

**Introduction:** This factsheet is based on information contained on the excellent website 'Islam is Peace'. Islam is Peace have kindly given their permission for their website to be used in the production of this factsheet.

## Islam – The Truth



**The Star and Crescent Symbol of Islam<sup>1</sup>**

In recent years it has become commonplace for Islam to be the subject of comment and discussion at a whole variety of levels – from informal everyday contexts such as in streets and workplaces right through the spectrum to comments in the media and discourse at government level.

However, it is a reflection on the times that a great many examples and occasions when Islam is mentioned involve basic misconceptions and errors and reflect a totally inadequate and uninformed knowledge of the faith. Indeed, there are occasions when it is fundamentally clear that prejudicial sentiment rather than factual understanding lie at the root of discourse on Islam. This has particularly been the case since the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.

This factsheet looks to redress the balance and address key misconceptions about Islam in the hope that a more adequate and objective understanding will elicit greater, fulfilling and more positive engagement between Muslims and non-Muslims and a more thorough appreciation of the intricacies and characteristics of this particular faith.

The nine misconceptions that we shall focus on are as follows:

### **1) Jihad means 'holy war'**

In Arabic, the word *jihad* means to strive, struggle and exert effort. It is a central and broad Islamic concept that primarily means to struggle against evil inclinations within oneself, i.e. an internal spiritual and moral struggle.

Islam is not confined to the boundaries of the individual but extends to the welfare of society and humanity in general. Muslims believe that an individual cannot keep improving himself/herself in isolation from what happens within their community or in the world at large. Hence jihad also means struggle to improve the quality of life in society and the struggle against injustice, oppression and tyranny.

The word jihad is often misunderstood and consequently evokes strong reactions. It is a word frequently and erroneously used in the press – directly or subtly – to mean 'holy war'. In fact the term 'holy war' was coined in Europe during the period of the Crusades, and as a term, it is not found anywhere in the Qur'an. Consequently, it is an alien concept to the Islamic framework. War cannot be considered in Islam to be in any way 'holy'.

In Islam, there is a term (*qital*) that is often confused with jihad and used interchangeably. Qital refers to a defensive form of violence, used as a last resort and subject to strict criteria in its application.<sup>2</sup> It is not the same as the true meaning of jihad outlined above.

<sup>1</sup> Author: Kbolino. Source: Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Star\\_and\\_Crescent.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Star_and_Crescent.svg))

<sup>2</sup> Similar usages and prescribed limitations on the use of violence can be found in other faiths.

## 2) Islamic Fundamentalism

In recent years, a great deal of attention in the media has been given to the threat of 'Islamic Fundamentalism'. Unfortunately, due to a mixture of incorrect and even biased reporting in the media and the actions of some misguided Muslims, the word 'Islam' has become almost synonymous with 'terrorism'. However, when one analyses the situation, the question that should come to mind is: Do the teachings of Islam encourage terrorism? The answer unequivocally is 'certainly not!' Islam totally forbids the terrorist acts that are carried out by some misguided people. Islam encourages peace, mercy and forgiveness. Killing innocent people totally contradicts the teachings of Islam.

## 3) Islam was spread by the sword

Many non-Muslims, when they think about Islam, picture religious fanatics with a sword in one hand and the Qur'an in the other. This myth, which was made popular in Europe during the Crusades, is totally baseless. First of all, the Holy Qur'an clearly says "Let there be no compulsion in religion." In addition to this, Islam teaches that a person's faith must be pure and sincere, so it is certainly not something that can be forced on someone. Dissociating the myth that Islam was 'spread by the sword', the (non-Muslim) historian De Lacy O'Leary wrote: "History makes it clear, however, that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever accepted."<sup>3</sup> Muslims ruled Spain for roughly 800 years. During this time, and up to when they were finally forced out, non-Muslims there were treated with the utmost respect and had flourishing communities. Additionally, Christian and Jewish minorities have survived in the Muslim lands of the Middle East for centuries. Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan all have thriving Christian and/or Jewish populations.

Of course, one must not be naïve in thinking that Muslims themselves have never resorted to violence. People from faith and non-faith backgrounds (Muslim and non-Muslim) have instigated and responded to violence and have been involved in war and other forms of conflict throughout the course of history. However, it is imperative that a distinction is made between what people do and what is encouraged, promoted, espoused and stipulated by religious scripture and practice.

## 4) Terrorism is supported in Islam

This misconception is one of the most widely held about Islam today. The Qur'an clearly states:

*"...Whoever kills an innocent soul it is as if he killed the whole of Mankind. And whoever saves one, it is as if he saved the whole of Mankind..."<sup>4</sup>*

(Surah Al Maidah, Chapter 5, Verse 32)

It is clearly Islamically unlawful to murder an innocent person. Hence, if anyone kills an innocent person, they have committed a grave sin, and certainly the action can in no way be seen as having been done 'in the name of Islam'. In relation to so-called 'suicide bombings', it is also worth pointing out that suicide is prohibited in Islam.<sup>5</sup>

## 5) Islam is a religion only for Arabs

Less than 20% of the Muslim population globally is Arab. There are more Indonesian Muslims than Indian or Arab Muslims and it is a myth that all Muslims are Arabs. It should also be clarified that not all Arabs are Muslims. An Arab can be a Muslim, Christian, Jew, atheist – or of any other religion or ideology. Also, many countries that some people consider to be 'Arab' are not 'Arab' at all. Examples include Turkey and Iran (Persia). The people who live in these countries speak languages other than Arabic as their native tongues are of a different ethnic heritage than the Arabs. Islam is meant for all people, regardless of race, nationality

<sup>3</sup> From 'Islam at the Crossroads', London, 1923, page 8.

<sup>4</sup> Compare this passage from the Qur'an with the passage in the Jewish Talmud (Sanhedrin 4:5) which states: "He who saves one life...it is as if he saves an entire universe. He who destroys a life...it is as if he destroys an entire universe."

<sup>5</sup> See the paragraph on **Euthanasia and Suicide** in the factsheet on Islam (Factsheet FFM6), also part of the Community Cohesion Toolkit.

or linguistic background. Taking a look at the Muslim world, from Nigeria to Bosnia, and from Malaysia to Afghanistan is enough to prove that Islam is a faith for anyone. In addition, arguably some of the most prominent Muslims of recent times have had very diverse backgrounds. Consider, for example, Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X from the United States, the singer Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) from the UK and the French international footballer Zinedine Zidane.

## 6) Islam oppresses women

Numerous verses of the Qur'an make it clear that men and women are equal in the sight of God. According to the teachings of Islam, the only thing that distinguishes people in the sight of God is their level of righteousness, in other words what they do rather than who they are. Many people are surprised to find that Islamic law guaranteed unprecedented rights to women over 1400 years ago. For example, Islamic jurisprudence clearly states that women have the right to vote, seek an education, own property, financial independence, operate a business and receive equal pay for equal work. These are the very same rights that have been granted legally only recently in Europe and America. The principal difference in the way these rights came about is also important. In Europe, rights became established legally only after women had been through great political struggles (e.g. the women's suffrage movement in the UK). In Islam, rights were given by God through revelation. They cannot be reversed by anyone's decision. If women in the Muslim world today don't have their rights and if a particular society oppresses women, it does so in spite of Islam, not because of it. Though clearly the issue of gender in Islam is more complex than our discussion here allows, these fundamental points nevertheless need to be borne in mind.

## 7) Muslims do not believe in Jesus

Many people are surprised to find out that according to Muslim belief, Jesus, the son of Mary, is considered to be one of God's greatest messengers. Muslims are taught to love Prophet Jesus, and a person cannot be a Muslim without believing in the virgin birth and miracles of Jesus Christ. The Muslim name for Jesus is *Isa*.

## 8) Islam is intolerant of other religions

The Qur'an states:

*"Those who believe in the Qur'an, and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the last day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."*

(Surah Al Baqarah, Chapter 2, Verse 62)

Muslims believe that God has commanded them in the Qur'an not to insult other faiths. In fact, Christians and Jews are given an honourable title in the Qur'an, 'the people of the Book'. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said 'One who kills a non-Muslim person (under the guardianship of an Islamic state) will not even smell the fragrance of Paradise.' He also said 'Whoever hurts a non-Muslim person (under the guardianship of an Islamic state), I am his adversary, and I shall be an adversary to him on the Day of the Resurrection.'

## 9) Muslims worship the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

Early researchers of Islam called it 'Muhammadanism', implying in some way that Muslims worshipped the Messenger of God. However, a Muslim is 'one who submits to God'. The essence of Islam is pure monotheism. Muslims point to the Qur'an, where God says:

*"Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the One on whom all depend; He begets not, nor is He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him."*

(Surah Al-Ikhlās, Chapter 112)

*"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 your 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."*

(Surah: Al Imran, Chapter 3, Verse 114)

In addition to these nine misconceptions, there are also some fundamental and frequently asked questions about Islam that need to be addressed, and which focus on areas that are themselves subject to much confusion and misunderstanding.

### **What is Shariah Law?**

*Shariah* (which literally means 'way to water'<sup>6</sup>) is a system of devising ethical and legal teachings, based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Qur'an, considered by Muslims to be the direct word of God, is the first and most important source of guidance and rulings, the Sunnah (the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)) being the second. The Shariah deals with many aspects of day-to-day life, including politics, economics, banking, business, contracts, family, hygiene and social issues. *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) is the legal application of the Shariah to day to day affairs and is seen as a human endeavour that is subject to change depending on time and place. It is important to note that Shariah is only applicable to Muslims and that, as a system of jurisprudence, it is not in any way a rival to the legal system in place in the UK. Muslims are not calling for a separate legal system. Neither is Shariah an attempt to impose Muslim dominance over non-Muslims. In essence, it is a system and framework of living according to laws established and revealed in the Qur'an and Sunnah in which Muslims can find guidance and practical application of their religious beliefs. In this sense there are similarities with other faiths in the way that religious law sits alongside civil law.

### **What is a fatwa?**

A fatwa is an Islamic religious ruling, a scholarly opinion on a matter of Islamic law. It is not necessarily 'binding' on the faithful. The people who pronounce these rulings are supposed to be knowledgeable, and base their rulings on knowledge and wisdom. They need to supply the evidence from Islamic sources for their opinions, and it is not uncommon for scholars to come to different conclusions regarding the same issue. Muslims look at the opinion, the reputation of the person giving it and the evidence given to support it, before deciding whether to follow it or not. When there are conflicting opinions issued by different scholars, the evidence is firstly compared. Muslims then believe that they are guided by their God-given conscience and will therefore choose the relevant opinion on this basis.

### **How does the Islamic Calendar work?**

The Islamic calendar is essentially a lunar calendar. It contains 12 months that are based on the motion of the moon. Because each lunar month lasts for 29.53 days, the Islamic calendar is noticeably and consistently shorter (by 11 days) than a solar year.<sup>7</sup> As a result, it shifts with respect to the Gregorian calendar. As an example, Ramadan in 2008 began on Monday 1<sup>st</sup> September. In 2009, it began on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> August. The Islamic calendar is the official calendar in countries around the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia. However, other Muslim countries use the Gregorian calendar for civil purposes and turn to the Islamic calendar for religious purposes.

### **How is an Islamic Month determined?**

Each month starts when the lunar crescent is first seen after a new moon. Although new moons may be calculated quite precisely, the actual visibility of the crescent is difficult to predict. It depends on several factors including the weather and the location of the observer. Therefore in some cases it may be difficult to give accurate information in advance about when a new month will start. Furthermore, in some areas Muslims depend on a local sighting of the moon, whereas in other areas a universal sighting is accepted (i.e. if a new crescent is seen anywhere in the world it is accepted for communities the world over). Both are valid Islamic practices, but they may lead to different starting days for the months. This is why there can be variations and uncertainty regarding the exact day of Eid ul-Fitr, which is celebrated after the month of Ramadan on the first day of the next month, on sighting the new moon.

<sup>6</sup> Source: [http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online\\_library/books/shariah\\_the\\_way\\_to\\_justice/](http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/shariah_the_way_to_justice/)

<sup>7</sup> 354 days (12 x 29.53 = 354.36) compared to 365.

## What is the Islamic greeting?

The Islamic greeting, used by Muslims all over the world, is the Arabic *'Assalamu alaikum'*. Translated, this means 'peace be upon you'. In the Qur'an it is stated that:

*"When a greeting is offered you, answer it with an even better greeting, or (at least) with its like. God keeps count of all things."*

(Surah an-Nur, Chapter 4, Verse 86)

Accordingly, it is preferable to add to the standard reply *'walaikum as sala'am'* (meaning 'and unto you also, peace') by using the words *'wa rahmatullahi'* (and mercy) and/or *'wa barakatuhu'* (and blessings).

There are other Islamic customs and rules governing the greeting of non-Muslims etc. We would recommend recourse to the Muttaqun OnLine website or others identified below for further information.

In the UK it is customary to shake hands as a formal and polite form of greeting. However, some – but not all – Muslims feel that it is inappropriate to shake hands with someone from the opposite sex who is not a relation.<sup>8</sup> This is an important element of understanding and practice as obviously some Muslims will often feel very awkward if a hand is offered towards them, and there is not always the time to explain the reasoning of this religious practice. Muslims who feel this way about handshaking do not want to offend or cause embarrassment and yet do not want to feel compromised with regard to their faith. The best advice to give is probably to wait and see if a Muslim member of the opposite sex instigates the greeting process by extending their hand and then react accordingly.

## How do Muslims verbally respect the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)?

Muslims say *'peace be upon him'* after every mention of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) name. This is done as a mark of great respect. The same is done when the Prophet's (pbuh) name is written. It is abbreviated in text to *'pbuh'*. This respect can be found throughout our factsheets on Islam.

## Credits and Sources of Further Information

BBC – Religion and Ethics ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/))

Geocities.com ([http://www.geocities.com/mutmainaa/tafakkur/salam\\_greeting.html](http://www.geocities.com/mutmainaa/tafakkur/salam_greeting.html))

Islam Awareness Week ([www.iaw.org.uk/](http://www.iaw.org.uk/))

Islam Guide (<http://www.islam-guide.com/>)

Islam – Religion Facts (<http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/>)

Islamia (<http://www.islamia.com/>)

Muslim Heritage (<http://www.muslimheritage.com/>)

Muttaqun OnLine (<http://muttaqun.com/index.html>)

The Qur'an

St Philip's Centre: Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society ([www.stphilipscentre.co.uk/](http://www.stphilipscentre.co.uk/))

Wikipedia (various links)

We are particularly grateful to the Islam is Peace website for allowing us to use the information on their excellent website as a basis for this factsheet. We would thoroughly recommend the website for its clarity and sense of purpose in furthering knowledge and understanding of Islam. The website address is [www.islamispeace.org.uk/](http://www.islamispeace.org.uk/).

We are also grateful to Dilwar Hussain, Head of the Policy Research Centre at the Islamic Foundation in Markfield, Leicestershire, for his advice and guidance in the production of this factsheet.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the same restriction exists in Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Hinduism. Many Orthodox Jews and Hindus also do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex. From <http://www.rukhsanakhan.com/article-etiquette.htm>.



**The new Islam Information Centre (IIC) in Leicester<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> Photograph © Julian Harrison 2009.