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Debunking Misconceptions About Muslims and Islam

Stereotypes are beliefs about an entire group that may be based on information about an individual or a small number of people within that group. People use stereotypes to make snap judgments about others without looking at them as individuals. Stereotyping is almost always negative and is always harmful because it makes unsubstantiated generalizations and ignores the humanity of the people being stereotyped.

Stereotypes about Muslims range from insults about terrorism to misunderstandings about the meaning of *Allah*. Here are four common stereotypes about Islam—each followed by an explanation of why the stereotype is incorrect and wrong.

Islam is a religion that promotes violence and terrorism.

“Islam totally prohibits terrorism—there is no text that endorses that,” says Ameena Jandali of the Islamic Networks Group, a California-based nonprofit, which provides education about Islam and promotes respect for all faiths. “Killing an innocent person is considered to be the greatest crime after worshiping another god.”

Islam guides followers to oppress women.

Historically, Islam promoted women’s rights. For instance, the Qur’an grants women freedoms that they did not have before, such as the right to inherit property, conduct business and have access to knowledge. “Men and women have the same responsibility before God,” says Jandali. “Arranged marriages are more of a cultural practice—and women do have the right to divorce.” The oppression many women face in Muslim countries is caused by cultural tradition, not Islamic law.

Women are forced by men to wear a headscarf, or hijab, as a sign of submission.

Rules about modesty are open to a wide range of interpretations. That is why women in Saudi Arabia must cover everything but their eyes, hands and feet, while many women in Turkey observe no special rules about dress. “It’s really because of a desire to please God,” Jandali says of using head or body coverings. The practice comes from a traditional interpretation that says the hijab protects women’s dignity. But wearing any special clothing is a personal choice. Further, women in other religious traditions also wear special clothing. Think about Catholic nuns, Amish women, and Orthodox Jewish women.

Muslims’ God is Allah.

The word *Allah* simply means *God*, and Islam springs from the same monotheistic tradition as Judaism and Christianity. To Muslims, Allah is the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mary.