

Misperceptions About Muslims

Whig Article May 17/08.

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In Canada, though there is a general lack of knowledge about religions other than Christianity such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism or Sikhism, the mistrust and fears about Islam exceed any hostility felt against any of these religions. Judaism and Christianity have their own historical issues, but Islam, even though it is viewed as one of the Abrahamic religions, does not fare well in the public perception.

This negative perception has increased since September 11/01, and though this was the action of a few Muslims, all Muslims have been tarnished because of it. It has been further exacerbated by the rhetoric and actions of the American government. The rhetoric of the "Axis of Evil" with attacks on Muslim majority countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan has conflated Islam, Muslims and politics.

It would be dishonest not to acknowledge that some Muslims are adding to the stereotyping, but the blanket blaming of all Muslims is hard to overcome. As a comparison, the recent incidents of polygamous Mormons, or the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, or the abuse of aboriginal children in residential schools, has not led to any condemnation of all Mormons or all Christians or all Catholics. This same sane approach is missing for Muslims.

One of the misperceptions is that Islam is a religion of violence. But Islam is not the only religion which teaches that war is sometimes necessary and justified. Other religions also openly discuss wars. In the Old Testament there is mention of righteous anger and God tells Jews to wage war against the Canaanites. The Christian Catholic church had St Augustine of Hippo, who initiated the theory of the "Just War" in the 4th century, and Hinduism's great Song of the God, the Bhagavad Gita, is about duties which include making war when it is necessary.

All religions agree that peace should be pursued first and that there are limitations and conditions to wage wars, but some wars are seen as just and necessary. Islam has strict directions that women and children must be protected and trees, fields and crops must not be damaged in a battle.

Unfortunately, it is Islam and Muslims who are seen as violent with the focus on "jihad." Both the West and some Muslims have created such a mess of this that few know what is the central message of Islam.

Islam does address the reasons for wars. It is permissible to fight in the defence of one's country, one's religious community or injustices against the vulnerable. This permission to fight is always tempered with many limitations, along with the message that to forgive or desist is better.

As there were several battles between the fledging community of Muslims and the tribes around Mecca and Medina, there are passages in the Quran about fighting and battles. The directions are clear about the right to defend oneself but that to go out looking for fights is not allowed.

“Fight in God’s cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for God does not love aggressors... fight against them until there is no more oppression”
And again,

“Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged...those who have been driven from their homelands ...if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques - in all of which God’s name is abundantly extolled - would surely have been destroyed”

As for those who died in battle the Quran states,

“Do not think of those who have been slain in God’s cause as dead. Nay, they are alive! With their Sustainer have they their sustenance....no fear need they have nor shall they grieve...”

Please note that there is no mention of virgins awaiting suicide bombers!

This permission to fight is seen as specific to the context of 7th century Arabia, but the principles are applicable for all times. What is often forgotten is that fighting is against oppression and aggression of others. It is not to be initiated merely because a people or a country decides to do so.

It bears repeating that over the centuries, too many countries and peoples have used religion to justify wars for political or economic gains, but this has nothing to do with the faith itself. What is occurring now also has more to do with material greed, power, and totalitarianism, than with wars of defence or wars against injustices. For example, Laura Bush’s comment, after Sept 11,2001, that the United States was “freeing Muslim women” in Afghanistan by ousting the Taliban was correctly met with cynicism.

To many of us believers the message of Islam which we love is expressed in these verses.

“God is with those who restrain themselves, and those who do well.”

“Those who spend freely whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and pardon all men, verily God loves those who do good.

“Indeed if any show patience and forgive, that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs.”

“The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with the one that is better, then lo, he with whom you share enmity will become as though he was a bosom friend.”

During these times of violence and retaliation, Muslims and non Muslims need to be reminded of the Quranic verses which demand kindness, restraint and balance. It degrades Islam if we only focus on battles and wars, and not on living our daily lives with love and compassion.