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The Sikh's public relations problem

By Dawinder Sidhu

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In 2013 the popular retailer GAP featured a turbaned Sikh actor in a major advertising campaign. Sikh-Americans were thrilled. When the company responded to the vandalism of the ad in New York by using the original photo as the background of its Twitter page, Sikhs' spirits were buoyed even further.

Sikhs' reaction to the ad and to GAP exhibiting solidarity with the community makes sense. But, as a Sikh myself, I wondered: Was this ebullient reaction justified? Is there any basis for the assumption that the ad made a difference? Worse, will the self-congratulatory impulse that consumes the community's online activists lead to complacency and an avoidance of more effective measures?

Curious, I asked my research assistant to stand in front of a GAP store in Albuquerque, N.M., where I teach, with a copy of the ad and pose the following question to the first 100 adults to walk by: What is turbaned model's religion? Of 100 adults, none were able to identify the Sikh religion.

Despite being the fifth largest religion in the world, our relatively small numbers in the United States make this outcome somewhat unsurprising. Per the religion's requirements, Sikh men wear turbans and have beards. Due to this lack of awareness and the visual similarity between Sikh men and al-Qaida leaders like Osama bin Laden, Sikhs became convenient targets of post-9/11 retribution and discrimination.

A report issued recently confirms what my non-scientific survey suggested: More than 13 years after 9/11, American ignorance of Sikhs abounds, notwithstanding the efforts of Sikh advocates or the assumptions of progress. The report — commissioned by the National Sikh Campaign and prepared by Hart Research Associates — found that 60 percent of Americans "admit to knowing nothing at all about Sikh-Americans." Further, "Americans' baseline level of knowledge is either completely null or mostly superficial."

At worst, the report is a damning indictment of Sikh civil rights efforts over the past 13-plus years. A more charitable interpretation is that the public ignorance is an "opportunity" to educate Americans about Sikhs. While the report claims that Americans are a "blank slate" when it comes to Sikhs, the persistence of hate violence against Sikhs suggests that, at least for some, this empty understanding has been occupied instead by preconceived notions about the meaning of turbans, beards and brown skin. The challenge is not only educating, but countering these latent negative impressions.

Fortunately, the report not only operates as a post-mortem for the Sikh community, but it also serves as a prescription for Sikhs seeking awareness, tolerance and even respect. These lessons may apply to other groups — particularly Muslims, Arabs and South Asians — who struggle for acceptance in a volatile world that can arouse the most narrow and parochial of sentiments. Indeed, the fact that anti-Muslim hate crimes have stayed fairly constant in each year since 9/11 begs the question: What can be done differently?

The report indicated that messages related to Sikh experiences with discrimination and bullying were among the least likely to connect with respondents. The dominant narrative from the community, though, has been the wide-ranging injuries that Sikhs have encountered after 9/11. This is not to say that such harms should not be remedied but only that a preoccupation with these wrongs in the absence of a complementary, affirmative signal about Sikhs will not facilitate the minimization of the occurrence of those wrongs in the first place. According to the report, Sikh messages that emphasized shared values and that were educational translated into a 17.5 percent increase in American resonance with the community.

Obviating hate violence requires engagement on the part of Sikh-Americans. The report reveals that two-thirds of Americans have never seen or interacted with a Sikh. Of the remaining third that have seen or interacted with a Sikh, 68 percent stated that the interaction was merely in passing. Active Sikh immersion in their neighborhoods, schools, charitable associations and political affairs, among other aspects of public and social life, can serve as the predicate for mutual understanding.

In no way should these suggestions be construed to imply that Sikh-Americans are in any way responsible for the noxious behavior of others. No one should be mistreated on the basis of their actual or perceived religious identity. The reality, however, is that Sikh religious identity has triggered nasty reactions.

Our community must evaluate how best to mitigate those reactions. With military conflicts ongoing and the specter of terrorist activity worldwide, these inquiries are persistently necessary. Self examination is healthy in the pursuit of self-preservation.

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