

Internal Factors Causing Misunderstanding Towards Islam and Islamic Law

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: Islamic Education Intra-faith Communication Misconceptions of Islam Orientalism Religious misunderstanding Social Construction</p>	<p>Misunderstandings of Islam remain a pervasive global phenomenon, affecting both interreligious perceptions and intra-faith comprehension. While Islam fundamentally promotes justice, compassion, and peace, it is frequently portrayed as intolerant, violent, or irrational. In Indonesia—the world’s largest Muslim-majority country—such misconceptions have intensified, evidenced by public ridicule and the derogatory representation of Islamic symbols, including distorted references to Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. This study identifies that internal factors among Muslims significantly contribute to the persistence of these misperceptions. Employing a qualitative-analytical approach, this study integrates several theoretical frameworks: Ninian Smart’s dimensions of religion, Schramm’s communication model, Berger and Luckmann’s theory of social construction, Edward Said’s Orientalism, and Gudykunst and Kim’s intercultural communication theory. The findings reveal five core internal factors: (1) fragmented understanding of Islamic teachings that privileges textual over contextual interpretations; (2) limited exegesis that neglects socio-political dimensions; (3) epistemological tensions between rationalist (Ahl al-Ra’y) and traditionalist (Ahl al-Hadith) schools; (4) political instrumentalization of religion; and (5) insufficient religious education that impairs critical engagement with Islamic values. These internal conditions are reinforced by external media narratives and orientalist discourse, perpetuating negative stereotypes and Islamophobia. This article argues for the urgent need to reconstruct Islamic understanding through contextualized education, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive hermeneutics that reflect Islam’s ethical and universal dimensions. Such efforts are essential to deconstruct entrenched biases and to foster more accurate, respectful representations of Islam in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Islam, as a religion revealed by divine revelation, teaches the values of justice, compassion, and peace. However, in various global contexts, misunderstandings of Islamic teachings and law are common. These misconceptions are not only prevalent among non-Muslims but also within the Muslim community itself. They can be attributed to several factors, including a lack of authentic understanding of Islamic teachings, media distortion of information, and political

and cultural influences that shape specific narratives about Islam. This phenomenon has contributed to the rise of negative stereotypes, discrimination, and even social conflict, which further worsens interfaith relations and widens the gap in understanding between the Islamic world and the non-Islamic world.

A striking irony is evident in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, where public insults against Islam and its followers are increasingly frequent. Islam is often cynically and unjustly labeled as a foreign religion, an “invader,” or even a “religion of war.” Some parties deliberately demean Islam by changing the name of Allah or openly insulting the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with inappropriate epithets, all with the aim of diminishing their dignity.

Ironically, these acts of contempt are not only committed by non-Muslims but also by Muslims themselves. Their initial intention may be to highlight certain aspects of Islamic teachings, but due to their flawed understanding, the result is often biased and misleading. The negative portrayal of Islam is not a new phenomenon. Islam and its followers have long been stigmatized with labels like “radical,” “extremist,” or “terrorist.” Unfortunately, Islamic teachings are often judged by standards from different perspectives that frequently contradict Islamic principles themselves. All of this is rooted in the long-standing issue of Islamophobia—an attitude filled with cynicism, prejudice, misconception, dislike, and hatred toward Islam and Muslims.

These various forms of misunderstanding often stem from systematic information distortion carried out by those who oppose Islam. Mainstream media, for example, tends to highlight the negative and extreme aspects of the Islamic world while ignoring Islam's positive contributions to human civilization. A clear example is the Western world's misinterpretation of the concept of jihad, which is often equated with war against non-Muslims. In reality, the meaning of jihad in Islam is much broader, encompassing spiritual, social, and intellectual struggles for self-improvement and the betterment of society.

The urgency of addressing these misunderstandings is growing due to the negative impact they have on Muslims and global society as a whole. Islamophobia, as a manifestation of these misconceptions, has led to an increase in incidents of hate and discrimination against Muslims. A report from the Islamophobia Register Australia noted that between January 2023 and November 2024, there were 309 direct incidents and 366 online incidents reported, with Muslim women being the primary victims in nearly 75% of these cases. Furthermore, a study by Ahmed et al. (2021) showed that Islamophobia has a significant impact on the mental health of Muslims, leading to an increase in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

These misunderstandings of Islam are the result of a systematic effort by those who oppose it. These various forms of distortion are propagated with the goal of diminishing Islamic values and even trying to extinguish its light from the world. However, Islam itself has refuted all such misconceptions through the divine revelation of the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and the examples of his companions. As a universal religion, Islam encompasses all aspects of life and must be applied comprehensively and continuously. Nevertheless, its application faces various challenges, especially for the Islamic world which,

despite gaining independence after World War II, remains under the control and domination of Western powers.

One of the main reasons for these misconceptions is the emergence of internal factors that damage this understanding. From the internal side, a lack of religious literacy among Muslims themselves contributes to this misunderstanding. Many Muslims have a partial understanding of their religion's teachings or focus solely on legal aspects (fiqh) without comprehending the social and philosophical context. Insufficient and decontextualized religious education makes it difficult for Muslims to explain their own religion to outsiders.

According to the social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1966), a society's understanding of a phenomenon, including Islam, is shaped by social factors like education, media, and cultural environment. If a society constantly receives flawed information about Islam, their understanding will be formed based on that information. The media plays a central role in shaping the image of Islam, particularly through reporting that tends to highlight negative aspects rather than Islam's positive values and contributions to world civilization.

Therefore, this research aims to identify the internal factors that cause misconceptions about Islam and Islamic law. By understanding the root of this problem, more effective solutions can be developed to build a more comprehensive and objective understanding of Islam, and to improve interfaith relations on a global level.

METHOD

Type of Research

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design grounded in library research. Rather than testing formal hypotheses, it seeks to develop a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the subject matter through critical reading and interpretation of existing literature. This approach emphasizes conceptual exploration and contextual analysis to uncover deeper meanings and patterns related to the research topic.

Research Approaches

The research employs multiple complementary approaches. Theologically, it investigates Islamic teachings through detailed textual analysis to grasp their core principles and interpretations. Sociologically, it draws on Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory to examine how religious knowledge and practices are shaped within societal contexts. From a communication perspective, it uses Schramm's communication model and Gudykunst and Kim's intercultural communication theory to analyze how messages about Islam are produced, transmitted, and received across cultural boundaries. The study also engages a critical-orientalist lens, inspired by Edward Said's Orientalism, to interrogate and deconstruct representations of Islam shaped by historical and power-laden discourses. Hermeneutics is employed to interpret religious texts and meanings contextually, recognizing the layered, evolving nature of interpretation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data will be gathered primarily through extensive literature review, including books, peer-reviewed journals, classical and modern exegesis (tafsir), and official documents. In addition, media analysis will be conducted, examining news coverage, opinion pieces, films,

and other forms of representation to understand how Islam is portrayed and constructed within public discourse. This combined approach enables a comprehensive, critical, and context-sensitive exploration of the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of course, here is a professional English translation of the text you provided. Keskin & Tuncer (2018) state that within the context of radicalism and extremism, deviant religious narratives rooted in Islamic theology cannot be ignored as a contributing factor to the emergence of violent acts. It is important to analyze this issue from a theological perspective to understand the mindset behind this phenomenon. However, this does not mean that Islam is a direct cause of violent extremism. Rather, it indicates that misinterpretations of Islamic teachings contribute to the radicalization process, especially among young Muslims. [1]

Several studies also reveal that Islamophobia does not emerge spontaneously in a neutral environment. For those who already hold negative prejudices against Islam, Islamophobic sentiments will continue to grow and be reinforced. In this discussion, several key theories are used as the basis for analysis: Ninian Smart's Theory of Religious Understanding (1996), Wilbur Schramm's Communication Theory (1954), Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann's Socialization Theory (1966), Edward Said's Orientalism Theory (1978), and Gudykunst and Kim's Intercultural Communication Theory (1997). These theories provide different but complementary perspectives on how misunderstandings of Islam are formed, spread, and can be overcome.

Additionally, differences in the use of terminology, social values, and religious traditions often lead to Islamic messages not being communicated effectively to non-Muslim audiences. A concrete example is the concept of jihad, which is often misinterpreted by Western society as a war against non-Muslims. However, in Islam, jihad has a much broader meaning, including the struggle to improve oneself and society. [2]. Internal factors that cause misunderstandings of Islam and Islamic law include:

Misunderstanding of the teachings of the Islamic religion

Radicalism and extremism often arise from a misunderstanding of Islamic religious teachings. For example, jihadism misinterprets Sharia as a destructive Islamic ideology that promotes violence against non-Muslims. Holistic and contextual Islamic education can play a crucial role in preventing and countering radicalism and extremism.

In his theory of Orientalism, Edward Said explains that the Western world often views Islam as something foreign and inferior compared to their own civilization. Orientalism creates a narrative that Islam is a backward, harsh religion that is incompatible with modernity. A clear example of Orientalism can be seen in the representation of Islam in Western media, which often links Islam with violence and extremism. Additionally, in academic and political discourse, Western countries' policies toward the Islamic world are often based on biased views, such as stereotypes about Islamic law being incompatible with human rights. For instance, in many Hollywood films, Muslim characters are often depicted as terrorists or individuals who oppress women. Such views further reinforce misunderstandings of Islam and create a divide between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds.

Media also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. The representation of Islam in mass media often emphasizes violence, radicalism, and extremism, thereby forming negative stereotypes. Wilbur Schramm's Communication Theory (1954) describes the two-way nature of the communication process, where both the sender and receiver can exchange roles in sending and receiving messages. This theory also explains that errors in information delivery can lead to a distortion of meaning, reinforcing misunderstandings and creating false perceptions of Islam.

Limitations of Interpretation

A narrow interpretation that does not consider social and political contexts can lead to misunderstandings. For example, the interpretation of Qur'anic verses on jihad and violence often fails to consider the actual conditions and true purpose. Such a narrow interpretation of the Qur'an, without considering its social and political context, can lead to misunderstandings and deviations from Islamic teachings. This kind of misinterpretation damages authentic Islamic beliefs and can distort the understanding of the Qur'an's true message.

Differences in Mindset

Differences between the Ahl al-Ra'y (rationalists) and the Ahl al-Hadith (traditionalists) can lead to misunderstandings about Islam and Islamic law. Rationalists tend to be open to reinterpretation, while traditionalists are inclined to maintain a literal interpretation. Islam, as a monotheistic religion with the Qur'an as its holy book, has undergone a historical process of dialectical interpretation closely linked to the context of time and place. In other words, every Muslim, especially Muslim intellectuals, has their own perspective in understanding religious doctrines. Within this framework, a dynamic of debate and intellectual discourse has emerged in the field of Islamic legal thought, presenting diverse approaches to interpreting its teachings. Broadly, views on Islam can be grouped into three main orientations: inclusive, exclusive, and pluralist. However, this kind of classification is not universally accepted, and these categories remain a subject of debate among thinkers and academics even today.

Political Involvement

Political and power dynamics can influence the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law. Islamic educational institutions are intertwined with power and politics, affecting the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law in Indonesia. This highlights the urgency of the politics of Islamic education and its role in shaping societal norms and governance. For example, some use Sharia law to legitimize political power or suppress opposition.

Lack of Education and Understanding

Lack of education and understanding of Islam and Islamic law can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Those who lack expertise in the Qur'an and Sunnah may incorrectly apply Islamic law, making Taqlid (following a qualified scholar's interpretation) essential to avoid errors in the practice and implementation of Sharia.

The social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1966) asserts that society's understanding of a phenomenon is shaped by its social and cultural environment. Misunderstandings of Islam often stem from imbalanced education, biased media coverage, and minimal social interaction with Muslim communities. If a society consistently receives incorrect information, the reality it perceives will also be formed based on that information.

Many Muslims themselves possess a limited understanding of Islamic teachings, both in terms of its laws and its universal values. Ninian Smart's (1976) theory of religious understanding emphasizes that religion has various dimensions that must be comprehended holistically, not merely dogmatically. If Muslims only understand Islam from a single dimension, for instance, the legal aspect without considering its spiritual and social dimensions, then misunderstandings can also arise from within the Muslim community itself. Smart states that religion has various dimensions, such as the doctrinal, ritual, mythical, ethical, experiential, and social dimensions. Misunderstanding Islam occurs due to a reductionist understanding that highlights only one aspect. For example, Islamic law is often understood merely as physical punishments like hudud (punishments stipulated by Sharia for specific crimes), without considering the broader principles of justice and social welfare.

To overcome these misunderstandings, a more inclusive and dialogical approach is needed. Intercultural communication strategy theory, as explained by Gudykunst and Kim (1997), can be used to improve how Muslims interact with other communities, whether through education, cultural diplomacy, or media. Furthermore, increasing Islamic literacy among Muslims themselves through more contextual religious education can help reduce distortions in the understanding of Islam. Gudykunst and Kim explain that intercultural communication barriers can be a primary cause of misunderstandings between different groups. Muslims and non-Muslims often have different communication styles in understanding religious concepts. For example, differing interpretations of the concept of jihad have created prolonged tension. Therefore, better communication strategies are needed to bridge these differences.

Problem Solution

Increasing Islamic Literacy

Muslims need to enhance their comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings. Contextual religious education, firmly rooted in authentic sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith, must be prioritized so that Muslims can gain broad and profound insights. Allah states in the Qur'an:

"Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?'" (QS. Az-Zumar: 9)

Education must instill moderate Islamic values and the concept of rahmatan lil'alamin (mercy to all worlds) so that Muslims can properly understand its teachings and correctly explain them to the outside world. Religious education that is contextual and based on authentic sources like the Qur'an and Hadith should be promoted to foster extensive and deep understanding among Muslims. More holistic educational programs, including interdisciplinary studies that connect Islam with science, philosophy, and social sciences, can help form a broader comprehension.

Improving Islamic Representation in the Media

Asda Media holds significant influence in shaping public opinion. Therefore, efforts are needed to enhance a more accurate and fair representation of Islam in media reporting. Muslims must actively engage in building a true narrative about Islam through social media, journalism, and documentary films that portray Islam as a religion of rahmatan lil 'alamin (mercy to all worlds).

Allah says:

"And thus We have made you a justly balanced community that you will be witnesses over the people..." (QS. Al-Baqarah: 143)

This strategy can include the production of fact-based content that counters negative stereotypes and media campaigns to promote a moderate Islam.

More Effective Communication Strategies

Based on the theory of intercultural communication by Gudykunst and Kim (1997), better communication strategies are needed to explain Islamic concepts to the outside world. Muslims must be able to articulate Islamic values in a way that is easily understood by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. The use of inclusive language and a more dialogical approach in da'wah (inviting to Islam) is crucial to prevent misunderstandings. Allah also emphasizes the importance of good communication in Islam:

"And speak to people good words..." (QS. Al-Baqarah: 83).

Misunderstandings can be reduced through open, understanding-based interfaith dialogue. Cross-religious discussion forums can help improve Islam's image in the eyes of the outside world. Furthermore, more active social interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities can help build better understanding. Therefore, Muslims must be able to explain Islamic values in a way that is easily understood by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Active and Sustainable Interfaith Dialogue

Misunderstandings can be reduced through open, understanding-based interfaith dialogue. Allah says:

"Invite (all) to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious..." (QS. An-Nahl: 125)

To achieve better understanding among people of different faiths, dialogue must take various forms, such as academic seminars, workshops, inter-community gatherings, and discussion forums among religious leaders. This dialogue should be inclusive, where all parties have an equal opportunity to express their views without feeling threatened or pressured to accept other beliefs. In this way, interfaith dialogue not only becomes a means to clarify misunderstandings but also to build mutual respect.

Furthermore, cooperation among religious communities in social projects, such as humanitarian aid, joint educational programs, and environmental projects, can be an effective way to build harmonious relationships. When communities from different religious backgrounds work together towards a common goal, they can see the positive values in each other's religions and reduce prejudices arising from negative stereotypes.

By implementing this approach, it is hoped that interfaith dialogue will not only be a forum for discussion but also a tangible step towards building a more peaceful and tolerant world, as Islam teaches the principles of peace and brotherhood in societal life.

Strengthening Inclusive Public Policy

Governments and international organizations need to adopt policies that support religious freedom and reduce discrimination against Islam. Regulations that protect Muslims from negative stereotypes and provide space for the expression of Islamic culture in

multicultural societies can help create a more harmonious environment. Therefore, the solutions offered must include broader educational approaches, enhanced intercultural communication, and changes in how Islam is represented in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

Misconceptions towards Islam and Islamic law are a complex phenomenon rooted in both internal and external factors. Internally, these issues are exacerbated by a lack of religious literacy among Muslims themselves, an inadequate religious education system, and a narrow understanding of Islam that focuses solely on legal aspects without considering its universal values. Externally, biased media portrayals, global politics, and social constructs contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes, with the media often highlighting violence and extremism without context. This perspective is reinforced by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, which demonstrates how Western views of Islam have been biased since the colonial era, and Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, which explains how public understanding is shaped by the information they receive. To address this, a multi-dimensional approach is needed, including enhancing Islamic literacy through comprehensive education, improving media representation of Islam, implementing effective communication strategies, and fostering continuous interfaith dialogue. Implementing these solutions will help create a more objective and comprehensive understanding, thereby reducing negative stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and harmonious global society.

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