians have not yet shown any aptitude for the discharge of the very large powers of self-government which they at present possess” (“Asia's Movement,” 1908: 12). Here, the benefit of hindsight certainly illuminates the kind of Orientalism evident in such passages, particularly given the events that led up to Indian independence in 1947, and its current status as the world’s largest democracy.

As the First World War drew ever closer, the Australian press played a constituent role in continuing and confirming the binary opposition between the Ottoman and British empires, ANZCA09 *Communication, Creativity and Global Citizenship*: Refereed Proceedings: <http://anzca09.org>

invoking the perceived apocalyptic nature of the looming battle between the forces of Islam and Christendom. For example, a number of highly inflammatory reports appear throughout 1912, including an anonymous article printed in the *Argus* under the eye-catching headline “Future of Islamism: Ameer’s Ambitions, New Gospel Preached”. In it, the author invokes many classically Orientalist images regarding the decadent nature of Asiatic despotism. Here, the unnamed Ameer of Afghanistan is said to be claiming “spiritual supremacy...over the Mohammedans throughout the world” (“Future of Islamism: Ameer’s Ambitions, New Gospel Preached,” 1912: 13). The impetus for his claim is that much of the Islamic world had, at this point, been subjugated under the auspices of European influence, while Afghanistan remained “the last of the really independent Mohammedan States” (“Future of Islamism: Ameer’s Ambitions, New Gospel Preached,” 1912: 13). The portrait of the Ameer himself is far from flattering; he is reported to be “intoxicated by petty successes, inflated with pride, and desirous of standing forth before all the world as the champion of Islam, [and that he] may one day proclaim that jihad which his mullahs have been constantly preaching for years past” (“Future of Islamism: Ameer’s Ambitions, New Gospel Preached,” 1912: 13). In this way, the Ameer of Afghanistan is constructed as a powerful but conceited megalomaniac, suffering a penchant for religious fervour and a tendency towards violence and barbarity. Indeed, this kind of coverage has some parallels with more contemporary examples, such as the Western media’s coverage of Saddam Hussein in the lead up to the Gulf War and the current Iraq War (Brown, 2006; Keeble, 1998; Kellner, 1995; Philo & McLaughlin, 1995; Sidaway, 1998; Tomanic-Trivundza, 2004). Such “Oriental despots” have therefore long been seen to pose a clear and present threat to the world of Christendom and to the forces of civilization.

It is worth noting here that on the same page and directly below the “Future of Islamism” article, a letter to the editor appears entitled “A Moslem’s Prediction” by Fatta Deen. What is of interest here is that Deen confirms and reiterates many of the Orientalist fears evident in the Australian press at the time, arguing that the Islamic world is one “of unrest and seething ferment that may at any moment explode and envelope the Christian world in the most devastating war the world has ever seen” (Deen, 1912: 13). In this war, according to Deen, “Over 100,000,000 of Moslems...to a man, will concentrate in one huge uprising to crush their Christian oppressors” (Deen, 1912: 13). What makes this letter particularly curious is not so much its contents or the fact that it appears to have been written by an Australian Muslim, but that it has been included in the *Argus* to begin with. On the one hand, there is something admirable about an editorial policy that allows such counter-hegemonic texts to appear across its pages. On the other hand, its content lends itself to the suspicion that it was included precisely because it confirms the pervading understanding of Islam and its purportedly

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inevitable clash with Christendom. In a sense, whatever counter-argument the author was trying to make becomes lost in its provocative language, which in turn works to confirm the notion that Islam stands ready to confront the West – and even Australia – in “the deadliest war...a seething maelstrom...the fulfilment of the prophecies of Islam” (Deen, 1912: 13).

Perhaps even more provocative are a series of articles appearing in the *Argus* under the populist headline “The Muslim Menace”. The first of these concerned a lecture by Reverend G. Brown (itself entitled “The Muslim Menace”) in which he is reported to have argued that the growing tensions between Islam and Christendom were “the first for centuries between Cross and Crescent” where “the East expected a second heroic age” (“The Moslem Menace,” 1912: 7). To demonstrate the menace that such a second age of Islam would bring to the West, and particularly its threat to women, Rev Brown made the startling claim that he “would almost like Melbourne to be a Mohammedan city, say, for 24 hours, and then Australians would realise the danger to wife or sisters going in the streets unattended or unguarded” (“The Moslem Menace,” 1912: 7). As various authors have recently noted, sentiments such as those expressed by Rev Brown serve as something of a precursor to more contemporary Australian discourse in which Islam has come to be seen as incompatible with “Australian values” and a very specific threat to the safety and sanctity of Australian women (Aly & Walker, 2007; Ho, 2007).

However, it should also be noted here that Rev. Brown’s lecture on “The Moslem Menace” was heavily critiqued and refuted by Sheikh Abdul Kader in a letter to the *Argus* a week later, entitled “Moslem Loyalty”. He begins by pointing out that members of the clergy, such as Rev. Brown, have a duty to “promote peace and good-feeling amongst human beings, irrespective of their nationality, or religion, in accordance with the Christian doctrine, and not to incite or create ill-feeling on actually undeservedly false accusations” (Kader, 1912: 7). He also takes the Australian media to task for their emphasis on Turkish atrocities which, Sheikh Kader argues, have been “extremely exaggerated and falsified by prejudiced persons, whose chief aim is to alienate the sympathy of Europe from the Turks” (Kader, 1912: 7). Sheikh Kader goes on to point out that when “it comes to barbarism, the Turks are a long way from the head of the list” (Kader, 1912: 7), detailing a number of recent atrocities committed by so-called Christian countries such as Russia, Belgium, America and Italy. “Where were these holy preachers then?” asks Sheikh Kader, “Did they preach against these cruelties? No, because they were committed by Christians. But anything done by Turks is exaggerated twenty-fold, and criticised by such unjust persons, who can see only one side of affairs” (Kader, 1912: 7). He concludes his cogent and erudite argument by dismissing Rev. Brown’s lecture on the “Muslim Menace” as “nothing but a delusion” (Kader, 1912: 7).

While printing such a robust debate between the leaders of both the Christian and Islamic communities does go some way to suggest that the *Argus* fostered public deliberation and discussion over key global and local issues, it is interesting to note that Sheikh Kader's letter is published on the very same page as another article which also carries the same title as Rev. Brown's address, "The Moslem Menace" (this time accompanied by the subtitle "Prospects for Foreigners"). This particular report seems to work entirely against Sheikh Kader's advocacy of inter-faith dialogue and tolerance to instead speculate on whether the Ottoman Empire had declared a holy war against Christendom. While the article is quick to note the unverified nature of its claims, it nonetheless reports that "Sheikh-ul-Islam, head of the Mohammedan clergy, is sending 100 eloquent and influential Ulemas (priests) to Hadem-koi, to raise the spirits of the army and to excite the warlike ardour of the men" ("The Moslem Menace: Prospects for Foreigners," 1912: 7). "From still another source," the article proceeds, "the news comes that notices proclaiming a holy war had been actually issued" and, meanwhile, "Mohammedan emissaries have been sent to the Dutch Indies to stir up the Moslems" ("The Moslem Menace: Prospects for Foreigners," 1912: 7).

Collectively, these Australian news media reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries paint a familiar picture of Islam and the Middle East. Beginning with the religion itself, the Australian press constructs a damning image of Islam, its holy book and Prophet. It moves from here to discuss the purported stagnation and retrogression that this religion has brought to the world and focuses on the inability of Islamic (and other Asian states) to comprehend and implement sophisticated Western political models such as constitutional government and democracy. Instead, Asia is thought to be prone to autocracy and fond of Oriental despots who are themselves portrayed as power hungry fundamentalists. Despite its support of such despots and its retrogressive nature, Islam is said to be gaining renewed vitality in Turkey, a vitality that is reminiscent of earlier eras of Islamic strength. Here, the Australian news media place particular emphasis on the notion of jihad to illustrate that a new and final battle between Islam and Christianity is imminent. As the First World War approaches, reports circulate that such a holy war has effectively begun and the forces of Islam are rallying in preparation for the annihilation of their Christian rivals. The net effect of this picture of Islam and the Middle East is the assertion of a "Muslim Menace", a force that is seen to pose both an increasing threat to the world of Christendom as a whole, and a more specific threat to the Australian way of life.

Conclusion

The construction of the Arab / Middle Eastern / Islamic “other” in the Australian news media can therefore be seen to have a lineage tracing at least as far back as the late 19th century. This was preceded somewhat by the Australian media’s their construction of Indigenous people and, in time, the alleged threat of an “Asian Invasion”. Gradually, the Australian news media turned their attention to the so-called “Muslim Menace”, a threat which was not only seen to pose grave challenges for Western civilisation as a whole, but also had specific implications for Australian society.

This racist history of the Australian news media sets something of a precedent for the Orientalist stereotypes evident in much media coverage of Islam and the Middle East in Australia today. In this way, many contemporary Australian journalists can be seen to have inherited a long and poignant tradition of reporting on the non-Western world and, like many Orientalist scholars and journalists before them, they have failed to question pervading ideologies. Instead of offering a nuanced, robust and insightful discussion of contemporary global and domestic events pertaining to Islam and the Middle East, the Australian news media have instead invoked a familiar catalogue of assumptions, images and motifs that demarcate the Orient and its peoples as “other”. This has resulted in a kind of Orientalist shorthand, where the long-held binary between the inherently superior West and the backward East unfolds across the pages of the press, is condensed into the sound-bytes of radio or is converted into the emotive imagery of the nightly news.

The question remains as to whether or not the contemporary Australian media can overcome this history of Orientalism to instead provide a well balanced and non-racist picture of the Middle East and Islam in this difficult age. It is precisely this question which poses one of the greatest challenges to the Australian news media in the post-9/11 world. If this challenge is met, the Australian media may well play a crucial role in arriving at what Rana Kabbani has termed a “West-East discourse liberated from the obstinacy of the colonial legacy”. This would of course require a “serious effort...to review and reject a great many inherited representations. For these inherited representations are so persistent and so damaging...that they cloud our urges to see beyond them, to our common humanity” (Kabbani, 1986: 13).

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