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Misunderstood Terms and Practices

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What is the Truth About American Muslims? Misunderstood Terms and Practices

14. What does “jihad” mean? Isn’t it a “holy war”?

“Jihad” literally means striving, or doing one’s utmost. Within Islam, there are two basic theological understandings of the word: The “Greater Jihad” is the struggle against the lower self – the struggle to purify one’s heart, do good, avoid evil and make oneself a better person. The “Lesser Jihad” is an outward struggle. Jihad constitutes a moral principle to struggle against any obstacle that stands in the way of the good. Bearing, delivering and raising a child, for example, is an example of outward jihad, because of the many obstacles that must be overcome to deliver and raise the child successfully. Jihad may also involve fighting against oppressors and aggressors who commit injustice. It is not “holy war” in the way a crusade would be considered a holy war, and while Islam allows and even encourages proselytizing, it forbids forced conversion. In Islamic tradition, the form of jihad that involves fighting requires specific ethical conditions under which it is permissible to fight, as well as clear rules of engagement such as the requirement to protect non-combatants. Scholars have compared Jihad that involves fighting to the Christian concept of “just war.”

The variety of interpretations of Lesser Jihad, or just war, over 1400 years in many settings is a complex discussion.

Much of the contemporary misuse of the term “jihad” may be dated to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when stateless actors began to claim the right to declare jihad. In Islamic tradition, there is no theological or political basis for this claim. Radical and extremist groups appropriate and misuse the term “jihad” to give a religious veneer to their violent political movements and tactics.

15. Does the Qur’an require women to be covered?

The Qur’an requires men and women to dress modestly, but without specifying exactly what that means (24:30-31). Muslims therefore differ on what modesty requires, resulting in a variety of practices in different cultures and countries.

Historically, male dominance in Muslim societies has led to unequal application of modesty rules, with women in some cultures being made to cover much more of their bodies than men are required to do. At the same time, it must be said that many Muslim women in the United States and other countries freely choose to veil as an expression of their faith.

16. Are Muslim men allowed to marry four wives?

While the Qur'an sanctions marriage to up to four wives (Q.4:3), the wording of the verse is understood by some Muslim scholars to allow but at the same time discourage marrying more than one wife. Verse 4:3 says that a Muslim man may marry up to four wives if he can treat them equally. Since men cannot treat any two people equally, the practice which was historically acceptable during times of crisis, like war, is now even outlawed in some Muslim majority nations.

17. Does Islam sanction “honor killings”?

No. According to Islamic teachings, no Muslim may sanction or support murder; the Qur'an explicitly forbids such actions (16:59, 5:27-32). In fact, the Qur'an does not mention “honor killings,” and in Islamic teachings, there is no such thing as excusable murder. The term “honor killings” used in some cultures is an attempt to describe murder as something religiously acceptable. It is not religiously acceptable in Islam.

18. What is Taqiyya? Does Islam encourage American Muslims to deceive and lie?

Taqiyya is an Arabic word that means to hide your faith in times of persecution in order to protect your life and family. It does not allow one to deceive and lie. Muslims are allowed to practice Taqiyya when open declaration of their faith leads to death and torture.

A similar teaching can be found in Judaism: Maimonides, one of the great Jewish Torah scholars, taught that one is allowed to lie about one's religion in order to save one's life, and many Jews who were forcibly baptized in medieval Christian Europe engaged in the same kind of practice to protect their lives and remain committed to their faith. Given the very restricted contexts in which such behavior is allowed in both religions, it would be wrong to accuse Islam or Judaism of actively encouraging believers to deceive others.

Islam commands all Muslims to speak the truth and conduct themselves honestly in personal, political and professional relationships. In the Qur'an, God commands Muslims: “And do not mix the truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth while you know [what it is] (2:42).”

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