

MUTUAL MISCONCEPTIONS: How Christians and Muslims misunderstand each other.

I. Introduction

All of us know the personal hurt of being misunderstood. It is all the more tragic when misunderstandings and misconceptions are elevated to national and cultural levels extending the hurt to millions. In these days of increased travel and communication we have the opportunity of diminishing misconceptions that have plagued us, sometimes for centuries. We have the opportunity to talk to and listen to each other as never before. Let us not squander this opportunity. I hope my contribution today will be a small part of overcoming some of the many misconceptions that have arisen between Muslims and Christians.

To truly understand each other we must talk and listen with as much fairness and objectivity as we can muster. It is too easy to yield to prejudice when we are confronted with something difficult to understand or something contrary to what we expect or contrary to what we want to believe. Such prejudice does no one any good. It only reinforces inaccurate stereotypes and prolongs and deepens misconceptions. Modern science at its best strives to overcome ignorance and misunderstanding with impartial research. We would do well to adopt this attitude of impartiality toward the more difficult issues that science cannot address that are addressed by our faiths.

This is a short attempt to address some of the major misconceptions between Muslims and Christians about each other and each others' religions.

II. Christian misconceptions about Islam

A. These are things those of us who are Christians need to take to heart.

Many Christians see all Muslims as extremists, terrorists, or intolerant. There is a tendency to see all Muslims as religious fanatics instead of normal, pious people. I think there are three main reasons for this:

1. Many Christians believe media bias which often shows extremism. They don't realize that they are being given an incomplete picture. Many are often ignorant of the variety within Islam that there are peaceful groups as well as violent ones, spiritually motivated groups as well as politically motivated ones.

2. Many Christians don't understand the political side of Islam. Christians tend to be ignorant of Muhammad's role as political ruler in Medina and the enormous amount of teaching and law in the Qur'an and Islam regarding politics. Many tend to simplistically look at Muhammad through the example of Jesus who did not have a political agenda.
3. Although Jesus grew up under an oppressive imperialistic power, Western Christians don't know the experience of being dominated by another political or economic power. Note I have said Western Christians and not Middle Eastern, African, Eastern European, and Chinese Christians to name a few. Western Christians find it hard to appreciate the hurt much of the West's involvement in the Middle East has caused Muslims. They don't understand the frustration that fuels much of the violence the extremists commit. Western Christians often don't understand poverty and oppression because their lives have been relatively free from injustice and want.

These are the reasons why I think Christians often make unfair generalizations as to what Muslims are like.

B. Many Christians don't understand Muhammad's place in Islam, and it leads them to two kinds of misconception concerning Muhammad:

2. Often Christians out of ignorance tend to think that Muhammad holds the same general place in Islam that Jesus holds in Christianity. They don't realize that Muslims don't see Islam as "Mohammad's" religion, that is, a religion that Muhammad began. Muslims see Islam as the basic religion that all prophets proclaimed, Muhammad happening to be the last prophet. This is why the term "Mohammedanism" is offensive to Muslims and is more properly replaced with "Islam". The misconception here is over-estimating the importance of Muhammad to Muslims in the religion of Islam, almost believing they worship him.
3. On the other hand, Christians also underestimate what Muhammad means to Muslims. This is seen in that many Christians don't understand the current attitude toward Muhammad as expressed in the Salmon Rushdie affair. While Muslims don't worship Muhammad, Christians often don't understand the place of affection and devotion he does have so that they understand the hurt defaming remarks cause. Muslims see Muhammad as the last and greatest of the prophets and so accord him the greatest amount of respect that they give to any man. It is like the hurt Christians feel when they hear Jesus called "just a good teacher", "just a man", or even "just a prophet". To Christians, Jesus is so much more, and to call Him something less is blasphemy. Christians need to understand the emotions involved in others' beliefs and be sensitive to Muslims.

C. Many Christians have misconceptions about the roles of politics and religion in Islam.

Christians can tend to believe that Islam is exclusively spread by the sword. They are often ignorant of world history that shows that much of Islam's spread in the world was the result of traders and Muslim Sufi missionaries. This is especially true for Islam's spread in Asia. Western Christians tend to know more about the wars with Islam that occurred around the Mediterranean and in Europe.

Also, many Christians are ignorant of the political nature of Islam so they think it should not be involved in politics today. Throughout history Islam has seen political means as being appropriate for accomplishing the spread of the religion since the religion of Islam is meant to embrace the whole of life. Christians often don't realize that the Qur'an and Islamic law embrace not only personal religion but family law, civil law, and criminal law.

Christians also forget that for much of the history of Christianity, the Church shared this view that it was to be intimately involved in politics. The Church has for much of its history seen the sword of political authority as a necessary and proper support for its position. Only in recent years has this expectation been overturned.

D. Many Christians see Islamic culture as backward and unrefined.

Christians are often ignorant of Islam's rich and full cultural heritage. They don't know that Muslims have extensive bodies of literature in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. They don't know that Islam has a long and full history in architecture, calligraphy, poetry, philosophy and science. This leads to Christians not understanding why Muslims often take more pride in their Islamic cultural heritage than in the cultural achievements of the West.

Like the West in general, Christians often tend to judge other nations in terms of technological progress, or they slip into simple prejudice at something that they don't understand.

Christians are often ignorant of the influences Islam has had on our own culture. They don't realize that our knowledge of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy came through Arabic translations of these texts. Many are ignorant of the debates and discussions in theology that took place between Islamic and Christian scholars for hundreds of years. They don't realize that all of our sciences and especially mathematics, medicine and astronomy were influenced by Medieval Islamic books and research. Many don't realize that all of our fine arts have been profoundly influenced by Islamic fine arts, from painting and literature to architecture and music. In general, many Christians are ignorant of the long and varied history of contact and influence between Islam and Christianity.

These are just some of many areas where Christians need to become better informed concerning Islam.

III. Muslims' misconceptions about Christianity.

*Please accept this as an outsider's view.
These are misconceptions I have encountered personally.*

A. Many Muslims view all Westerners as Christians.

Because culture and religion are so intertwined in Islam, I think Muslims have a hard time realizing that all Westerners are not Christians. The West has a Christian cultural heritage, but in the main our culture and society have left that heritage to pursue a more secular course. Religion in the West has been moved out of public life to be a mostly private affair. Crime, immorality, drug abuse, and drunkenness are not things that Christianity promotes or allows. It is adamantly opposed to them for the sins that they are in themselves, and for the hurt and tragedy they foster.

Many Muslims have a hard time understanding that most countries in the West do not allow the Church to have dominant political power. The limiting of the Church's power is a reflection of the biblical teaching that coercion and true religion do not go together. Muslims tend to confuse Jesus with Muhammad and think that He left a law and political agenda similar to Muhammad's. Jesus didn't do these things. The law He left is the Law of love summed up by what is called the Golden Rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 7:12, NIV). It is this teaching, which still operates to a great degree in the West, that is behind people being allowed to freedom of speech, even to the degree where Muhammad is insulted in The Satanic Verses, and Jesus is degraded in The Last Temptation of Christ. This also contributes to why the West views it as wrong for even blasphemers to be injured or killed. Christians are also taught to love their enemies and pray for their repentance.

Also, Muslims tend to misunderstand that, according to the Bible, becoming a Christian is primarily a personal decision, not a cultural or family identity. No one is born a Christian. Everyone must decide for themselves that they will trust in Jesus' death for them on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) A culture becomes "Christian" only secondarily after many people choose Christ and obey His teachings, and it affects the way they live.

B. Many Muslims view the basic message of Christianity and Islam as the same, that in essence they teach the same thing.

I appreciate the tolerance that this sentiment is trying to express. But it is not fair to Christianity or Islam to say they teach essentially the same thing. Islam claims to be the final religion. This is the claim of the Qur'an itself (Surah 61:9, "As-Saff" or "The Ranks"): "He it is who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it conqueror of all religion however much idolaters may be averse." (Pickthall's translation) Likewise, Jesus claims to be the only way to the Father, and His teachings the most authoritative statements of truth given by God to mankind

(John 14:6): "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'" (NIV)

Such statements, though well intended, only confuse the issue of truth. In order for both Islam and Christianity to be true at the same time, then major parts of each would have to be viewed as wrong. For instance, Islam holds that sincere repentance is enough for God to grant a person forgiveness. Christianity holds that repentance is not enough but must be united with trust in the atoning death of Christ. These are very different views. They involve differing views of the nature of sin, of God's character, and of forgiveness. Neither side can yield its view without giving up essential foundational doctrines.

C. Many Muslims assume that the Bible has been corrupted, that is, that it's content and meaning have been intentionally and radically changed.

Most Muslims I have talked to are convinced that the Bible has been corrupted so much that it cannot be trusted. This matter in itself is of such great importance that it should not be treated lightly by anyone but should be searched out with care and objectivity. The Bible and the Qur'an each claim for themselves to contain the truth that will lead to eternal life. Yet they do not agree with each other. Here are four issues that are commonly misunderstood by Muslims concerning the Bible:

1. The existence of so many different translations of the Bible means that there are many different versions of the Bible, meaning different Bibles. This is completely wrong. There is only one Bible, in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. There are many different translations of this one book because of the nature of language. Language changes, so translations need to reflect these changes. Language is also rich in meaning. Additional translations bring out nuances that might be missing in others. The basic meaning in all these translations is the same. This situation is the same as is found with English and Urdu translations of the Qur'an. There are many different translations of the same book. Also, there has never been a hesitation in Christianity to translate the Scriptures. The original languages have never been regarded as divine languages defying translation. The Bible presents that revelation can be adequately conveyed in human languages. Revelation is meant to be understood, loved, and obeyed (Deut. 30:11-14). That is why Christians take so many pains to see the Bible translated and translated accurately.
2. It is often believed that since there are four gospels in the New Testament that there was originally one which the Church corrupted. There is no historical evidence that this was ever the case. There is no evidence that Jesus left a book to His disciples called "the Gospel." In fact, Jesus promised, not to leave a book, but to guide the disciples into all the truth as they wrote of Him. Jesus left the task of recording Scripture to His disciples whom He would guide by the Holy Spirit (John 14:25,26; 15:26,27)

3. It is often remarked about the Bible that since there are variations in the manuscripts that the text must be corrupt. I have found that most Muslims do not realize that their own book, the Qur'an, is in a similar situation. In the reliable Islamic traditions it is recorded that many of the companions of Muhammad had collections of the Qur'an that differed from each other. These differences have been preserved. The Qur'an collections differed in many respects, for example, the number and order of Surahs, the spelling of words, and the use of different words in the exact same contexts. If one examines these variations fairly, they will realize that the situations for the Bible and the Qur'an are the same. These variations in details don't affect the overall reliability of the text. There are small areas that are in doubt as to the exact reading, but none of the variant readings affect any major or minor doctrine in Islam or Christianity. Both books are amazingly accurate as regards the historical preservation of their texts. The significant difference between the two books is in their message, not their textual history. It is a misconception to believe that one has been corrupted beyond reliability in the transmission of its text while the other has not.
4. Also, Muslims are often ignorant of the history of the transmission of the Bible that bears this out. The Old Testament of the Bible has been the holy Scriptures of the Jews since before Jesus, and they still are to this day. The New Testament has been the holy Scriptures, with the Old Testament, for the Christians since the days of the Apostles of Jesus. In the five centuries preceding Muhammad this same Bible that we have today was the Scripture of the Christians. Its content and meaning have not been changed either before Muhammad or after.

D. Many Muslims believe Christians have made Jesus out to be God, that is, that they have elevated a man to deity.

All that the Christians believe about Jesus being God comes from Jesus' own words and actions in the Gospels, and the testimony of Jesus' closest disciples as preserved in the New Testament. Christian belief is based on what Jesus said about Himself and did to prove it and what the disciples had seen of Jesus and what they had been taught by Him. If you read the Gospels fairly you will see that Jesus identifies Himself as God and does many things that are the prerogative of God alone. Christians have not made Jesus out to be God. We have only accepted what Jesus revealed about Himself. Christians are as sensitive to blasphemy as any Jew or Muslim. We have only accepted Jesus as God by examining the evidence left by Jesus Himself.

These are some of many areas where I have found Muslims could be better informed.

IV. Conclusions

As I said at the beginning, these are just a few of the major misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians. If you feel I have not been fair, or that I have left out any of greater importance than these, please say so and help me to learn.

My burden is that we discuss our faiths fairly, clearly, and with respect and sympathy. We would all agree that God is to be served with our entire lives and hearts. Let us approach each other sincerely and seek to correct our mutual misconceptions.

Thank you for allowing me to address you. May God bless you as you seek Him and seek out truth.

Given by Keith E. Small, 18 February 1997, Bradford University, Bradford, West Yorkshire.

I would appreciate your comments on any of the points that were raised.