

Islam the Misunderstood Religion in the West

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Islam has been largely misunderstood in the west. The reasons can be traced back to the era of the Crusades. Ignorance, fear, suspicion, etc. prevented the followers of other major faiths from an objective and impartial study of the religion. The result was that numerous misconceptions, false stories, and biased accounts about Islam came to be accepted as “true” even by Christian scholars and historians. Some of the misconceptions are listed below:

Misconception #1 - Allah is “God of the Muslims

Many Christians believe that Allah is different from the God of Jesus. The fact is that “Allah” in Arabic simply means The God, as does “Yahweh” in Hebrew, “Dieu” in French, and “Gott” in German. He is the same one God, the Omnipotent and the Omnipresent Deity, the Creator, Sustainer, and Cherisher of the universe.

Misconception #2 - "Muslims worship Muhammad"

It is a common misunderstanding that "Muhammad was divine and that Muslims worship Muhammad," similar to some Christians who worship Jesus. The truth is that Muhammad (peace is upon him) is no more than a messenger of God. He died like any other mortal. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was divine (God or part of God). Muslims regard Jesus as a blessed and chosen Prophet of God.

Misconception #3 - "Women are given an inferior status in Islam"

Nothing can be farther from the truth. The status of women in Islam is the most misunderstood aspect of the religion. According to the Qur'an as well as the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, women enjoy an honorable status. Islam gives women separate legal rights as individuals. Fourteen hundred years ago at the very inception of the Islamic faith, by divine decree, women were given the right to divorce, the right to own property in their own name and separate from the husband, the right of inheritance, the right to make a will, and many other rights. These rights were not available to women in the western societies until the 19th century.

The Qur'an says: *"Men shall have the benefit of what they achieve and acquire, and women shall have the benefit of that which they similarly achieve and acquire."* (4:32)

A saying of the holy prophet Muhammad is recorded as follows: "If a daughter is born to a person and he brings her up, giving her good education and training in various arts of life, I shall myself stand between him and hellfire.

According to another saying of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh&p): "Paradise lies under the feet of the mother."

God says in the Qur'an about women: *"They (women) have rights similar to those against them..."* (i.e., for men)

Misconception #4 - "Polygamy is conducive to loose moral behavior"

Islam permits a man to have more than one wife under certain circumstances, but it does not encourage this practice. In fact, polygamy is discouraged.

The Qur'an says this about polygamy: *"And if you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, three, and four, but if you may not do justice to them, then marry only one."* (4:3)

Islam permits polygamy as an alternative to situations, which may force a husband to immoral acts. A husband may be forced to seek a second wife in the following situations:

- A. Inability of the wife to bear children and the couple choose not to seek divorce.
- B. Prolonged debilitating illness of the wife, where she is unable to provide sexual satisfaction to her husband, or carry on her responsibilities in relation to the family.
- C. Prolonged physical separation due to war, travel, etc.

Polygamy was practiced by all the prophets of the old and their followers, such as Abraham, David, Solomon, and others. In the early days of Islam, because of successive wars of defense, there was a great shortage of men and an over supply of women. Polygamy was the only honorable way to provide the women, particularly the widows and orphans, with food, shelter, and protection. Thus, many moral and social ills were avoided.

Misconception #5 - "Islam was spread with the sword"

In the past, Muslim kings, or more appropriately, kings who were Muslims, conquered many lands; but a distinction has to be made between lands conquered by these kings and imposition of Islam on its people. Islam does not believe in force, coercion, or lure of material benefits to spread the faith. Muslims believe that God alone can put faith into the heart of a person.

"No soul can believe, except by the will of God..." (10:100)

"Let there be no compulsion in religion." (2:256)

There are several examples of the tolerance of Muslims towards other religions. Muslims ruled over Spain for many hundreds of years. The Christians and the Jews there were

free to practice their own religion in their places of worship. In fact, Christians and Jews are regarded as privileged people and are mentioned with respect in the Qur'an as "People of the Book".

Indonesia ranks as number one in the world for its Muslim population. However, it was never invaded or conquered by any Muslim king or ruler. Other countries like Malaysia have a Muslim majority. There, Islam was spread when the local population came in contact with Muslim traders and merchants from overseas. In India, Islam was introduced and spread by Sufi Muslims who came from Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, etc. India has over one hundred million Muslims.

Today, Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and elsewhere despite adverse publicity, media bias, and negative stereotyping. The rich and the poor, intellectuals and commoners alike, continue to enter into the fold of Islam. The Muslim converts encounter rejection, resistance, alienation, and in some cases hostility from their families, friends, and employers. However, it does not deter them in pursuing their newly acquired faith.

Misconception #6. "Islam condones terrorism"

Islam prohibits terrorism, unlawful acquisition of property of others, and causing harm to innocent human beings. Islam rejects all forms of violence. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 was condemned by Muslims around the world. In fact, those who perished included many Muslims.

Terrorists have no religion. They kill indiscriminately. They use the name of religion to justify their atrocities, and thus bring a bad name to the religion.

The Qur'an says:

"Any one who has saved one life, (it is as if he) has saved the whole mankind, and any one who has killed a human being, except in case of murderer or mischief on earth, (it is as if he) has killed the whole mankind." (5:32)

Misconception #7. "Islam rewards suicide with paradise."

This misconception is held, unfortunately, by a very small Muslim minority. Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject this distorted and extreme view. Taking one's own life is no different than taking someone else's life. It is a major sin, which invokes extreme displeasure and wrath of God.

Misconception #8. Hijab (the headscarf and the outer covering) is "degrading to women."

In fact, it is a sign of dignity and respect for women. It signifies that the worth and value of a woman is not in her looks and her physical form. It protects Muslim women from

being molested by men. It safeguards the woman from being reduced to mere “sex objects.” Islam prohibits women from all acts of lewdness including public display of their beauty in any form or manner.

Islam similarly requires men to practice modesty in their behavior, to cover their private parts, and not to look at women with lust.

In conclusion, Islam upholds the moral and ethical teachings similar to the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity and Judaism. In fact, the teachings of the Qur’an as practiced by Prophet Muhammad require a higher code of moral and ethical conduct. If Muslims fall short, they are to be blamed, not the religion itself.

(The End)