

Ten Misconceptions about Islam

In this article, we will try to clear up many of the misconceptions that are prevalent about Islam. Before jumping into the list of misconceptions directly, it is important to give a little interesting background about the source of Islam.

Islam is the name of a way of life which the Creator wants us to follow. We avoid the word religion because in many non-Islamic societies, there is a separation of "religion and state." This separation is not recognized at all in Islam: the Creator is very much concerned with all that we do, including the political, social, economic, and other aspects of our society. Hence, Islam is a complete way of life.

The source of Islam is Allah, the Creator of everything known and unknown to us. He is One, and He is Unique. Allah has taught us about Islam via two mediums: the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Both the Qur'an and Sunnah were transmitted to us, humanity, via the Messenger of Allah: Muhammad bin Abdullah, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him (saas). The Messenger of Allah was nothing more and nothing less than a mortal messenger of the immortal Creator.

The Qur'an is a book containing the literal Word of Allah. It was transmitted from Allah to an angel of His (Gabriel), and from the angel to the Messenger of Allah who delivered it to us. The Qur'an covers a wide variety of topics, including evidence to support its claim of being the Word of the Creator, stories of earlier generations, rules which humanity is asked to obey, and information about the Hereafter. The Qur'an claims that it is protected from change by other than Allah, and this is confirmed by its 1400 year history. The earliest copies and the latest copies are the same.

The Sunnah is the term used to describe how the Messenger of Allah (saas) lived his life. The Messenger's life is an example for all Muslims, or those who accept Islam, to follow. Whatever the Messenger (saas) did, said, or approved of is a source of Islam just as much as the Qur'an. The Messenger's role is not overemphasized: his life was dictated by what the Creator desired, and the Messenger did not add or subtract to Islam according to his own personal whim. His life was such that his wife called him "a walking Qur'an."

The Qur'an and Sunnah are the only two mediums by which Allah has directly taught us about Islam. This leads us to the following simple but critical principle:

If any man or woman engages in a belief or action which clearly contradicts the Qur'an or Sunnah, then that belief or action cannot be thought of as `Islamic'.

This rule applies whether the man or woman is Muslim or non-Muslim. Hence, we cannot equate Islam and the Muslims. Islam is the way of life; Muslims are people

who claim to follow that way of life. A Muslim may claim to follow Islam, but be wrong. In the context of misconceptions, we can restate the above principle in a slightly different way:

Some misconceptions about Islam are due to the wrong beliefs and actions of Muslims, and others are due to a significant lack of understanding and false stereotyping by non-Muslims.

Several misconceptions are listed below. Instead of simply stating the misconception by itself, we have also included some reasons why people might adopt that misconception. Therefore, each entry in the list is given in the following form:

<Statement of misconception> because:
<reason 1>

<reason 2>

etc.

After each misconception and its possible reasons, we show briefly why the misconception is false by showing one or more of three possibilities:

A reason is false

The reason does not logically lead to the misconception

A key piece of information is being ignored

Our answers to the misconceptions are drawn from the Qur'an and Sunnah. All other approaches are insufficient: Islam is a way of life which is very firmly based on a scholarly approach, an approach which is based on knowledge.

Misconception 1

Islam is 'the religion of peace' because: The Arabic word Islam is derived from the Arabic word "Al-Salaam" which means peace.

It might seem strange to think of this as a misconception, but in fact it is. The root word of Islam is "al-silm" which means "submission" or "surrender." It is understood to mean "submission to Allah." In spite of whatever noble intention has caused many a Muslim to claim that Islam is derived primarily from peace, this is not true. Allah says in the Qur'an (translated):

[2:136] Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered. [Arabic "Muslimoon"]

A secondary root of Islam may be "Al-Salaam" (peace), however the text of the Qur'an makes it clear that Allah has clearly intended the focus of this way of life to be submission to Him. This entails submission to Him at all times, in times of peace, war, ease, or difficulty.

Misconception 2

In Islam, denial of human rights is OK because: Islam is against pure democracy

Islam tolerates slavery

The misconception does not follow from the reasons given, and the reasons ignore a great deal of information.

As stated earlier, Islam is a complete way of life. Given this, it is not surprising that the Creator is concerned with the method which we choose to govern ourselves. The preeminent rule which the Islamic state must observe is stated in the Qur'an (translation follows):

[4:59] O you who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if you do believe in Allah and the Last Day; That is best, and most suitable for final determination.

From this verse, it is clear that the state's obligation of obedience to the Creator is as important as the obedience of the individual. Hence, the Islamic state must derive its law from the Qur'an and Sunnah. This principle excludes certain choices from the Islamic state's options for political and economic systems, such as a pure democracy, unrestricted capitalism, communism, socialism, etc. For example, a pure democracy places the people above the Qur'an and Sunnah, and this is

disobedience to the Creator. However, the best alternative to a pure democracy is a democracy that implements and enforces the Shari'ah (Islamic Law).

The Creator also states in the Qur'an (translated):

[42:36-38] So whatever thing you are given, that is only a provision of this world's life, and what is with Allah is better and more lasting for those who believe and rely on their Lord, and those who shun the great sins and indecencies, and whenever they are angry they forgive, and those who respond to their Lord and keep up prayer, and their rule is to take counsel among themselves, and who spend out of what We have given them.

Allah orders us in this verse to conduct our matters by taking counsel among ourselves, or by consulting each other. This is the methodology of the Islamic state, to consult one another, but to always keep the Qur'an and Sunnah paramount. Any law which contradicts the Qur'an or Sunnah is unlawful. This broad principle of consultation is certainly wide enough to encompass a form of government where all are heard - in fact, encouraged to be heard. The early Islamic states were of this form. The petty governments of many 'Muslim countries' today do not apply this principle and in fact commit many crimes against the people.

As for slavery, Islam is unique among the 'religions' in its close attention to the peaceful removal of this practice. Before the advent of Islam, slavery was widespread all over the world. The Messenger of Islam taught us that freeing slaves was a great deed in the sight of Allah. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[3:46:693] Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Whoever frees a Muslim slave, Allah will save all the parts of his body from the (Hell) Fire as he has freed the body-parts of the slave." Said bin Marjana said that he narrated that Hadith to 'Ali bin Al-Husain and he freed his slave for whom 'Abdullah bin Ja'far had offered him ten thousand Dirhams or one-thousand Dinars.

Also from the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Malik's Muwatta, we find:

[38:9:15] Narrated Aisha Ummul Mu'minin: The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was asked what was the most excellent kind of slave to free. The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, answered, "The most expensive and the most valuable to his master."

The Creator has also made it easy for slaves to gain their freedom. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[3:46:704] Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Whoever frees his portion of a common slave should free the slave completely by paying the rest of his price from his money if he has enough money; otherwise the price of the slave is to be

estimated and the slave is to be helped to work without hardship till he pays the rest of his price."

The condition of slavery is very different in Islam than the harsh conditions imposed by non-Muslims or disobedient Muslims. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sunan Abu-Dawud, we find:

[41:4957] Narrated AbuHurayrah: The Prophet (saw) said: None of you must say: "My slave" (abdi) and "My slave-woman" (amati), and a slave must not say: "My lord" (rabbi or rabbati). The master (of a slave) should say: "My young man" (fataya) and "My young woman" (fatati), and a slave should say "My master" (sayyidi) and "My mistress" (sayyidati), for you are all (Allah's) slave and the Lord is Allah, Most High.

Also from the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[3:46:721] Narrated Al-Ma'rur bin Suwaid: I saw Abu Dhar Al-Ghifari wearing a cloak, and his slave, too, was wearing a cloak. We asked him about that (i.e. how both were wearing similar cloaks). He replied, "Once I abused a man and he complained of me to the Prophet. The Prophet asked me, 'Did you abuse him by slighting his mother?' He added, 'Your slaves are your brethren upon whom Allah has given you authority. So, if one has one's brethren under one's control, one should feed them with the like of what one eats and clothe them with the like of what one wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them (in their hard job).'"

As a result of the teachings of Islam, slavery was almost completely eradicated from many areas of the Muslim world, peacefully and without bloodshed.

Misconception 3

In Islam, women are inferior to men because:

A man can marry up to 4 wives, a woman can marry only one man

A man's share of inheritance is bigger than a woman's

A man can marry a non-Muslim, a woman cannot

Women must wear the veil

This widely held misconception does not remotely follow from the reasons given. The first and most important observation to make about the popular question "Are men and women equal?" is that it is a badly-formed, unanswerable question. The problem which many people conveniently ignore is that "equal" is not defined. This is a very critical point: the equality must be specified with respect to some measurable property. For example, women on average are superior to men if we

ask who is shorter in height than the other ("Growth and Development", Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1992). Women are also superior on average if we ask whom do children bond to deeper, mothers or fathers. Women are also superior on average if we ask who has a tendency to socialize more. On the other hand, men are superior on average if we ask who is taller in height than the other. And so on: every question can be turned around, and more importantly these are properties which are irrelevant.

What then, is the really important property which we are worried about in terms of gender equality? Naturally, from the point of view of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the obvious important property is who is dearer to Allah, men or women? This question is emphatically answered in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:124] If any do deeds of righteousness - be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Paradise, and not the least injustice will be done to them.

[33:35] For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.

The Qur'an and Sunnah repeat over and over again that Allah only favors one person over another based on that person's awareness, consciousness, fear, love, and hope of Allah (the Arabic word is difficult to translate: Taqwa). All other criteria are excluded: gender, ethnic group, country, ancestry, etc.

Given that Allah does not favor one gender over the other in His attention to us (and it helps to remember that Allah is neither male nor female), we can now address the differences between the genders in Islam. First, men and women are not the same as we know. The Creator states in the Qur'an (translation),

[3:36]...and the male is not like the female...

Men and women are different in their composition, and in their responsibilities under Islam. However, both are bound by obligations to one another, especially the following important one which must be understood in any discussion on men and women. From the Qur'an (translation),

[24:32] And marry those among you who are single and those who are fit among your male slaves and your female slaves; if they are needy, Allah will make them free from want out of His grace; and Allah is Ample-giving, Knowing.

In this verse, the Creator emphasizes that marriage is to be vigorously pursued by the Muslims: the state of being single is not to be maintained. With this in mind, we can begin to understand the four reasons cited above for the nonetheless erroneous conclusion.

Men and women are different in their responsibilities towards the families that they are strongly encouraged to set up. Women are not obligated to work, whereas men are obligated. The man must provide for the family, but the woman does not have to spend out of her money for it, though she gets a reward for doing so. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:34] Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.

From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[2:24:545] Narrated `Amr bin Al-Harith: Zainab, the wife of `Abdullah said, "I was in the Mosque and saw the Prophet (p.b.u.h) saying, `O women ! Give alms even from your ornaments.' " Zainab used to provide for `Abdullah and those orphans who were under her protection. So she said to `Abdullah, "Will you ask Allah's Apostle whether it will be sufficient for me to spend part of the Zakat on you and the orphans who are under my protection?" He replied "Will you yourself ask Allah's Apostle ?" (Zainab added): So I went to the Prophet and I saw there an Ansari woman who was standing at the door (of the Prophet) with a similar problem as mine. Bilal passed by us and we asked him, `Ask the Prophet whether it is permissible for me to spend (the Zakat) on my husband and the orphans under my protection.' And we requested Bilal not to inform the Prophet about us. So Bilal went inside and asked the Prophet regarding our problem. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) asked, "Who are those two?" Bilal replied that she was Zainab. The Prophet said, "Which Zainab?" Bilal said, "The wife of `Adullah (bin Masud)." The Prophet said, "Yes, (it is sufficient for her) and she will receive a double rewards (for that): One for helping relatives, and the other for giving Zakat."

Given that husbands are obligated to provide for wives, and that marriage is a highly recommended goal of Islam, it is easy to see why women's inheritance share is half that of men. We note also that men are obligated to provide a suitable dowry to women on marriage. In fact, it is preferable at this point to speak in terms of husbands and wives instead of men and women. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:4] And give women their dowries as a free gift, but if they of themselves be pleased to give up to you a portion of it, then eat it with enjoyment and with wholesome result.

Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[2:228]...And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them...

This one degree in no way affects the position of the Creator in which He has stated that He does not hold women dearer to him than men, or vice versa. Rather it is simply a way of partitioning responsibilities in a household of two adults: someone must make the final decision on daily matters. As will be shown below in a section on a different misconception, though the final decision rests with the husband, it is through mutual consultation that decisions are best reached at.

While men are allowed to marry up to four wives, they are also commanded to meet the preconditions of being able to financially support them. They must also deal with each wife justly and fairly with respect to marital and economic obligations. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:3] If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

Moreover, women are allowed to reject any marriage proposal made to her by prospective suitors, thus if she does not feel she can abide by the rules of the Qur'an and Sunnah if she marries a certain person, she can reject his proposal. While it is irrelevant to Islam, it is worthwhile to note that both Judaism and Christianity allow polygamy. The idea is not as foreign to the non-Muslims as is often claimed.

Finally, the wearing of the veil by women is also an illogical premise to claim that women are inferior to men. It is more appropriate to indict a society of female exploitation if it tolerates pornography rather than if it enforces the veil. Given that Allah is neither male nor female, given that He does not endear people to Himself based on their gender, given that the Creator cares about all of us male or female, given that the sexual and violent drive of men is stronger than that of women...given all this, it is illogical to cast a negative light on the following injunctions contained in the Qur'an (translation),

[33:59] O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not be annoyed...

[24:30-31] Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should

draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands...

On this misconception, there is a great deal more to write, most of it showing how current practices in many Muslim lands go against what the Qur'an and Sunnah have ordained, lands in which women are treated as property (unIslamic), are not educated (unIslamic), are forbidden their economic rights (unIslamic), and more. On this point in particular, we encourage everyone to consult the Qur'an and Sunnah before incriminating Islam. Always remember that Islam is a complete way of life from the Creator, and that Muslims are people who claim to follow that way of life. A Muslim may claim to follow Islam, but be wrong.

Misconception 4

Islam is well-suited only to the Arabs because:
Most Muslims are Arabs

The Qur'an is in Arabic

The first reason for this misconception is far from the truth. Of the more than one billion Muslims around the world, only 18% are Arab. The most populous Muslim country in the world is Indonesia. The second most populous Muslim country is Bangladesh. Neither of these countries is Arab.

Islam is the fastest growing major religion in the world (Encyclopedia Britannica). It has adherents on all the populated continents, and is accessible to Arabs and non-Arabs alike. In the United States, Muslims are expected to become the largest religious minority around the turn of the century, outstripping the Jews.

The universal appeal of Islam to Arabs and non-Arabs comes in spite of the Qur'an being in Arabic. Allah states in the Qur'an that this way of life called Islam is for all people (translation follows),

[21:107] And We (Allah) have not sent you (Muhammad) but as a mercy to the worlds.

[34:28] We have not sent you but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not.

Moreover, the Creator does not use the color or mother tongue of people to judge them, be they Arab or not. Instead, it is the level of their awareness of Allah which is the criterion,

[49:13] O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)."

The choice of Arabic as the language of the Qur'an is explained very simply and clearly (translation follows),

[41:44] And if We (Allah) had made it a Qur'an in a foreign tongue, they would certainly have said: "Why have not its communications been made clear? What! a foreign (tongue) and an Arab!" Say: It is, to those who believe, a guidance and a healing; and (as for) those who do not believe, there is a heaviness in their ears and it is obscure to them; these shall be called to from a far-off place.

However, it is also important to emphasize that the Qur'an in its revealed form in Arabic is the literal Word of the Creator - but any translation is not. Each translation is more accurately called a translation of an interpretation, for every translator includes his or her own bias.

Misconception 5

Islam rejects Jesus because:

Jesus is not accepted as `the Son of God'

The Qur'an and Sunnah both teach us emphatically and without any doubt that the Creator considers the statement of the Trinity to be a great falsehood. The Qur'an states (translation):

[19:88-93] They say: "(Allah) the Most Merciful has begotten a son!" Indeed you have put forth a thing most monstrous! At it the skies are ready to burst, the earth to split asunder, and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin, that they should invoke a son for (Allah) the Most Merciful. For it is not consonant with the majesty of (Allah) the Most Merciful that He should beget a son: Not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to (Allah) the Most Merciful as a servant.

However, the misconception that Jesus is rejected does not follow from the reason given above. It is more precise to say that identifying Jesus as `the Son of God' is rejected. As a Messenger of Allah, Jesus is accorded the same honor that all the Messengers are given, as the following verse attests to (translation),

[2:136] Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered. [Arabic "Muslimoon"]

Misconception 6

Islam orders the worship of a man because:
Muslims are also 'Muhammadans'

Early non-Muslim quasi-researchers of Islam called it 'Muhammadanism', implying in some way that Muslims worshipped the Messenger of Allah (saas). Hence, the (false) basis for this misconception really emanates from non-Muslims. However, as was described above, a "Muslim" is "one who submits to Allah." The essence of Islam is pure, pure, pure monotheism. Allah says in the Qur'an (translated):

[112:1-4] Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the One on whom all depend; He begets not, nor is He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him.

[3:144] Muhammad is no more than a messenger: many were the messengers that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will you then turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah; but Allah (on the other hand) will swiftly reward those who (serve Him) with gratitude. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[9:93:470] Narrated Mu'adh bin Jabal: The Prophet said, "O Mu'adh! Do you know what Allah's Right upon His slaves is?" I said, "Allah and His Apostle know best." The Prophet said, "To worship Him (Allah) Alone and to join none in worship with Him (Allah). Do you know what their right upon Him is?" I replied, "Allah and His Apostle know best." The Prophet said, "Not to punish them (if they do so)."

[4:55:654] Narrated 'Umar: I heard the Prophet saying, "Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians praised the son of Mary, for I am only a Slave. So, call me the Slave of Allah and His Apostle."

Misconception 7

Islam tolerates the killing of innocents because:
Muslims can be terrorists

Muslims engage in 'holy wars' (jihad)

Islam spread by the sword

it has a harsh and cruel judicial system

This misconception is one of the most widely held misconceptions about Islam today. And yet in the Qur'an, the Creator unambiguously states (translation),

[17:33] Nor take life - which Allah has made sacred - except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heir authority (to demand retaliation

or to forgive): but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life, for he is helped (by the Law)

Based on this verse, it is Islamically unlawful to murder anyone who is innocent of certain crimes. It is well to remember at this point the distinction made above between Qur'an and Sunnah, and the Muslims: only the Qur'an and Sunnah are guaranteed to be in accordance with what the Creator desires, whereas the Muslims may possibly deviate. Hence, if any Muslim kills an innocent person, that Muslim has committed a grave sin, and certainly the action cannot be claimed to have been done "in the name of Islam."

It should be clear, then, that "Muslim terrorist" is almost an oxymoron: by killing innocent people, a Muslim is committing an awesome sin, and Allah is Justice personified. This phrase is offensive and demeaning of Islam, and it should be avoided. It is hoped that as the general level of public awareness and understanding of Islam increases, people will keep "terrorism" and "Islam" separate from each other, not to be used in the same phrase.

Another reason advanced in support of the misconception is that the Creator has imposed `jihad' on us. The term "holy war" is from the time of the Crusades and originated in Europe as a rallying cry against the Muslims in Jerusalem. Jihad is an Arabic word meaning struggle, but in the context of many verses in the Qur'an, it carries the meaning of military struggle, or war. Allah gradually introduced the obligation of military struggle to the Muslim community at the time of the Messenger (saas). The first verse ever revealed in that connection is as follows (translation),

[22:39] Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them;

This verse lays down the precondition for all war in Islam: there must exist certain oppressive conditions on the people. The Creator unequivocally orders us to fight oppression and persecution, even at the expense of bloodshed as the following verse shows (translation),

[2:190-192] And fight in the cause of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits. And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them at the Sacred Mosque (in Makkah) until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the reward of the unbelievers. But if they desist, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And fight with them until there is no persecution, and religion should be only for Allah, but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors.

As one might imagine, the method of military struggle has been clearly and extensively defined in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Since this subject is a huge one, we

simply summarize part of it by noting that it is unlawful to kill women, children, the infirm, the old, and the innocent. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[4:52:257] Narrated 'Abdullah: During some of the Ghazawat of the Prophet a woman was found killed. Allah's Apostle disapproved the killing of women and children.

A related misconception to jihad is often propagated by Muslims who say that "Jihad is only for self-defense of physical borders." The Qur'an and Sunnah refute this notion categorically. As the verses cited above show, jihad is obligatory wherever there is injustice, and Muslims need not acknowledge imaginary lines around the earth when it comes to upholding this obligation. The Messenger of Allah (saas) has also commented on this extensively in the Sunnah. From the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find that,

[4:52:65] Narrated Abu Musa: A man came to the Prophet and asked, "A man fights for war booty; another fights for fame and a third fights for showing off; which of them fights in Allah's Cause?" The Prophet said, "He who fights that Allah's Word (i.e. Islam) should be superior, fights in Allah's Cause."

Hence, the Creator obligates us to fight wherever people are being grossly deprived of freely hearing or practicing the Message of Allah as contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Sayyed Qutb, a famous Muslim scholar eloquently discusses the notion of jihad and self-defense in his book Milestones,

"If we insist on calling Islamic jihad a defensive movement, then we must change the meaning of the word 'defense' and mean by it 'defense of man' against all those elements which limit his freedom. These elements take the form of beliefs and concepts, as well as of political systems, based on economic, racial, or class distinction."

A third reason often cited for the misconception about Islam which says that this way of life tolerates the killing of innocents is that the judicial system of Islam is unnecessarily harsh. This reason is weak in two respects. First, it presupposes that human beings are more just and more merciful than the Creator, and therefore we can change the law. Second, it is often based on gross oversimplifications of Islamic law, such as saying "all thieves get their hands cut off."

The Qur'an and Sunnah make it clear that the law of retaliation (or equality) governs us for murder and physical injury, but forgiveness is better as the following verses from the Qur'an show (translation),

[2:178] O you who believe! the law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then prosecution (for the bloodwit) should be made according to usage, and payment should be made to him

in a good manner; this is an alleviation from your Lord and a mercy; so whoever exceeds the limit after this he shall have a painful chastisement.

[42:40-43] The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for (Allah) loves not those who do wrong. But indeed if any do help and defend themselves after a wrong (done) to them, against such there is no cause of blame. The blame is only against those who oppress men and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land, defying right and justice: for such there will be a grievous penalty. And whoever is patient and forgiving, these most surely are actions due to courage.

The Creator ordained the law of retaliation on us knowing full well that we might question it. In many non-Muslim societies today, there are ongoing debates about the death penalty. In Islam, this discussion is moot: the Creator has decided the matter for us. He has however given us an interesting verse in the Qur'an which advises to consider the matter carefully if we want to understand it (translation follows),

[2:179] And there is life for you in (the law of) retaliation, O people of understanding, that you may guard yourselves.

Most people are also unaware of the stringent conditions which must be met for the law of retaliation to be applicable. The Sunnah is full of examples of the Messenger of Allah showing us when the law's preconditions were fulfilled. For example, a thief is only liable to lose his or her hand if the item stolen exceeds a certain value, and if it is proven that the item was taken from its normal resting place. Stealing food is not punishable by the loss of one's hand, and other items are exempt as well. This is just an example of how gingerly the law is applied in Islam.

Finally, another reason advanced for this prevalent misconception is that Islam 'spread by the sword'. It should be clear by now that we must always distinguish between the Qur'an and Sunnah and the Muslims when it comes to determining what the Creator has asked of us. Allah has stated clearly in the Qur'an (translation),

[2:256] There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever rejects Satan (and what he calls to) and believes in Allah, he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handhold, which shall not break off, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.

Hence, it is impossible to accept Islam under duress. Even if misguided Muslims were to try to 'force' Islam somehow on others, it would not be accepted by the Creator based on this verse.

Historical arguments that try to demonstrate that Muslims did not 'convert others by force' are actually secondary to the argument given above. However, it is worth noting that historically, Islam did spread by peaceful means. The Message of the

Creator was conveyed to Africa and to southeast Asia by trading Muslims, and today the largest Muslim country in the world is Indonesia. The military expeditions that led to the conquest of large swathes of territory in Europe and central Asia were all marked by tolerance of other creeds and faith.

Again, it is important to remember that Allah declares it IMPOSSIBLE that Islam can be forced on a person, hence Muslims find it useless to try!

Misconception 8

Islam is intolerant of other religions because the Qur'an condemns the other religions as false

The Creator has taught us in the Qur'an and Sunnah that all other 'religions' and ways of life are unacceptable to Him if a person is aware of Islam. The Qur'an states (translation),

[3:85] And whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers.

However, even though the Creator has clearly specified that no other way of life is acceptable to Him except Islam (i.e. submission to Him as embodied in the Qur'an and Sunnah), He has also commanded the Muslims to be tolerant of people who espouse other creeds. From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Al-Awsat by Al-Tabarani, we find regarding those non-Muslims living in the Islamic state,

The Messenger of Allah (saas) said, "One who kills a non-Muslim person under protection (Arabic: dhimmi) will not even smell the fragrance of Paradise."

Also from the Sunnah, specifically in a report from Al-Khatib, we find that the Messenger of Allah (saas) also said:

Whoever hurts a non-Muslim person under protection, I am his adversary, and I shall be an adversary to him on the Day of Resurrection.

In short, Islam is intolerant of false ideas, however it is tolerant of the people who hold to those ideas. One historical example of Muslims living up to the standard of Islam can be found from the time of the Spanish Inquisition. During that disaster sprung by misguided Catholics, some Spanish Jews fled to Muslim Turkey and to this day, there is a community of Spanish-speaking Jews in Turkey. Another example may be found during one of the Crusader invasions from Western Europe. Some of the the Catholic Western European knights were so likely to rape, murder, and pillage the Jews and Orthodox Christians, that when the Muslims won, they were treated as a liberating force by those non-Muslims.

Misconception 9

Islam is a racist, afro-centric cult because:
Nation of Islam espouses the superiority of the black man

The Nation of Islam recognizes God as a black man

One of the great misconceptions of the twentieth century is that the so-called 'Nation of Islam' is a Muslim community, or more precisely: a community which submits to Allah by following the Qur'an and Sunnah. The 'Nation of Islam' is a man-made way of life which borrowed some elements of Islam and then mixed them with a large number of inventions and lies to reach their present doctrines.

It suffices to point out the 'Nation of Islam's deviation in two areas. First, they reject the essence of Islam by concocting a story wherein the Creator takes the form of a black man. From their on-line publications, we find that the 'Nation of Islam' believes in

...one God (Allah) and that Allah (God) appeared in the Person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July, 1930; the long awaited 'Messiah' of the Christians and the 'Mahdi' of the Muslims...

However, the Creator states in the Qur'an (translation),

[6:103] No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.

The 'Nation of Islam' also claims that white men are 'devils', and that black people are in general superior to all other races. However, from the Sunnah, specifically in the Messenger of Allah's farewell sermon, we find the Messenger (pbuh) saying:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white - except by piety and good action.

There are many other beliefs which the 'Nation of Islam' holds which take it outside of Islam. It is interesting to note that in the mid-1970's, the overwhelming majority of the group realized its errors and converted to true Islam. There is, however, a splinter group which remains active today.

Misconception 10

Islam produces a lazy, uneducated society because:
All things come from God, and so fatalism is OK

Modern technology and science are condemned

The reasons given for this misconception are false, and the misconception itself is actually refuted directly by the Qur'an and Sunnah. While it is true that the Creator is the source of everything to us, it is not true that this can be used as an excuse for humanity to hide behind as the following verses from the Qur'an state (translation),

[16:35] The worshippers of false gods say: "If Allah had so willed, we should not have worshipped anything but Him - neither we nor our fathers,- nor should we have prescribed prohibitions other than His." So did those who went before them. But what is the mission of messengers but to preach the Clear Message?

[43:20] They (the idolators) say, "If it had been the will of (Allah) the Most Merciful, we should not have worshipped such (deities)!" Of that they have no knowledge: they do nothing but lie!

Allah has taught us via the Qur'an and Sunnah that we all have a certain amount of free will. This free will must be exercised properly in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah to please the Creator. This is plenty of motivation for all Muslims to push themselves to be the most knowledgeable, effective Muslims they can be. If Muslim societies today are not meeting their potential, it is surely not due to their knowledge of Islam, rather it is their ignorance of this way of life. The importance of seeking knowledge and working are made clear in the Sunnah.

From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sunan Abu-Dawud, we find:

[9:1637] Narrated Anas ibn Malik: A man of the Ansar came to the Prophet (pbuh) and begged from him.

He (the Prophet) asked: Have you nothing in your house? He replied: Yes, a piece of cloth, a part of which we wear and a part of which we spread (on the ground), and a wooden bowl from which we drink water.

He said: Bring them to me. He then brought these articles to him and he (the Prophet) took them in his hands and asked: Who will buy these? A man said: I shall buy them for one dirham. He said twice or thrice: Who will offer more than one dirham? A man said: I shall buy them for two dirhams.

He gave these to him and took the two dirhams and, giving them to the Ansari, he said: Buy food with one of them and hand it to your family, and buy an axe and bring it to me. He then brought it to him. The Apostle of Allah (pbuh) fixed a handle on it with his own hands and said: Go, gather firewood and sell it, and do not let me see you for a fortnight. The man went away and gathered firewood and sold it. When he had earned ten dirhams, he came to him and bought a garment with some of them and food with the others.

The Apostle of Allah (pbuh) then said: This is better for you than that begging should come as a spot on your face on the Day of Judgment. Begging is right only for three people: one who is in grinding poverty, one who is seriously in debt, or one who is responsible for compensation and finds it difficult to pay.

Also from the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sunan Ibn Majah, we find that the Messenger of Allah said:

Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim.

Knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunnah are clearly the best types of knowledge, and knowledge which benefits humanity is good as well. The Qur'an and Sunnah do not condemn the study of this earth and in fact the Creator encourages us to investigate the world we live in according to the following verse from the Qur'an (translation),

[3:190-191] Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed Signs for people of understanding. People who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, (with the thought): "Our Lord! not for nothing have You created (all) this! Glory to You! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire."

Anything good in this document is from Allah, while everything bad in it is from us.