

Do all Muslims Represent Islam?

(part 1 of 3): An Introduction



Islam and the followers of Islam, Muslims, are very prominent in the media nowadays. Around the world debates rage about various Islamic topics or topics that invariably involve Muslims. Almost continuous media exposure means that there is hardly a person left in the world that has not read or seen something about Islam or Muslims, or both. In addition, most people have an opinion. Many base their opinions on misconceptions or misunderstandings about Islam. Many base their opinions on the actions or words of people who call themselves Muslims but actually have very little knowledge about their religion.

Thankfully, many base their opinions on sound knowledge and research. It is through the mercy of God that the truth of Islam usually reigns triumphant over media speculation and disinformation. However, in a media saturated century it is only fair to ask the question, do all Muslims represent Islam?

The answer is, of course not! Think about it for a minute. Would any one ask the question, do all German's represent Germany? Do all Indonesians represent Indonesia? Do all Catholics represent Catholicism, all Hindus, Hinduism? No, of course not! While one religion or one country is not generally maligned by the action of a few people, this sadly has not been the case for Islam, especially post 9/11.

It is a distressing fact that many great crimes have been perpetrated by individuals, groups, and countries in the name of Islam. When these atrocities occur, it has somehow become the norm to blame the religion of Islam instead of the perpetrators themselves. In 1987 when Sikh gunmen opened fire on Hindu bus passengers in India's Punjab state, killing 38 people, the media did not declare the Sikh religion to be bloodthirsty and automatically condemn all Sikhs.

In Spain, ETA (the Basque Separatist Movement) has claimed responsibility for more than 800 unlawful deaths since 1968. Even though

Spain is 94% Catholic, as is mentioned in the CIA world Fact book, this atrocity was not attributed to Catholics nor is the Catholic Church condemned as a religion promoting violence. If a person commits a crime and then declares himself Muslim, or shouts the words *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) this does not make him or her a representative of Islam.

However, knowing that not all Muslims represent Islam does not solve the problem. Just what is this religion called Islam and how is it that many people who declare themselves Muslim misrepresent their own way of life? Unfortunately, many Muslims throughout the world are marginalised and are struggling to overcome colonial and imperial backgrounds. The military conquest, economic exploitation and cultural mutation imbedded in the colonialism of the 15th to 20th centuries has left generation after generation of disaffected, poverty stricken and marginalised Muslims struggling to come to terms with a globalised world.

This however is not an excuse for bad behaviour or the perpetration of atrocities on the innocent. There are no excuses for crimes like this. Background information does however serve to help us understand why some people commit crimes and atrocities against humanity, against themselves and ultimately against their religion. When we see or read about a person who calls himself or herself a Muslim perpetrating a crime too horrible to contemplate, it is important to understand that this person does not represent Islam. The same can be said of all religions. Throughout history, humankind has used the name of God to justify unspeakable acts.

In Islam it is impossible for one person to speak on behalf of all Muslims, or to act on behalf of all Muslims. When differences arise Muslims turn to the only reliable sources, the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

One of the problems facing the world today in general and facing Muslims specifically is that unqualified people think that it is possible to read a book, badly translated into a language other than Arabic, and instantly become able to give religious rulings on subjects they really have no knowledge about. People with very little real Islamic knowledge suddenly become experts while the real experts are unable to have their opinions heard. Extreme groups preach extreme ideologies that have no place in the way of life that is Islam. Islam is the middle ground, extreme is not from the teachings of Islam.

When Islam is called the religion of peace it is meant literally. Islam comes from the root word “sa-la-ma”, as do the words Muslim (one who follows the message of Islam) and which among many meanings also denotes peace, security, safety and implies submission and surrender to Almighty God. Peace and security are inherent in the submission to the One God. When a person submits to the will of God he or she experiences an innate sense of security and peacefulness.

Not all Muslims represent Islam and not all Muslims understand and follow their religion. Culture often dictates action. Knowing this, it becomes essential to recognize that just because a person, a group or country is known as Islamic, does not mean that it automatically follows the laws sent down by God. The Quran was revealed for all of humankind and Prophet Muhammad was sent as a mercy to all of humankind. One person is not more worthy of peace and security than another is. Each person is entitled to sustenance, shelter, and security and if some are denied their God given rights, it is the responsibility of the rest of humankind, to restore those rights, not blatantly take them away.

In the following articles, we will discuss the role of culture and customs, learn what Islam says about violence and war, and see how ignorance overshadows true Islamic teachings.

(part 2 of 3): Islam demands justice, even under duress

Trying to convince people that Muslims are not terrorists, or that Muslim women are not oppressed, or that not all Muslims represent Islam is becoming increasingly difficult. A Muslim man with a bushy beard is presumed to be planning an attack – on something. If a Muslim woman chooses to dress modestly it is taken for granted that she was forced to wear such clothing. Although one can hardly pick up a newspaper or watch the news without hearing something about Islam or Muslims, it is usually a gross misinterpretation or misrepresentation.

Into this volatile mix comes the Muslim himself or herself, sometimes Muslims are their own worst enemies. They often speak without knowledge or even without weighing up the effect of their words. Sometimes Muslims react without looking at the bigger picture. Often they react to the misconceptions without realising their behaviour sometimes affirms the incorrect notions. Not all Muslims represent Islam.

We live in interesting times, and according to an old Chinese proverb or perhaps a western spin-doctor, this is anything but a blessing. Muslims call such a period of time, *fitnah* (trials and tribulations). Life rushes ahead beckoning us into the unknown but in a strange sort of way it has all been done before. This is not the first time in history that Muslims have suffered from the effects of lies and misrepresentations. However, when the lies and misunderstandings are piled high the truth seekers of this world have a way of finding the gold buried in the dirt. Islam is like that gold, it can lie quietly, and it loses none of its beauty by doing so.

By far the greatest threat to Muslims and the Muslim way of life, now, is the “war on terror” and the subsequent demonizing of Muslims. The mainstream media focuses on the bad behaviour of Muslims who more often than not have very little understanding of their religion. The overwhelming majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims condemn acts of terror and the unlawful killing of innocent civilians; so do the majority of Muslim scholars

and leaders, yet unfortunately, the religion of Islam is almost invariably implicated in the thinking and behaviour of criminals.

The wrongdoings of Muslims are often used to justify or encourage hatred of innocent Muslims or the religion of Islam itself. Over and over again, verses from the Quran are taken out of context and criminals are said to be following Islamic dogma, when in reality nothing could be further from the truth. To understand Islam's stance on violence and war one must refer to the original sources, the Quran, and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. It is not feasible to take one verse from Quran and deduce its meaning without reading the preceding and following verses. Fully understanding the depth and subtlety of Quran is only possible when one understands the historical context and reason for revelation, as well as in depth knowledge about the life of Prophet Muhammad.

Therefore, what exactly does Islam say about war and violence?

Islam is a religion revealed by God for the benefit of humankind and it wholeheartedly forbids harming innocent people in any way. This includes their bodies, wealth, or honour. Islam teaches Muslims to treat everybody, no matter their religion ethnicity colour or social status, with respect and kindness. Islam forbids oppression and safeguards rights and it commands the Muslims to live in peace and harmony and uphold justice even towards ones enemies and even in times of war. It is never permissible to kill a person who is not hostile or who has a peace treaty.

“God does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion nor drove you out of your homes. Verily, God loves those who deal with equity.” (Quran 60:8)

When Prophet Muhammad sent his companions into battle he said “Go out in the name of God and do not kill any old man, infant, child or woman. Spread goodness and do good, for God loves those who do good.”^[1] **“Do not kill the monks in monasteries” or “Do not kill the people who are sitting in places of worship.”**^[2] Once after a battle the Prophet saw the corpse of a woman on the ground and said, **“She was not fighting. How then was she killed?”**

This way of behaving in times of war was further emphasised by Abu Bakr, the leader of the Islamic nation after Prophet Muhammad. He said, “I command you ten things. Do not kill women, children, or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly.”

If an enemy inflicts harm upon the Muslims, or drives them out of their homes and homelands then the Muslims are commanded by God to stand up for them, but even under duress a Muslim must behave justly.

“Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but don't transgress limits; for God loves not the transgressor. And fight them on until there is no more oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in God; but if they cease let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression.” (Quran 2:190-193)

“O you who believe! stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety, and fear God. For God is well-acquainted with all that you do.” (Quran 5:8)

The message from Quran is clear. The taking of life, any life, unjustifiably, is a grave sin. Both the Quran and the authentic teachings of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, are imbued with an overwhelming sense of justice and forgiveness. The message of Islam is for all of humankind, and Islam demands mercy and wisdom in all dealings even in times of war. When atrocities that defy belief and defy the teachings of Islam are committed, it is important to remember that not all Muslims represent Islam.

“We ordained that if anyone killed a person not in retaliation of murder, it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind.” (Quran 5:32)

Footnotes:

[1] *Abu Dawood*

[2] *Imam Ahmad*

(part 3 of 3): Strange superstitions are not part of Islam

In the previous two articles we discussed the fact that not all Muslims represent the religion of Islam. Our focus was Islam's attitude towards war, violence and terrorism. We established that Islam is a religion of peace, and that unjustifiable killing or violence is absolutely forbidden. Sadly many Muslims around the world have sullied the name of Islam by committing acts and atrocities that have no place in a religion based on the concepts of justice and mercy. However this is not the only way that Muslims themselves misrepresent Islam.

From the outset it is important to understand the foundation of Islam - God is One. He has no partners, no sons, daughters or helpers. He alone created, and sustains the universe. Nothing happens without His permission.

“He is Allah, (the) One. Allah-us-Samad (The Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need, He neither eats nor drinks). He begets not, nor was He begotten; And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him.” (Quran 112)

“Is there any god with Allah? High Exalted be God above all that they associate as partners (to Him)!” (Quran 27:63)

Muslims believe this with certainty, there is no god but Allah, and they believe that the prophets and messengers were sent by God to guide humankind to the truth that God is One. Therefore, in Islam there is no room for intercession of any kind. It is God Alone that Muslims worship and God Alone that they ask for help, in any and all endeavours. This concept is known as *tawheed* and it forms the basis of the religion of Islam.

Sadly however, when we look at the behaviour of some Muslims we find practices and superstitions that are actually forbidden in Islam. Sincere worship for God Alone has become adulterated by the local customs and traditions, yet many Muslims are unwilling to admit that such corruption exists. The fact is not all Muslims worship in the correct way and not all Muslims are representative of Islam.

One of the gravest sins is calling on somebody or something other than God. This is forbidden in Islam, yet around the world these deeply entrenched cultural practices remain. Muslims who call on the dead to intercede for them do not represent the religion of Islam. Muslims, who believe that righteous people are able to intercede between ordinary people and God, do not represent the religion of Islam. Muslims who wear good luck charms and amulets in the belief that they can somehow ward off evil or bring good, do not represent the religion of Islam. These are direct contradictions to the Oneness of God.

Corruption of worship is evident in the many myths and traditions that surround pregnancy and childbirth. Many traditions involve the use of charms spells and amulets. A Muslim however, knows that everything is from God, and that there is no luck or randomness involved. Strange superstitions can neither bring harm or good. Islam teaches that there is no power or strength except with God, it dispels these myths and superstitions thereby freeing humankind from this type of bondage.

Bearing this in mind let us examine the cultural practices surrounding two fictional women. The women in these anecdotes are entirely fictional but the practices are real and form just a small part of hundreds of traditions and practices used throughout the Muslim world to ward off evil or obtain good.

In a small village outside Mogadishu in Somalia, 18 year old Nura has just given birth to her first child. A beautiful healthy boy. Nura and her family believe that the bracelet he wears made from string and herbs will protect him from the evil eye. Most Somali people link their identity with Islam however a

large number of pre Islamic practices have survived. There is a strong belief in *jinn*(devil) possession and *zar* (a cult in which women are willingly possessed) and most Bedouin Somalis routinely wear protective amulets. Prior to Islam the belief system in Somalia was largely animist, it dates back to the Palaeolithic age in which every object, be it animate or inanimate had a soul.

These traditions and practices usually evolve around major life experiences such as birth and death and often involve the use of plants and herbs both for their medicinal properties and the belief that such plants and herbs offer protection from malevolent spirits. Thus a new born baby would be given an amulet to safeguard him from harm. This practice clearly denies the Oneness of God. These are traditions that do not make sense when the true nature of God is revealed through Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

Far away in Turkey in the thriving metropolis of Istanbul Ceylan's mother and aunts are adorning the wall of the room in which she will give birth with strings of onion, garlic and blue beads. They believe that this will protect Ceylan and the newborn baby from the evil eye and evil jinn known in Turkey as the "baby snatcher". Amongst the strings of herbs being hung in the birthing room in Turkey you may also find blue beads. These are prevalent in many Muslim communities. People wear amulets, keep them on hand to give to guests, hang them near the doors of their homes or in their cars. The beads are usually made of glass in order to reflect any bad luck or evil and the belief is that like a mirror it draws positive energy away and reflects the bad intentions back. According to this false belief, if the evil is too strong for the blue eye to push away, it breaks and sacrifices itself.

The origin of the blue beads is difficult to trace however it is common in all countries around the Mediterranean Sea including Greece, Cyprus and Egypt. It may even date back as far as the ancient Egyptians. The eye of Horus (ancient Egyptian symbol of protection and power) may be the origin of this widespread belief, and the colour blue has been used since antiquity to denote healing and protection. Islam is clear, healing and protection is from God Alone.

Corrupted worship and superstitious practices are prevalent in Muslim communities throughout the world. You may have noticed some in your own community; however they are not representative of Islam. Islam is the religion of informed knowledge, not blind belief and strange superstitions. The power of God is Omnipotent. When Muslims behave in a manner that seems to encourage superstitions and strange behaviour, they do not represent Islam. The message of Islam is clear. There is no power or strength except with God, and Prophet Muhammad is His final Messenger.