

FIVE COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ISLAM

Muslims around the world and in the US have long been subject to negative stereotyping where they are presented as terrorists, as uncivilized, barbaric, exotic peoples who are oppressive to women. This portrayal of Islam and Muslims is perpetuated by many sectors of the US mainstream media as well as public educational institutions. The following are five of the most widely held misconceptions about Islam and Muslims.

Islam Degrades Women

One of the most generally held misconceptions about Islam is that it is a misogynistic religion: it requires Muslim women to cover their entire bodies except for parts of their faces, it sanctions different divorce rights based on gender, and it allows Muslim men to limit the freedom of movement of Muslim women.

Indeed, a brief look at the countries in which Islam is the predominant religion would support these views: in Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive unless they are at least 35 and married; until recently in Afghanistan, women were forced to remain at home, and were required to be entirely covered when they did emerge; in Nigeria, there have been accounts of rape victims being stoned to death for engaging in extramarital sex.

Yet many Muslim scholars today are emphasizing the distinction between what Islam as a religion advocates, and what Muslims (who often live in impoverished societies with little access to education) do. They draw attention to the fact that the laws sanctioning such misogynistic behavior are not advocated in the Quran (the holy text in Islam), but that this traditional Islamic jurisprudence (known in Arabic as *shari'ah*) was written primarily by Muslim men in the 10th-12th centuries who were interpreting the Quran to fit their own socio-cultural circumstances. Today many progressive Muslims are emphasizing the importance of re-interpreting the Quran for the present day, allowing Islam's ideals of social and gender justice to be highlighted. They point out the many sections in the Quran regarding the equality of men and women. According to these individuals, there is little basis in Islam for these violations of the rights of women. Rather, these practices are the products of laws written by Muslim jurists hundreds of years ago, combined with local customs... practices that don't reflect the egalitarian and humanitarian nature of Islam.

Just as Christian, Jewish, and other societies have evolved over the centuries gradually to allow greater rights to women, Muslim intellectuals insist that Muslim societies will also do so, if given the opportunity. Iran, a country in which there is a large reform movement among the younger generation, is one such example. However, US and Western intervention over the past century has kept the Muslim world in a state of political and economic unrest, making social change virtually impossible.

Islam is Intolerant of Non-Muslims

Recent announcements on television and radio by Osama Bin Laden and others who claim to speak in the name of Islam espouse a view that Muslims are a racist people with little tolerance, and even a desire to destroy, non-Muslim societies, and especially Jews. While these extremists and the Western xenophobes who oppose them attribute these opinions to Islam, an observer needs to separate politics from religion to understand the situation more clearly.

The Quran and other Muslim texts preach tolerance of non-Muslims and especially emphasize the value of human life, the ban on killing non-combatants, and respect for people of other religions. The fact that many acts of terror in recent years have been perpetrated by Muslims should not lead us to lay the blame on the religion of these individuals, since Christian, Jewish, and other histories - even in present times - are similarly filled with instances of violence waged in the name of their faiths. Rather, we should investigate the underlying motives of these individuals, most of whom come from nations in which the United States government has long been supporting puppet governments and providing funding for military actions against the people of these countries. We could point to the United States' support of the Saudi regime, in which the royal family is allowed by the US to rule in an undemocratic fashion in exchange for providing cheap oil

resources; or the US' annual financial aid of about \$9 billion to the government of Israel which uses these funds in its continued illegal occupation of Palestinian lands; or the US' financial backing of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

Such circumstances provoke the oppressed people of these nations to feel great animosity towards the United States. And just as others have unjustifiably pointed to religion as the inspiration for their actions, these individuals similarly claim Islam as their motivation, despite the numerous instances in the Quran which discourage them from doing so. Thus, in order to understand the root of the violence, it is important to recognize the significance of the role of US foreign policy in world politics as well.

Islam Advocates Conservatism

In various parts of the world, including the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, there exist countries which claim to base their governmental system on Islamic law, and which are also strongly associated with conservatism. Such countries have limited opportunities for freedom of speech, and are well known for their violations of human rights, especially those of women, homosexuals, and non-Muslims. For this reason, Islam as a religion has come to be associated with conservatism and fundamentalism.

What this view does not acknowledge, however, is that the laws that govern these nations were written by men, and are not directly stated anywhere in the Quran or *hadith* (i.e. the speech and actions of the prophet Muhammad). While the individuals who wrote them would state that they were inspired by Islamic ideals, it is important to note that Islamic jurisprudence was written by men living more than 1000 years ago who were interpreting the Islamic holy texts to fit the patriarchal society which was prevalent not just in the Arabian peninsula where they lived, but throughout the world.

Today, many progressive Muslims are calling for a re-interpretation of the Quran and hadith to produce a revitalized system of Islamic jurisprudence that reflects the tolerance of individuals of different genders, religions, and sexualities, within the Islamic framework. With this view, it would be incorrect to state that Islam as a religion promotes conservatism and fundamentalism, but rather that a more contemporary interpretation of holy texts is required, free of the socio-cultural constraints present hundreds of years ago.

All Muslims are Arabs, and All Arabs are Muslims

Another myth prevalent today is that all Muslims are Arabs, all Arabs are Muslims, or that these two groups are in fact one and the same. This misconception could not be further from the truth. While Muslims are those who subscribe to the religion of Islam, Arabs are a linguistic and cultural group found mainly in the Middle East.

Islam is the religion of over 1.2 billion people in the world today, and only 15-20% of these are Arabs. In fact, the nations with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia and India, and Muslims today come from a tremendous range of ethnic groups, including Asians, Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics.

Arabs, meanwhile, represent a number of different religions, not just Islam. Throughout the Arab world, there are Christians, such as those in Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt, as well as Jews, such as those in Iraq, Yemen, and Morocco, and members of other religious groups.

Jihad Means Holy War, and it is Being Waged Against the West

In the past few years, the term *jihad*, literally “struggle” in Arabic, has become one of the most misunderstood terms surrounding Islam. Many have come to see the word as meaning a “holy war,” one in which the entirety of the West and non-Muslims are being targeted.

The word jihad is used by Muslims to mean a struggle on three different levels to bring oneself closer to God. Firstly, it is an internal struggle against one's own selfish tendencies so that an individual becomes more spiritual and moral. Secondly, it is a struggle on the level of one's community, for goals such as social justice and human rights. Thirdly, jihad can be an armed struggle in the name of Islam, either for self-defense, to establish justice, or to deter an aggressor. As noted above, individuals who have been trampled by global politics have often turned to this final definition as justification for their violent actions against the United States, despite the presence of many sections in the Quran banning the killing of, and the violence against, innocents. Thus, while jihad sometimes - but not always - implies violence, many Muslims would object to its use in this context, stating that the actions of Bin Laden and others are primarily politically motivated, and not justifiable by Muslim texts.

Reference: *Progressive Muslims*. Ed. by Omid Safi. Oneworld Publications (UK), 2003.