

Twelve Talking Points About Islam

1. Salaam means “peace” in Arabic and comes from the same root word (SLM) as SHaLom in Hebrew. (These two languages sometimes drop vowels when in written form.) The Arabic word ISLaM means to surrender to God, and can also connote the peace that comes from that surrender. A MuSLiM is a person who surrenders to God.

2. Allah is the word "God" in Arabic, just as Diós means God in Spanish or Gott in German. Bibles translated into Arabic refer to God as Allah. Christians in Arabic-speaking countries call God Allah in their worship services, and refer to Jesus as the son of Allah.

3. Muslims have deep reverence for Jesus and believe he is a great prophet. They believe in the virgin birth, in His miracles and that He is the Messiah. They believe that because of Jesus' holiness God intervened to prevent the crucifixion. They do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead or is divine. Q3:45-49

4. Muhammad referred to Jews, Christians and Muslims as “People of the Book” and called for cooperation and peace among the three faiths. Q3:199

5. It is important to distinguish between religion and culture, and between a religion and those who practice a religion. Religion is practiced in an imperfect world and is shaped by imperfect people and their cultures. Religious wars almost always are fought for political and economic reasons, using religion as a justification.

6. The Qur'an was written in the 7th century and affirms rights for women that were rarely recognized elsewhere until the 19th century. The Qur'an stipulates that women can own property, form contracts, have a say in the selection of a husband, and are to be treated with respect. The Qur'an outlawed infanticide, which was commonly practiced against infant girls, and put limits on polygamy, which was the norm at the time (Abraham and David belonged to similar cultures.) Practices such as female circumcision existed long before Islam began. Current oppression of women is a result of cultural norms that have persisted in spite of, rather than because of, true Islamic teaching. Q 4:7, 3:195, 4:19, 2:231, 4:3, Surah Al-Isra 17:31

7. Muslims trace their ancestry to Ishmael, the first-born son Abraham had with Sarah's slave Hagar. After Sarah became pregnant and Isaac was born, she drove Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert. (Gen. 16:1-16) Muslims believe that Abraham rescued them, and that God later called Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael rather than Isaac. Because Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace their spiritual heritage back to Abraham, they are sometimes referred to as the Abrahamic faiths.

8. Muslims do not worship Muhammad. They believe he is the last in the line of great prophets that includes Jesus, Abraham, Noah, Moses, and others of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They believe Islam is not a new religion, but a call to return to the core teaching of Judaism and Christianity, preached to everyone rather than just the Chosen People.

9. Customs about head covering for men and women have varied widely throughout history and culture. 1 Cor. 1:3-6 calls for men to uncover and women to cover their heads during worship. In the 19th and 20th centuries U.S. men removed their hats when entering a building and tipped their hats as a sign of respect when encountering women. No Catholic woman would have dreamed of entering a church with her head uncovered until the mid-1960's, and many Orthodox women still cover their heads in church. Hijab is the name for the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women. While some cultures impose additional highly restrictive dress and other sanctions on women, a hijab is not a symbol of oppression.

10. The Arabic word jihad means struggle, and throughout Islamic history has signified the personal struggle each of us engages in as we strive to let go of our own wills and submit to God's. Muhammad is quoted as saying to some returning soldiers, "This day we have returned from the minor jihad to the major jihad," meaning the greater and more difficult struggle was the struggle for goodness within. Jihad can also be legitimately used to describe a war of self-defense, with standards roughly equivalent to the Catholic just war tradition. Jihad is never appropriately used to describe terroristic violence. See this text on jihad from the Islamic Supreme Council of America.

11. Most Muslims are not Arabic. The six countries with the largest Muslim populations are, in order: Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Egypt. Islam was introduced into China in 616; China currently has a significant Muslim population. Only about 20% of Muslims live in Arab countries.

12. The Qur'an does not tell the story of Muhammad's life in the same way the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' life. The Qur'an is considered the message revealed to Muhammad over a period of many years and is therefore more comparable to the books of Leviticus and Revelations than to the Gospels.

Note: The Qur'an, unlike the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, is not a collection of books. References to the Qur'an simply indicate chapter and verse. Ex: Q3:46