

Are Islamic Beliefs Understood in America?

When I was a child, I grew up in a rural area in Darfur, Sudan. It was a simple life on the highest scale of happiness. Imagine growing up in a place where electricity wasn't available, but a person could still appreciate the life so much. We entertained ourselves by creating our own games and we played from neighbor to neighbor's house without any differences or even thinking about what we believed. There was a strong link together as humans despite the religious differences. I had family members in both faiths, Muslim and Christian, living together for many years in a perfect, peaceful life. We attended school together, spent enormous time with each other, especially for religious purposes to commemorate important events, anniversaries, and holidays. We celebrated birthdays, weddings and other special occasions. During those days families, friends and relatives spent enjoyable moments together.

I received my religious education from my family. I have been reading the Holy Quran since I was a child and I am now almost forty years old. My grandfather was a teacher and had three to four hundred students and he used to teach us sacred verses outdoors beside a fire at night. I memorized a lot of verses and learned how to recite and write the Holy Quran.

I am so sorry to say that region is not at peace today. That security and unity have been completely devastated by the war. Not only because of the religious differences, but because of some evil politicians' ideologies that drove the native people out of that place for their own interest. These groups called themselves "Arabs" and attacked us. We were Muslims too, but still they were fighting us. According to the Quran, this is wrong. In Chapter 49, Verse 13, it says, "O Mankind, we have created you from a male and a female; and we have made you into tribes and sub-tribes that you may recognize one another" (Quran). By forming the militias to attack civilians, destroy the culture, and seize the properties, the Arab rulers ruined Darfur

because they felt they were better or superior to those black-skinned Muslims who had been there for generations. Their idea was to kill us all. During this time, three hundred thousand people died in Darfur (UNICEF). Today similar divisions exist under different names in different places. However, all the differences are based on misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the message of The Quran for political motives. Evil people use different methods to spread corruption in the land. Today Islam is a victim among religions. Some groups of Muslims misuse Islam to carry out attacks against innocent people in the name of Islam and justify these actions by quoting the scripture out of context.

Islam has existed for about fourteen hundred years. The Prophet Mohamed was born in Mecca about 570 A.D. and died in Messina in 632 A.D. Although Mohamed himself was illiterate, Muslims believe The Holy Quran is the revelation from God revealed to his last and final prophet, The Prophet Mohamed. Islam comes from an Arabic word “silm” which means “peace.” Islam generally means total submission to the will of God. The Muslim believes that Allah sent many messengers and prophets throughout the ages with the message of unity with God. Islam recognizes Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, David, John the Baptist and Jesus as prophets and many others. Islam makes it an article of faith to believe in Jesus Christ. Muslims believe Jesus was one of the mightiest messengers. They believe he was born miraculously without any male intervention. We read from The Quran, “Behold!’ the Angel said, ‘God has chosen you, and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations. O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him, whose name shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near to God. He shall speak to the people from his cradle and in maturity, and shall be of the righteous.’

She said: 'O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?' He said: 'Even so; God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing, He says to it, "Be!" and it is.' (Quran 3:42-47). Muslims totally agree he was the Messiah and that he healed the blind, lepers, the lame and gave life to the dead with God's permission. Muslims respect and revere Jesus as one of the greatest of God's messengers to mankind, but not as God or the son of God and that is the clear difference. The definition of God in Islam is, "Say: He is Allah, The One and only. Allah, the Eternal, Absolute. He begets not, nor is He begotten. And there is none like unto Him" (Al-Qur'an 112:1-4).

Islam has Five Pillars, which describe the duties of a good Muslim. The first, Shahada, means to believe there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah and Mohamed is his prophet. The second, Salah, means prayer – Muslims must pray five times a day. The third, Sawm, means fasting during the month of Ramadan. All adult Muslims must not eat or drink from dawn to dusk. The fourth, Zakah, means charity. Any Muslim who has savings or wealth more than “nesab” level, which is about 85 grams of gold, must pay 2.5% to charity. The fifth, Hadjj, or pilgrimage, means journey to Mecca, the holy place for Muslims for those who are able to make the journey at least once during their lifetime, but it is not mandatory for those who are not capable (Islamic Bulletin).

Muslims also rely on the Six Pillars of Faith: belief in Allah, his angels, his books to mankind, his prophets and messengers, the Day of Judgment, and Destiny (Islamic Bulletin). Islam teaches a belief in one God (Allah) who should be worshipped and obeyed. There is also a belief in angels, which are unseen creatures described in the Quran. Certain books, believed to have been revealed to the prophets are considered divine revelations. The most important books are Abraham's Scrolls, Psalms as revealed to David, the Torah revealed to the Prophet Moses,

the Gospel revealed to Jesus and the Quran, revealed to the Prophet Mohamed. Muslims also believe in the Prophets of Allah, those pious, truthful men chosen to be models for all of mankind. There will be a Day of Judgment when the life of this world will end and Allah will judge each person according to his actions, both good and bad. The righteous people will be rewarded with Paradise and those who disobeyed will be punished. Finally, there is Destiny – the belief that since Allah controls and directs everything in the universe, from the smallest to the greatest event, Muslims must put their trust in Allah and they are required to make a sincere effort to do their best, not to sit back and be resigned to whatever is happening (Islamic Bulletin).

I used to be a volunteer teacher at the mosque for Sunday School for three years from 2011-2013. I taught teenagers and children basic Arabic so they could read The Quran in its original language of Arabic, so they can at least have the ability to recite and understand the scripture, instead of translations. Unfortunately, I have to work on weekends so I stopped teaching. But I still attend the regularly ritual meeting every Friday. On Friday, December 04, 2015, I interviewed one of the sisters in the Mosque after Friday prayer about her daily life, wearing the Hijab or head scarf, and if she faces any prejudices from non-Muslims based on her appearance. She claimed these prejudices are very common. On the street every day she gets asked questions like, “Are you Muslim?” She feels maybe they are thinking “terrorist.” She says, “These questions are unavoidable for Muslim women. On those days, I have trust in my faith and will remain in hijab as long as I am alive, inshaa Allah.” Hopefully, someday these nonsense expressions from those who do not understand Islam and true Muslim will end. I totally agree on her feelings about being a Muslim woman, but for men these prejudices seem a little easier because men don’t cover their heads and that makes their identity unrecognizable in most cases.

As of 2014, it is estimated that there are 1.08 billion Muslims in the world.

Unfortunately, because various groups like El Qaeda and ISIS pervert the true teaching of Islam through misunderstandings, lack of knowledge and misquoting of the Quran, people of other faiths lump all Muslims together as terrorists.

For me as a Muslim, living in the United States, today it is a common practice by non-Muslims to think of me as a terrorist. This prejudice is everywhere: whether I am on the street, in the stores, traveling or at work. It is impossible to spend a single day without hearing, “Muslims are terrorists.” In my former workplace, Micron Technology for example, back in 2008 it was very common for coworkers to call me a terrorist. At that time I was very new to the United States and I did not know how to respond to them. Now I could explain in a better way about some of the aspects of Islam that seem to cause the most misunderstandings about my religion.

Jihad does not mean “holy war.” The term “Holy War” in Arabic, “harbi al mugaddes”, does not exist anywhere in the Quran. Jihad comes from an Arabic root word, “jahada” which simply means to strive and struggle to make the society better. It also means “work hard.” Some examples: to study hard in school for a test, to work to provide for the family, to exercise to improve yourself physically, or even to try to heal yourself from illness – all these are called Jihad. To defend yourself in battle or against oppression is considered Jihad, too (Naik). This word is often mistranslated, not even by non-Muslims, but also with some Muslims, who do not read the Quran with understanding. The Quran states explicitly and clearly in Chapter 5, Verse 32 where it says, “Whoever kills a person [unjustly]...it is as though he has killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved all mankind.” (Qur’an, 5:32) Even though this verse is clear enough, yet it has been so misquoted by the terrorist groups that it causes non-Muslims to misunderstand it completely.

The concept of Sharia law also causes a lot of confusion. In his article "*Sharia Law in the United States 101*" Omar Sacirbey says, "Many Americans think of Sharia as an Islamic legal system characterized by misogyny, intolerance, and harsh punishment." Some anti-Islamic activists warn that Muslims are trying to sneak Sharia into the American legal system (Sacirbey). Some states have become so alarmed by this that they have passed laws forbidding the use of Sharia. These states include North Carolina, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, South Dakota and Tennessee. According to the true practices of Islam, Sharia is the code which guides a Muslim in all affairs of his or her life. The basic rule is that things are lawful unless they are specified as unlawful in the Quran or the Sunnah, which is a record of the Prophet Mohamed's action and sayings. So Sharia states that Muslims must not drink alcohol, use drugs, engage in adultery or use interest from money. It is also prohibited to eat pork or any bird or animal that is a predator (Sacirbey). Sharia literally means "the path to be followed." In the countries that base their legal systems on Sharia, it is mostly used for family law or to settle disputes between people. Secular courts cover the other crimes. There is no reason to worry that Sharia law will be adopted in the United States because we already have laws to cover these matters.

People in America don't always understand why women cover themselves with the Hijab when they go out in public. This is the scarf or head covering that is the minimum required by the Quran. The Quran teaches that both men and women should wear proper, decent, modest and clean clothes (Sacirbey). The woman is free to dress as she pleases at home and with her female friends and family. Islam thinks of women as equal partners with men and a family cannot exist without them. In the Quran, Chapter 3, Verse 195 it says, "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female, and you are equal to one another (Quran)."

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, many Muslim-Americans were the victims of insults from other Americans who did not understand the Muslim religion. President George Bush made a speech on September 17, 2001 where he made it plain that he would not tolerate blaming Muslims for what had happened. He said,

“The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war. America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law professors, members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads. And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect. Women who cover their heads in this country must feel comfortable going outside their homes. Moms who wear cover must be not intimidated in America. That's not the America I know. That's not the America I value. Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior (Bush)”

. This statement did some good to quiet the people who reacted to 9/11 by thinking Muslims were at fault or that the United States was at war with Islam.

With the rise of ISIS the situation has changed for the worse. Americans cannot be blamed completely for thinking this organization represents Islam, but the truth is that both El Qaeda and ISIS have interpreted Islam to their own purposes. They call themselves jihadists, but they kill both Muslims and anyone else who stands in their way. Their ideology is not based on true Muslim teachings and their methods rely on terrorizing people. Most recently, ISIS has

claimed responsibility for attacks in Paris, France, that killed many people and injured hundreds of others. In response, one of the Republican candidates for president has even suggested listing all Muslims in the United States in a database and requiring them to list their religion on their IDs (Hillyard). Governors in twenty seven states have suggested that we not allow any more refugees from Syria to come to the United States (CNN). President Obama, on the other hand, has said that is not the American way and the United States has a long history of giving refuge to victims of war and violence.

I am hoping that Americans can overcome their fear of Islam and the best way is to have an interaction with Muslims and to ask questions and remove misconceptions in their minds instead of talking in this hateful way. If you know the teaching of Islam, surely, the less a person has to fear of a true Muslim. It is my duty and that of every Muslim citizen to follow the country's laws as long as the law does not force us to do something which is against the religion or prevent us to do something which is compulsory in our religion. It makes me unhappy that people sometimes don't understand that my religion is a religion of peace, but I will use every chance I have to talk to them and help them overcome their prejudices. For example, I could point out that Hitler claimed to be a Christian and he incinerated six million Jews. Based on what he did, should we blame Christianity? I believe no religion supports violence.

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