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“But He’s a Muslim!”



By Marty Kaplan

It made me think of my own family.

Having coined “O’Bama” for the Irish working-class values that Joe Biden brings to the Democratic ticket, Chris Matthews called his family in Pennsylvania — where Scranton-born Biden is known as the state’s “third senator” in some quarters — to ask whether now they’d be voting for Obama.

“But he’s a Muslim!” That’s the reply Matthews told his viewers he got.

The Matthews clan is not alone. Going into the Democratic National Convention, depending on which poll you read, somewhere between 10 percent and 15 percent of American voters thought that Obama is a Muslim. A *Newsweek* poll found that 26 percent thought he was raised as a Muslim (untrue), and 39 percent thought he grew up going to an Islamic school in Indonesia (also untrue).

I’m not shocked by Americans’ ability to think untrue things. After all, under the relentless tutelage of the Bush administration and its media enablers, nearly 70 percent of the country thought that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in planning the Sept. 11 attack.

In fact, if you told me that double-digit percentages of voters believe that Jewish workers were warned to stay home on Sept. 11, or that the American landing on the moon was faked, or that every one of the words of the Bible is literally and absolutely true, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised. It might make me think about the downsides of universal suffrage, the challenges facing public education, the limitations of “fact-checking” as a corrective to Swiftboating, the coarsening of public discourse, the devolution of news into entertainment, the risks to democracy of Rovian demagoguery — stuff like that — but it wouldn’t make me question the methodology of the polls.

On the other hand, “But-he’s-a-Muslim!” does raise the issue of whether people lie to pollsters when they’re embarrassed to say what they really think. This argument — called “the Bradley effect,” after the Election Day disappearance of the lead that Los Angeles’ African-American mayor, Tom Bradley, had held

until then in the gubernatorial campaign — says that the percentages that black candidates get in polls should be discounted by the reluctance of no small number of white voters to admit that race is a factor in their choice.

Race, of course, is already an issue in this presidential election, though it has largely been discussed via the proxy issue of ideology — black ideology, and '60s black ideology in particular. It's way more comfortable to ask whether the Obamas' membership in Rev. Jeremiah Wright's church, and whether the thinking in Michelle Obama's senior-year college thesis, "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community," are evidence of their now-concealed belief in black separatism, black power and black liberation theology, than it is to interrogate our nation's melting-pot self-image, or to figure out why our prison population and our intractable economic underclass are overwhelmingly African-American.

The Muslim issue is a way to talk about race without talking about race, and without having to squirm about saying that race is not an issue. To enough voters that it matters for the outcome of this election, Muslims are as other, if not more so, as blacks. A Muslim running for president of the United States may just as well be the Manchurian Candidate, with al-Qaeda, the Palestinians, the Saudis, your-Islamic-bad-guys'-name-here, playing the role of the brainwashing North Koreans nefariously plotting to plant one of their own in the White House.

It's entirely conceivable that the McCain campaign's harping on Obama's alleged "elitism," his popularity in foreign crowds, is their way of hitting low notes meant to resonate with his otherness. They can't very well come out and call him a Muslim or directly question his patriotism in their ads, but when they charge that his foreign policy is a gift to the Iranians, the Russians or the terrorists, they are deploying the same tactic that labeled John Kerry as "French" — that is, as a national of the weasel country that opposed the pre-emptive war in Iraq.

I don't know whether the family that Chris Matthews comes from, despite their kinship with kitchen-table Catholic Joe Biden, is fastening on "But-he's-a-Muslim!" as a surrogate for their discomfort with his race; in their case, maybe race plays no part at all. But it does make me wonder what my own parents, may they rest in peace, might be thinking about this election.

Though lifelong Democrats, they were not among the Jews who joined arms with the civil rights movement. Though their relatives were killed by Cossacks just because they were Jews, they saw no irony in judging others just because of their religion or their race. Philip Roth, another kid from the Weequahic section of Newark where I grew up, was reviled for telling goyim about some of the values held in our 'hood that our clan thought best kept private, so it will come as no surprise, though it is no less discomfiting to recall, that in the four-family houses on the block where I was raised, the word *shvartze* was not used merely to name a color.

I wonder how my parents would be dealing today with the dilemma I imagine Obama would pose for them. I suspect that the Muslim thing would be weighing as much in their thinking as the black thing. I suspect that my protestations — it is factually untrue that Obama is or was a Muslim — would be met with clucking condescension toward my naivete. For them, in the contest between voting for a Democrat and

voting for Obama, I'm pretty sure it would come down to the Is-he-good-for-Israel? thing. And I can't imagine that the secret-Muslim belief I posthumously, perhaps unfairly, impute to them would make it a no-brainer for them to vote, as they always had done before, a straight Democratic ticket.

If this election remains as tight as it is today, its outcome will once again turn on how the undecideds break. (Yes, there is a chance that an unprecedented youth turnout, or an unprecedented black turnout, or an unprecedented formerly-nonvoter turnout, will change that calculation, but that would be, well, unprecedented.) That same *Newsweek* poll saying four out of 10 voters believe Obama went to a madrassa also said that 85 percent of undecided voters are non-Hispanic whites and that nearly 80 percent of those undecideds do not have a four-year college degree. In other words, demographically, they're like my parents. I would like to think that the free press is equal to taking the "But-he's-a-Muslim!" urban legend off the table for those voters. But if Chris Matthews can't do that for his own parents, I don't yet see how that's going to happen for anyone else.

(This is my column for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles.)

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