

Misconceptions about Islam: Historical, Theological, and Socio Cultural Reviews

Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

Ph.D. (USA), NDI, Shahadat al Aalamiyah (Al Hawzah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shariah)

Musheer: Fed. Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

The Writer is an Attorney at Law and a Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

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Abstract: Contemporary Western perceptions of Islam remain heavily shaped by medieval polemics and Orientalist frameworks that depict the faith as intellectually stagnant, socially regressive, or inherently inferior to Christianity. Such narratives obscure Islam's historical role in transforming the Arabian Peninsula from fragmented tribalism into a civilization grounded in rational inquiry, theological coherence, justice, and moral refinement. While post-apostolic Europe endured centuries of intellectual contraction, the Muslim world fostered an ethos of Talim (learning) and Tarbiyyah (moral cultivation), generating advances in optics, geography, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, agriculture, architecture, and literature that later informed and, in many respects, catalysed the European Renaissance. In doing so, it offered a distinctive synthesis of faith, reason, and law. This paper interrogates several enduring misconceptions that structure Western religious, political, and cultural discourse on Islam. Central among these is the allegation that Islam was "spread by the sword." Examining regulations of Qur'an that confine Jihad to self-defense, resistance to persecution, and the protection of non-combatants, alongside historical evidence, the study argues that Islam's expansion from Spain to China was driven chiefly by ethical commercial practice, scholarly and Sufi networks, and a robust social-justice ethic embedded in Islamic norms. The peaceful Islamization of Indonesia and Malaysia, and the post-conquest conversion of the Mongols, exemplify Islam's persuasive rather than coercive power in shaping diverse societies. The paper further challenges the claim that Muslims worship Muhammad (S), clarifying Islamic theology's strict monotheism, which reserves worship for Allah alone and situates Muhammad (S) as Rasul of Allah and Uswa Hasanah (exalted exemplar), not an object of deification. It interrogates portrayals of Islam as inherently misogynistic or intolerant, demonstrating that core sources affirm women's spiritual equality, property and inheritance rights, and social dignity through modesty norms, while historical polities such as Andalusia, Palestine, and the Ottoman Empire institutionalized layered, yet durable, regimes of interfaith coexistence. Finally, by comparing these misconceptions with episodes of mass violence perpetrated by non-Muslim powers - from crusades and inquisitions to colonial conquests and world wars-the paper exposes prevailing double standards in global narratives on religion and violence. It concludes by advocating a historically grounded, textually informed, and analytically consistent reassessment of Islam within contemporary Western thought.

Keywords: Islamic history; jihad; religious tolerance; Muhammad; women in Islam; Orientalism; Crusades; Ottoman Empire; interfaith relations; Islamic law.

1. Spread by the Sword:

The Jih'ad of Muslims for the spread of Islam is popularly misconstrued by the Medieval European Christian clerics to justify the series of war known as 'the Crusades'. Islam being equally concerned about the quality of life and that of the hereafter has regulated Jih'ad. The Qur'an teaches:

"Fight in the cause of Allah with those who fight you, but do not disobey limits; Allah does not like transgressors" (2:190).

War is permissible only in self-defense and under well-defined limits. Its main aim is to restore peace and freedom for the people. Women, children, the elderly and the infirm should not be harmed, nor trees and crops cut down, or peace withheld when the enemy comes to terms. A Hadith expresses this golden principle:

"Do not oppress, and do not be oppressed".

Can Orientals or anybody prove that Rasulullah (S) converted people to Islam by the sword? He raised the sword for political acts, not religious ones; all the Ghazw'at (battles) he fought were originally in defense of Muslims and their territory and not for the spread of Islam. How does one explain the rapid expansion of Islam from Spain to China, within a century, after the demise of Rasulullah (S)? How did 10 or 20,000 Arabs conquer the entire world along with strict injunction of Qur'an?

"There is no compulsion in religion"?

The Roman and Persian Empires collapsed so dramatically, not just because they were already in decline, but because the Muslims offered a brilliant alternative to the gross materialism and injustice which differentiated those civilizations. Islam conquered hearts, not forts. Those early Muslims set a splendid example by their actions and people were naturally inclined towards Islam, which produced such remarkable men and women. Two prominent examples which attest to Islam's non-violent expansion are the conversion of Indonesia-Malaysia and the Mongols. No Muslim army ever set foot in Indonesia, one of the largest Muslim populations of the world. Indonesians and Malaysians entered into the fold of Islam by the influence of the Talim and character of traders, merchants, teachers, and spiritualists from overseas. The Mongols destroyed half of the Muslim world before they settled down as its undisputed conquerors. Yet, within a century, they too embraced Islam.

When the Ottomans reached the banks of Danube, they had conquered Bulgaria and the north of Greece, and had twice defeated armies sent by Europe to save the Eastern Empire. On May 29, 1453, only a few years after Manuel's death, his capital, Constantinople (Istanbul) fell to the Turks, putting an end to the Empire that had lasted for more than a thousand years. For centuries, the Muslims ruled Greece. Did the Greeks become Muslims? Did anyone even try to convert them by swords? On the contrary, Christian Greeks held the highest positions in the Ottoman Empire. The Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians, Hungarians and other European nations lived under Ottoman power with their Christian beliefs, without any pressure. The Albanians and Bosnians converted to Islam, but no one can prove that they converted due to undue influence. They adopted Islam to attain the many benefits from the Ottoman Court.

In 1099, the Crusaders invaded Jerusalem and started the massacre of Muslim and Jewish inhabitants indiscriminately in the name of Jesus. At that time, 400 years into the occupation of Palestine by the Muslims, Christians were still the majority in the country. Throughout this long period, no effort was made to impose Islam on them. Only after the removal of the Crusaders from the country, the majority of the inhabitants started to adopt Islam and the Arabic language – and they were the forefathers of most of today's Palestinians. Under Muslims, the Jews of Spain flourished unprecedentedly. They handled offices as ministers, poets and scientists.

For centuries under the Muslim rule in Spain the Christians and the Jews were free to practice their own religion. In fact, Christians and Jews are regarded as privileged people and are mentioned with respect in the Qur'an as "People of the Book". In Muslim Toledo (Toledo is a city and municipality located in central Spain), Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars contributed jointly and translated the ancient Greek philosophical and scientific texts. That was, indeed, the Golden Age of Muslims. How would this have been possible if Rasulullah (S) decreed the "spreading of Islam by the sword"?

What happened afterwards is even more important. When the Catholics re-conquered Spain from the Muslims, they instituted a reign of religious terror. The Jews and the Muslims were presented with a cruel choice: to become Christians, be massacred or to leave the land. Where did the hundreds of thousands of Jews, who refused to leave their faith, escape? Almost all of them were received with open arms in the nearest Muslim countries. The Spanish Jews settled all over the Muslim world, from Morocco in the West to Iraq in the East, from Bulgaria (then part of the Ottoman Empire) in the North to Sudan in the South. It was the Muslims who sheltered them, while the Crusaders persecuted them.

Why Christians forget the military expedition of the Ottomans which almost conquered Vienna, but when the Pope humbly requested the Sultan to not enter Vienna even though victory was a few minutes away with the Sultan on Vienna's doorstep, the Ottoman Sultan granted them amnesty. Had this not happened, the entire Europe would have been under their rule.

2. The Worship of Muhammad:

It is a general misinterpretation by many non-Muslims that Muslims worship Muhammad as Christians worship Essa (Jesus). It should be clear that Muslims offer Ibadah only for Allah, who is the Creator. The principle of Islam is clear:

"I witness that there is no God except Allah, and that Mohammad (S) is His Rasul."

The word Muslim is derived from the root word Salaam from which the word Islam also originates. Islam denotes the conscious and willing surrender or Ta'at and Taslim - total submission with devotion to the will of Allah. This then becomes the means to achieve peace.

The word Muslim means one who submits to Allah or surrenders before Him. Therefore, the expression such as Mohammadan or Mohammadanism is totally misleading and absolute sacrilegious. Muslims love Mohammad (S) as the Rasul of Allah who guided the Ummah through the Qur'an which changed the world. Furthermore, they do not worship any human or idol; they

only pay respect to Hajar al-Aswad since it is sacred. They offer Sajdah towards the direction of Kabah, and their attention is focused on one direction - the Kabah at Makkah - to signify their faith in Tawhid. Allah and the God of Jesus or Yahweh, as described in the original Bible, is one and the same.

3. The religion of Arabs:

It was the Hikmah of Allah that He selected Arabia as the fountainhead of Islam and Arabs as a nation were the first to answer the clarion call. No one can doubt that they did that job admirably. Yet, unlike all previous Scriptures, the Qur'an was not meant to be confined to one race or a particular nation. As the Qur'an says:

"Truly, this is no less than a Message to (all) the worlds - For whoever wills among you to take the right course". (81:27:28)

Islam is the logical conclusion to the development of religions. It is a non-sectarian, non-racial, and above all universal religion. It is a divine truth of unity designed for all humans. Islam's concept of the unity of Ummah is clearly evident during the annual Haj at Makkah. It is there that millions of Muslims from every corner of the globe bow down together to obey their Creator.

4. The Backward Middle Ages:

The modern view of Islam by the western world is generally quite a medieval one, understood in terms created mainly by so-called western scholars, who convinced themselves and others that Islam is of no real importance, or at best, a poor copy of Christianity. The truth is that it is Islam which has raised the Arabs out of their ignorant and illogical lifestyle, provided guidance and wisdom for the Muslims to establish a civilization based on reason, Aqidah, tolerance, and justice. While the Christian world was under darkness for over 500 years after the death of Jesus, the Muslim world provided light and understanding by encouraging Talim and Tarbiyyah. It were the Muslims who laid the foundation for the ultimate European Renaissance. Besides their contributions to literature, art, and architecture, Muslims created or developed whole new areas of enterprise, including optics, geography, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, and agriculture. The list of accomplishments by Muslims is amazing and the modern world cannot deny this fact that much of the current science is a result of the research done by Muslims.

Another aspect of Islam which is not carefully examined by non-Muslims is the question of punishment. The concept of punishment in Islam is based on the philosophy of prevention rather than on the physical or psychological infliction of pain. Criminals think very seriously about committing offenses when the consequence may be the loss of a hand or public caning. Judicial parts of the law of Islam are concerned with maintaining the rights of the innocent and not with protecting the guilty. It is no wonder that in societies where crime is out of control, many are advocating stricter punishments and revising their opinion about some laws of Islam.

5. That it is anti-Christian:

The Christian world has generated a lot of heat, but little light, in its assessment of this controversial issue. Medieval Christian clergy presented Rasulullah (S) as anti-Christ. This erroneous belief became enshrined in epics of European literature such as "The Song of Roland," and more emphatically, in Dante's "Inferno" and Milton's "Paradise Lost". It became part of what might be called the collective ideology of Christianity and partly contributes to the reflexive Western view that Islam is medieval and backward. A Muslim cannot be a Muslim without believing in Essa (as) (Jesus); in his miracles; in the Bible as a previous sacred Book; in the Talim of Essa (as) which he provided to the Jews to guide them; and in his complete submission to Allah's will. Islam's point of departure from Christianity is the Aqidah that Essa (as) (Jesus) is a Nabi of Allah and not His son in the literal sense.

The Qur'an says:

i. "O followers of the Book! do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not speak (lies) against Allah, but (speak) the truth; Maseeh Essa, son of Mariyam, is only Rasul of Allah and His Word, which He communicated to Mariyam and the spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His Anbiya, and say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only one: for be it from His Glory that He should have a son; whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His; and Allah is a sufficient Protector. (4:171)

ii. "Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely Allah, He is the Maseeh, son of Mariyam; and the Maseeh said: O Children of Israel! Serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord... Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely Allah is the third (person) of the three; and there is no God but Allah..." (5:72-73)

iii. "Maseeh, son of Mariyam is but a Nabi; Anbiya before him have indeed passed away, and his mother was a truthful woman; they both used to eat food. See how We make the communication clear to them, then behold, how they are turned away". (5:75)

There are further references regarding Essa (as) and other Anbiya in the Qur'an and one Surah is known by the name Mariyam. The Aqidah regarding the Creator in Islam is based upon Tawhid, confirming the first Commandment in the Old Testament:

"I am the Lord, your Rabb. You shall have no other Deities before me" (Exodus 20).

In fact, the Trinity as a theological idea is an ancient pagan belief, based on the worship of the Sun.

6. That it is unfair to women:

Islam's so-called mistreatment of women is one of the favorite topics of discussion by the West, the Church and their NGOs. Without knowing the Laws of Islam regarding women, they are shedding tears before the media. They have tried unsuccessfully to prove that Islam is unfair in its treatment of women with statements such as:

Muslim women are absent of choice

Muslim men have four wives

Women can be released simply by saying: "I give you divorce" (Talaq) and so on. What, then, is the Muslim view of women? Surah al-Nisa-4 deals with women, orphans, family rights, share in succession, Nikah and social problems. Its first Ayah states:

"O mankind! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, by whom you demand one of another (your duty to) Allah, by whom you demand one of another (your rights), and (to) the ties of relationship; surely Allah ever watches over you". (4:1)

While it is not possible to deal with half of the population in a few words, the following is considerable and important:

"Women are the twin-halves of men"

Rasulullah (S) declared.

The meaning of "the twin halves of men" emphasized the idea that their role in society is complementary to that of the men. Rasulullah (S) declared that the most valuable in the world is a virtuous woman. They deserve respect and care because they bear children. They face physical discomfort during birth (a woman who dies during childbirth is considered a Shaheed). They nurse babies (the Qur'an encourages breastfeeding) and generally administer the daily welfare. Moreover, they provide Tarbiyyah to the infant. For such valid reasons Rasulullah(S) said:

"The mother is the faculty", and "Jannah lies beneath the mother's feet".

A Hadith says:

"If a daughter is born and he brings her up giving her good education and training in various disciplines of life, I myself shall stand between him and hellfire."

Women are men's companions. Men and women are meant to reciprocate peace, security, and comfort. Nikah is to be based on this natural desire. Men have a duty to maintain their wives but not vice-versa. Of all things permitted, the Qur'an advises:

"Talaq (divorce) is the most disliked."

When a couple declares their intention to Talaq, 'preventive' measures are set in action. Firstly, there is the waiting period: it must be confirmed that the woman is not pregnant by waiting for the appearance of the next menstrual cycle – If she is, then the husband is bound to maintain her and the infant until feeding has been completed. This gives both parties time to reconsider while reconciliation moves are made by arbitrators from each side.

Muslim men are permitted more than one wife (to a maximum of four) with certain instructions. In some circumstances, this might be beneficial. For example:

War may have decimated the male population, leaving numerous widows and children without financial means. It is permissible to take such a woman as a wife to safeguard her and maintain her welfare and that of her family. Naturally, the man must be in a position to be able to support more than one wife because according to Islam, each wife is entitled to have whatever the other(s) have (e.g. house, car, clothes, jewelry, etc.) Injunctions of the Qur'an are clear:

"Do Nikah with such women as seem good to you, two and three and four, but if you fear that you will not do Adal (between them), then (do Nikah) with only one...." (4:3).

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

- A. The 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 meet the sexual needs of 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 and their early followers. In the early days of Islam, as a result of successive wars against pagans, there was a great shortage of men and an abundance 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.

Coming to Hij'ab, it is a sign of pride for women as it signifies her value like a pearl in an oyster. It provides protection to women against becoming a sex symbol. The teachings of Islam condemn beauty contests, modeling for fashion, and other ills. Islam not only encourages this philosophy of Hij'ab for women but also instructed men to practice modesty in behavior, to cover and protect their private parts, dress modestly and prevent themselves for harming women.

Rasulullah(S) and Islam in general has been the target of many unfounded criticisms in this respect. It was Rasulallah (S) who raised the status of women after she was abused in all previous cultures. Today, all the rights that women in societies other than Islam enjoy are a direct result of their struggle which were grudgingly allowed to them. On the other hand, Islam had granted the following rights to women more than 1400 years ago:

- i. Spiritual equality (Qur'an 3:196; 33:36; 57:13)*
- ii. Right of inheritance (4:8, 12, 13 & 177)*
- iii. Mahr: a compulsory right of the wife on the husband to pay her prior to establishing sexual relationship. This is the wife's personal property (4:5 & 25).*

Islamic Shariah gives wife the right to demand Mahr as per the financial status of her husband and no one has the right to fix her Mahr against her wishes.
- iv. Marriage is illegal if she is forced to do so against her will. (4:20)*
- v. Right of termination of her marriage. (2:228)*
- vi. A woman has been invested the right of ownership of property by virtue of her own initiative (4: 33) for her welfare.*
- vii. A beautiful aspect of a Muslim woman is that she, in spite of her wealth which she may acquire, is not expected to spend for the welfare and well-being of her family. This responsibility is vested in her husband (4:35), although she may patronize to help in sharing the responsibility. (4:5; & 25)*

viii. As per Qur'an, the relationship between a husband and wife is considered a divine bounty through love, kindness, and comfort. (7:190; 16:73; 30:32)

7. That Islam is an Intolerant Religion:

The following Ayah announces clearly:

"There should be no compulsion in religion." (2:256)

The above Ayah announced that Islam does not give power to anyone to force any person or section which may be disturbing to the other party. Islam never encouraged anything like 'suicide bombing' which is unfortunately created by misled Muslim groups with vested interests. All major Muslim schools of thought strongly reject the views regarding suicide bombers. Islam condemns terrorism, the unlawful acquisition of property, and causing harm to innocent beings. Islam rejects all forms of violence. Qur'an says:

"Anyone who has saved one life has saved the whole mankind, and anyone who has killed a human being... on earth, it is as if he has killed the whole mankind." (5: 32)

Islam is speedily rising in the world despite the propaganda by the Zionist media. As the Christian clergy is failing to stop the spread of Islam in the West, they have demonstrated their hostility with the Qur'an by burning it. People from all walks of life continue to enter into the fold of Islam. They encounter rejection, resistance, hostility from their families, friends, and employers, but it does not discourage them in following Islam, the religion of peace and justice.

I conclude this article on the answer of one German Muslim scholar when he was asked about terrorism and Islam: He said:

Who started the First World War?

Who started the Second World War?

Who killed about 20 millions of Aborigines in Australia?

Who dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Who killed more than 100 million Indians in North America?

Who killed more than 50 million Indians in South America?

Who took about 180 million of Africans as slaves and 88% of them died and were thrown in the Atlantic Ocean?

No, these were not Muslims! First of all, you have to define terrorism properly. If a non-Muslim does something evil, it is declared as a crime of passion or insanity. However, if a Muslim commits the same, he is a terrorist. Moreover, Islam is described as the reason for the purported act.

Sounds like a classic case of having double-standards, isn't it?

Conclusion:

The misconceptions examined in this study illustrate how selective readings of history, theological misunderstanding, and political agendas have contributed to distorted perceptions of Islam in Western thought. Far from being a faith spread by coercion or sustained through intolerance, Islam's historical route demonstrates an emphasis on justice, compassion, intellectual advancement, and coexistence. The examples of peaceful conversions across Asia and the tolerant governance of Muslim empires contradict claims of systematic religious oppression. Islamic teachings clearly reject the worship of any human being, advocate spiritual and legal equality for women, and prohibit coercion in matters of faith. Moreover, the significant scientific, philosophical, and cultural achievements of the Muslim world challenge the portrayal of Islam as a backward or anti-intellectual tradition. This analysis also exposes the double standards often applied in discussions about violence and terrorism, where actions perpetrated by non-Muslims are detached from their religious or cultural identities, while similar actions by Muslims are generalized to indict an entire faith. The historical record of global conflict and colonial violence underscores the need for more objective, consistent frameworks for evaluating human behavior. Ultimately, fostering an informed understanding of Islam requires moving beyond inherited prejudices and engaging critically with authentic sources, historical evidence, and intercultural perspectives. Recognizing Islam's contributions to global civilization and its enduring principles of justice and peace is essential not only for academic accuracy but also for promoting mutual respect in an increasingly interconnected world.

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