



Questions Frequently Asked About Islam In This Time of Crisis

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American media have most often portrayed Muslims and their religion, Islam, in a negative light. This negative understanding of Islam in American popular culture has understandably grieved Muslims in the United States. The recent events in New York and Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania have fueled anti-Islamic sentiment and forced Muslims to represent their faith in the American public sphere. This brief list of questions is intended to provide information regarding some of the most commonly asked questions regarding Islam since Sept. 11.



1. Why does the American media have such a negative view of Islam?

Prior to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, one can identify two pivotal events that have shaped many Americans' views of Islam. Americans' first collective experience of Islam came in relation to the oil embargo of the early 1970s.

More vivid in many Americans' minds are memories of the Iranian revolution of 1979—including the overthrow of the U.S.-backed Shah and the seizing of American hostages. Americans generally viewed the violence of the revolution as an expression of Islam and followed American political leadership in characterizing radical Islam as a great evil that posed a threat on par with the Soviet Union. These modern Western understandings of Islam and the history of the development of extremist Islam are outlined in John L. Esposito's *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

The popular perception of Islam developed in the early 1980s (and its infusion with Cold War rhetoric) remains as a backdrop for the perspective of many Americans regarding Islam. Add to this the pervasive misunderstanding and mischaracterization of

Islam and Muslims propagated in American media (including news and entertainment, especially film), it is not difficult to understand the negative view of Islam held by many Americans.

It must be acknowledged, however, that American suspicion of Islam and Muslims is not unique in the Western world. Since the rise of Islam in the 600s (7th C.), Christian communities have generally viewed Islam as a threat. A long history of conflict between Muslims and Christians informs our present situation, giving us cause for both uncertainty and hope. One aspect of this history is documented in R.W. Southern's *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Harvard University Press, 1962).



2. How do Muslims understand Islam?

In the current cultural climate of the United States, one will often hear Muslims refer to Islam as a "religion of peace." The vast majority of Muslims in the world believe that Islam condemns, in no uncertain terms, the Sept. 11 attacks.

This explanation of Islam as a "religion of peace" has its roots in the Arabic word *islam* itself. Every word in a Semitic language (such as Arabic and Hebrew) has a three-consonant foundation called a "trilateral root". While the consonants form the root of the word (communicating its basic meaning), the vowels and other consonants that surround the root shape the word's meaning for different uses.

In the word *islam*, the trilateral root is *s-l-m*. This same root provides the foundation for the words *salam* and *muslim*. You might recognize those words, even if you don't know much Arabic. *Salam*, closely related to the Hebrew word "shalom", means "peace".

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The word “*islam*” is often translated “submission”. Since it shares a root with “*salam*”, this submission is understood to bring one into peace. Finally, a “*muslim*” is “one who submits.” To tie it all together, a Muslim submits to God and in that submission finds peace. This peace can then translate into all parts of the life of a person who submits to God. Thus, Muslims understand Islam to be a religion of peace.

The submission of a Muslim to God is in response to the final revelation of God’s will for humans in the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an (sometimes spelled Koran). The practice of submission is modeled on the customary practice (*sunna*) of Muhammad, the final prophet through whom God (*Allah* in Arabic) gave the gift of his revelation to humanity. The religious practice of Islam is based on two fundamental sources: the revelation given to humanity in the Qur’an and the life and teachings of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Muslims are extremely proud of their Islamic heritage. Islam, through making clear one’s relation to Allah, imparts an appreciation for life and provides an effective means of ordering one’s existence. Additionally, Muslims are keenly aware that their advances in mathematics, science, philosophy and technology have positively affected the progress of the entire world.



3. If Islam is so peaceful, what is all this talk about *jihad*?

“And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely, Allah does not love those who exceed the limits.”

— Qur’an 2:190, trans. M.H. Shakir

This passage from the Qur’an refers exclusively to defensive fighting. This fighting could be with military force or, in today’s world, with media force. But, according to the Qur’an, the fighting must cease when an agreement is reached. This is one use of the

Arabic word “*jihad*”.

But, read this excerpt of a Reuters news story titled “Afghan Clerics Say Holy War if U.S. Attacks” (Thurs., Sept. 20):

A meeting of Afghanistan’s senior Islamic clerics issued an edict on Thursday saying they would declare a jihad, or holy war, if the United States attacks. “If infidels invade an Islamic country and that country does not have the ability to defend itself, jihad (holy war) becomes a definite obligation of all the world’s Muslims,” the edict said.

While it is true that *jihad* has its origin in the verb *jahada*, meaning “to struggle” or “to fight”, the word has *many* different connotations since “struggle” can occur on several different levels. Notice in the news story that “jihad” is translated repeatedly as “holy war”, even in the headline. Unfortunately for those gathering their information from this news story, “holy war” is not a good translation of the word. Most Muslims will understand *jihad* as *my struggle to put things right in the world, starting with my own life*.

Any Muslim is offended when Islam is seen as inherently more violent than either Judaism or Christianity. While all three of the major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—have “just war” traditions, all three suffer from the fact that extremists can manipulate those traditions, making an unjust action seem like a “just war.” This is what faces Muslims when they attempt to distance themselves from the extremist appropriation of *jihad* to endorse terrorism.

The concept of *jihad* as religiously sanctioned military action developed more fully during the crusades, when Western Christians truly *did* declare a Holy War to regain Jerusalem from Muslim (and Eastern Christian) occupation. This goal of regaining Jerusalem did in fact succeed for a time in a campaign marked by atrocities. That is why President George W. Bush’s use of the term “crusade” in conjunction with possible military action was so offensive to many different groups of people (not only Muslims).

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4. What do Muslims think of Christians?

It has long been a misconception among Western Christians that Muslims seek to destroy Christianity. This notion has once again grown prevalent in the weeks following Sept. 11, feeding already existing tensions between Muslims and Christians in the U.S. Predictions of a great “religious” war between irreconcilable parties resulting from a “clash of civilizations” abound. One problematic book that has led to this popular view of history is Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

The problem with assuming that Muslims hate Christians is that it simply isn’t true! Islam requires that Muslims accept that God has revealed his will to other peoples; these others who have received scriptures before the time of Muhammad are referred to as “People of the Book”. Moreover, from the Muslim perspective, Christians, Muslims and Jews have much in common. We worship one God. We share the stories of many biblical characters, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Moses, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael and Jesus. The following verses of the Qur’an help communicate the Muslim approach to Judaism and Christianity:

And there are, certainly, among the People of the Book, those who believe in God, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to God: They will not sell the Signs [miracles] of God for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord, and God is swift in account.

— Qur’an 3:199, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali

To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what God hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single

people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute;

— Qur’an 5:48, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (for the right): they rehearse the Signs of God all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. They believe in God and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emulation) in (all) good works: They are in the ranks of the righteous.

— Qur’an 3:113–114, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali

And every one has a direction to which he should turn, therefore hasten to (do) good works; wherever you are, Allah will bring you all together; surely Allah has power over all things.

— Qur’an 2:190, trans. M.H. Shakir

The witness of history shows that Muslims have commonly accepted the presence of Christians in Islamic nations. While Muslims and Christians disagree over many points of theology, neither religion even suggests eradication of the other. It is simply un-Islamic and un-Christian for Muslims and Christians to attack one another on the basis the other’s faith.



5. What is a Christian response to Muslims in this time of crisis?

Many Muslims in the United States have been living in fear in the weeks since Sept. 11. There have been several incidents of harassment and assault aimed at Muslims (and those who merely “look” Muslim) by misguided individuals.

But in these difficult weeks, Muslims in Amer

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ica have been able to tell many more stories of solidarity and hospitality—stories that bring hope rather than despair. As Mark Swanson, Director of the Islamic Studies Program at Luther Seminary, said in a recent interview, “We hope and pray that there will not be incidents of physical abuse. It is our duty along with other church institutions to stand in solidarity with the Muslim and Arab community and with all variety of ethnic communities. We must sustain our friendships and be very alert.”

Even through the simplest actions you can help your neighbors in these frightening times. Visit your friends, let them know that you’re there for them and that you can be called upon when they need help.

As Swanson noted, “Simple, personal, human gestures have been made and these are greatly appreciated.”

Perhaps one of the enduring legacies for the Christian community in this time is whether or not we will take careful note of the Eighth Commandment—“You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.”—and Luther’s explanation of it in his *Small Catechism*:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

In God’s name, may we all seek to be neighbors to one another, that we may together face the evils with which we are confronted.

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