

2. Misconceptions about Islam

The Jesus Fatwah

Looking Back before Looking Ahead

The old city of Santiago de Compostela sits on the top of a hill in Galicia, in Northwest Spain. Because it is a cold and damp place with a climate similar to what one might expect in Seattle, moss grows on the walls of the medieval buildings, giving Santiago a slightly haunted vibe. When a late afternoon mist descends on the town and the wail of Galician bagpipes echoes off ancient stones, it's easy for a visitor to feel as if he or she has arrived on the border between the modern and civilized world, and has slipped, perhaps, into a liminal place where the line separating the physical and spiritual realms grows thin.

For more than a thousand years, Santiago de Compostela has been—behind Jerusalem and Rome—Christendom's third holiest city. Each year tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world come to Santiago, often walking long distances to visit a shrine dedicated to Saint James the Apostle, the brother of John the Evangelist. According to legend, a miraculous journey by sea transported the saint's remains from the Holy Land to Galicia, and a veneration of St. James—"Santiago" in the local tongue—dates back to Roman times, but the central role of Santiago in European spirituality began during the so-called "re-conquest" of Southern Spainⁱ when St. James is said to have come to the aid of Christian soldiers, riding a white stallion, leading the armies of Christ into a victorious battle against Muslims at Clavijo in 844.ⁱⁱ The apostle's military acumen is a myth, but the "miracle" earned the apostle the title of "Matamoros" or "killer of moors." During Vatican-endorsed Crusades against Muslims in Spain and in the Holy Land and against Cathars in the south of France, Christian warriors visited Santiago de Compostela, seeking the blessings of heaven before waging war under the sign of the cross.

In the more than seven hundred years since the end of the crusades in the Holy Land, and more than 520 years since the end of the re-conquest of Spain, Santiago remains as popular as ever. More than 100,000 pilgrims visit Santiago each year, arriving in a city where Santiago Matamoros, St. James the killer of Muslims, is acclaimed. The image of St. James, astride his white stallion, drawn sword raised, ready to hack Muslim soldiers, while his horse tramples those same troops—is found all over the place, especially in the main church. There the patron saint of crusaders enjoys the place of greatest honor on the high altar

and in a side chapel, where the life size, and real-looking statue of the slayer of moors stands under the approving smiles of the busts of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

A History of Stereotypes

Islamophobia, a modern word that refers to a fear of Islam and of Muslims, has been a part of Christian life—especially in Europe and among the descendants of European emigrants in the New World—for almost as long as Islam has been in existence, and it is almost certainly rooted in the anxiety felt by Europeans as they witnessed the rapid rise of Islamic empires between the seventh and eleventh centuries of the common era. Islamophobia helped to inspire the Crusades, it is present in Western European Art, literature and music (Mozart's opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is a good example); Islamophobic tropes are found in the work of great European theologians such as John Calvin, and are parodied in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

And though it has never left us, Islamophobia experienced a resurgence in western society during the first Gulf War, and especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In response, the United States and her allies waged a global "war on terror," killing as many as 600,000 mostly innocent peopleⁱⁱⁱ (all the while asking why Muslims are so violent).

The latter-day manifestations of Islamophobia have a modern look and feel. They are propagated online and on cable television by a host of well-spoken (if not particularly well-informed) talking heads—all relying upon tropes and half truths about Islam that are ancient. The most common of these misconceptions are the ideas that Islam is a violent religion with aspirations for global domination and the notion that Muslim men are sexually deviant misogynists whose several, often under-aged, burka-clad wives must toil in uneducated squalor behind mud-wattle harem walls. These misconceptions come together for many Americans in the stereotype of the young and over-sexed Muslim man who longs to experience a martyr's death so that he can experience an eternity in paradise surrounded by several dozen virgins.

It is a fact that Americans, despite having ready access on the glowing screens of their smart phones to an almost infinite stream of information, often remain ignorant about a host of subjects. Despite their country's having spent more than a decade waging war in Afghanistan, most Americans cannot find the central Asian country on a map. Sadly, our knowledge of subjects like history and basic science is equally dismal. It should come as no surprise, then, that Americans, for the most part, are ignorant about Islam. Americans are stunningly numb on the subject of religion in general. A 2010 poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion in the Public Life found that an overwhelming number of Americans lack basic knowledge about their own religious traditions, and simply are ignorant about the faith of others.^{iv}

What sets the American ignorance of Islam apart is that Americans have not allowed a lack of information to prevent the formation of strong opinions on the subject of Islam. Indeed, Americans have grown so attached to misconceptions about Islam, that in the United States, the pedaling of Islamophobia has become big business. In 2013, the Council on American Islamic Relations, a leading Muslim civil rights organization, released a study that identified donations of more than 119 million dollars between 2008 and 2011 to Islamophobia-generating media organizations.^v It is a number that would make Santiago Matamoros swell with pride, for his spirit lives on in the misconceptions propagated on the Islamophobia industry's blogs, books and cable news outlets. It is left to people of good will, often without financial means or a media voice, to speak words of truth, common sense and peace.

By taking on *The Jesus Fatwah*, gentle reader, you are joining yourself to the company of the informed. Our hope is that, becoming informed, you will cast aside misconceptions about Islam and that the information you find in these videos and study guides will be a catalyst for your setting aside fear in the hope of a better world.

-- Ben Daniel

Discussion Questions (pause DVD after each video segment)

The Myth of Muslim Violence

1. How has the myth of Muslim violence affected your understanding of Islam?
2. It can be argued that over time, other faith traditions have been as violent (or more violent) than Islam. How important is acknowledging that reality when making generalizations about Islam?
3. How have violence and misbehavior practiced in the name of your faith tradition created inaccurate stereotypes about your tradition?

Women in Islam

1. Discuss one of the ways your beliefs about Muslim women may need to be revised.
2. How has your faith tradition dictated the roles women must play in the home, in the faith community, and in society – and how are they different from Islam?
3. How does Islamic feminism differ from feminism in your faith tradition?

Polygamy

1. The speakers in this segment suggest that Muslim practices of polygamy come from a time and culture different than our own. What antiquated and—to modern people—offensive practices were allowed in your religious tradition?
2. At some point in their past, most religious traditions have embraced polygamy. How has your religious tradition dealt with and set aside polygamy (or has it)?

Shariah

1. Although some harbor fears about the encroachment of Sharia into civil law, Islam expects its adherents to follow the laws of the country in which they are citizens. How might this reality affect the likelihood of Muslims advocating for Sharia law (in Oklahoma – or anywhere, for that matter)?
2. In a country like the United States, Constitutionally committed to a separation of “church and state,” to what extent should secular law accommodate the religious beliefs of any particular faith tradition?
3. For historical or cultural reasons, should a religion be given preference in matters of legal accommodation in our society?

Muslims are People, Too

1. Why did you embrace your faith tradition?

2. How closely do you follow the theological dictates or moral obligations of your faith?

***The Jesus Fatwah* Theme Question:**

What element or learning from this session do you think will be most significant in your everyday interactions with others?



BONUS READING:

The Promise to St. Catherine (written by Muhammad in 628 CE):

“This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).”

Notes

ⁱ “Reconquest,” or “*reconquista*” is the commonly-used name for a series of wars through which Roman Catholics from northern Spain drove Muslims from southern Spain out of the Iberian peninsula. The term is problematic because prior to the reconquest, no part of southern Spain ever was governed by rulers who were both Christian and Spanish. The Muslims kingdoms and Caliphates of southern Spain displaced Arian Visigoth overlords who took Spain from pagan Romans who established themselves in the territory before the birth of Christ. Nonetheless, it is the word used by most historians, so it is used here, but not without a wistful desire for more accurate language.

ⁱⁱ Joseph F. O’Callaghan *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. p. 194

ⁱⁱⁱ It is difficult to find an exact number of people killed in the War on Terror. However, the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, found that between 2003 and 2006 more than 600,000 individuals died as a result of violence in Iraq, which, at the time, was the principle front in the war (see “Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey” by Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta *et al.* 12 October 2006

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(06\)69491-9/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(06)69491-9/abstract)). A follow up study by John Hopkins, Al Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, and MIT confirmed *The Lancet’s* findings (see “The Human Cost of the War in Iraq A Mortality Study, 2002-2006” by Gilbert Burnham, Shannon Doocy *et al.* http://web.mit.edu/CIS/pdf/Human_Cost_of_War.pdf). Eight years after the completion of *The Lancet’s* study, it’s hard not to imagine the human toll of the War on Terror is not significantly higher.

^{iv} <http://www.pewforum.org/US-Religious-Knowledge-An-Overview-of-the-Pew-Forum-Survey-Results-and-Implications.aspx>

^v <http://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/12149-cair-report-islamophobia-network-funded-with-119-million-2008-to-2011.html>