

Understanding the Three Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

The Dunedin Jewish, Christian and Muslim Community Liaison Group

Our group was formed here in Dunedin in the aftermath of the events of September 11th 2001 out of spontaneous expressions of solidarity and goodwill between leaders of our three faiths, the police and the Dunedin City Council. We exist to express a common heritage and concern, as people of faith in Dunedin.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all Abrahamic faiths. All three can trace their faith back to Abraham. Ordinary people from all three faiths share a deep desire for peace and justice. We seek to encourage and model friendship and respect for each other.

Our aims are three-fold:

1. To stand together should any of our communities suffer harassment or attack.
2. To respond together to events, local or global, which have an impact on the relationships between Jewish, Christian and Muslim people in Dunedin.
3. An ongoing educational role as together we seek to overcome some of the misrepresentation and lack of awareness in the wider community. With this aim in mind we arrange for inter-faith delegations to visit Dunedin schools, and host public forums.

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Understanding Judaism and the Jews

*In the Name of God,
Blessed be the Name*

What is Judaism?

Judaism is an old religion. Unlike Islam or Christianity, Judaism is more about Right Action than Right Belief. As a non-missionising religion, Judaism cannot compete in terms of numbers but its influence is immeasurable. At its centre is the concept of Tikkun Olam — repairing the world. Jews seek to create a world worthy of God, to build the ‘Kingdom of God’ on earth.

What do Jews believe?

Jews believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God. The central declaration of Jewish belief is a passage of Scripture known as the Shema: 'Shema Yisrael, Adonai, Elohenu, Adonai Echad' (Hear, O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord is One). All other Jewish belief stems from this declaration. This singular, unique, unitary God gave the Jewish people the Torah (the Law) at Mt. Sinai and this Law defines the parameters of Jewish belief and practice. Contained in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) are 613 commandments or ‘Mitzvot’ (singular: ‘Mitzvah’) divided into 248 positive commandments and 365 negative ones.

How does someone become a Jew?

Judaism does not seek converts so the easiest way to become a Jew is to be born Jewish! Conversion is possible but it is not an easy path and the process takes several years of study, commitment and examination.

What does ‘Judaism’ mean?

The word comes to us from the Roman Empire when the Holy Land was the Roman province of Judea (from the Hebrew: ‘Yehudah’) and all who lived there were referred to as Judeans. This became Jews over the course of time. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob.

Do Islam and Christianity share origins with Judaism?

The first Christians, including Jesus, were Jews and Christianity grew out of Judaism. Islam developed later and owes aspects of its character to both Judaism and Christianity. However, the theology of both Christianity and Islam, to a greater or lesser extent, embraces important figures whom Jews claim as their own. Abraham is acknowledged as the Father of all three religions.

Who is Moses?

Moses was born in Egypt about 3,500 years ago, at a time when the Hebrew people were enslaved and oppressed. Although he grew up in a privileged position he became known for his compassion. Eventually, he led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and slavery (the Exodus, an event still commemorated each year at Passover) and became their leader, teacher and greatest prophet.

After the Exodus he ascended Mt. Sinai and God gave him the Torah to deliver to the Children of Israel. He led them for forty years and died just before they passed over the River Jordan from the ‘wilderness’ to the ‘promised land.’ The account of his life and works is found in the Biblical Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Jews, Christians and Muslims all revere him as a prophet.

What is the Torah?

The Torah is the Law that was revealed by God at Mt. Sinai. The term usually refers to what Christians call the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). In Jewish literature and worship the word is sometimes used to denote certain other things but one cannot go wrong in applying it solely to these books. The Torah, written in Hebrew and on a single Scroll, is read in Jewish synagogues and is central to Jewish faith and practice.

The Torah contains history, law, legend, poetry and song. It recounts the story of the Jewish people from the creation of the world until their arrival in the land promised them by God. Along the way it delineates the rules that God has ordained for the Hebrew people and for all the peoples of the world.

Are there any other sacred sources?

Yes, the Nevi'im or Prophets and the Ketubim or Writings, along with the Torah make up the Written Law, known by the acronym: TaNaKh. In addition, the Oral Law — which is often referred to as the Talmud, was committed to writing over a period of about 500 years starting nearly 2,000 years ago. It contains stories, legal rulings and explanations of the Torah. Belief in the Talmud is part of the Jewish faith.

Examples of the Talmud's writings:

'Whoever destroys a single life is as guilty as though he had destroyed the entire world; and whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.'

'Who can protest and does not, is an accomplice in the act.'

'Live well. It is the greatest revenge.'

'Anyone who shames his fellow in public, it is as if he shed blood.'

'Deeds of kindness are equal in weight to all the commandments.'

'Teach your tongue to say "I do not know", lest you be led to lie.'

'In a city where both non-Jews and Jews live, the tzedakah (charity) collectors collect from Jews and non-Jews and support Jewish and non-Jewish poor; we visit Jewish and non-Jewish sick and bury Jewish and non-Jewish dead, and comfort Jewish and non-Jewish mourners, and return lost goods of non-Jews and Jews, to promote the ways of peace.'

Does Judaism tolerate other beliefs?

The Jewish religion does not teach that Jews have a monopoly on the truth. Rather, it teaches that all peoples are 'chosen' by God for different missions and that each people must fulfil its own mission.

For the Jew, Judaism is the path to God but others must follow their own paths. Throughout Jewish Scripture and post-Scriptural writings there exists a thread of concern for the 'stranger' and the 'oppressed'. Jewish law protects and honours all human beings, regardless of whether or not they are Jewish. It forbids Jews to deal unjustly with non-Jews.

What do Jews think about Jesus and Mohammed?

Judaism teaches respect for the faith of others. So, such religious figures as Jesus or Mohammed are respected but not worshipped. Although they play no part in the Jewish religion it is forbidden to disrespect them. Jews do not accept the Virgin Birth or atoning death of Jesus but recognise the Christian position on these. Likewise, Judaism does not accept that Mohammed was a prophet but recognises and respects Muslim convictions.

What about Jewish women?

Judaism sees a woman, whether single or married, as an individual in her own right, with the right to own and dispose of her property and earnings. A marriage contract is drawn up and signed by the groom to the bride which identifies and guarantees her rights.

The Hebrew Scriptures include women prophets (such as Miriam), judges and generals (such as Deborah), war heroes (such as Jael), great women of faith (such as Ruth and Abigail), and others.

Traditional Judaism exempts women from many of the commandments incumbent upon men for historical and theological reasons, but they play pivotal roles in the life of Judaism: ushering in the Sabbath, fulfilling the role of first teachers of Jewish children, maintaining the everyday laws of kashrut (fitness) and perpetuating Judaism itself through childbirth.

Why is family so important to Jews?

The family unit is designed and ordained by God: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). The family is also the means of perpetuating Judaism, through propagation and education.

What does Judaism say about war?

Sometimes war is necessary. Although Judaism teaches the supreme value of life, Jews are not pacifists. Wiping out evil is also part of justice. As Rashi (a great Bible commentator who lived 1,000 years ago in France) explains, dangerous disputes must be resolved because if evil is left alone it will eventually attack you.

Before a war, the other side must be given the chance to accept peace terms (Deut. 20.10). The hope is that they will change and accept the Seven Universal Laws of humanity. These 'Noachide Laws' are basic to any functioning society and embody fundamental respect for human rights and civilized values:

- Do not murder.
- Do not steal.
- Do not worship false gods.
- Do not be sexually immoral.
- Do not eat the limb of an animal before it is killed.
- Do not curse God.
- Set up courts and bring offenders to justice.

In the event that the other nations chose not to make a treaty, the Jews were still commanded to fight mercifully! For example, when besieging a city to conquer it, the Jews never surrounded it on all four sides. This way, one side was always left open to allow for anyone who wanted to escape.

Throughout Jewish history, waging war has always been a tremendous personal and national ordeal which ran contrary to the Jews' peace-loving nature. King Saul lost his kingdom when he showed misplaced mercy by allowing the Amalekite king to live. And in modern times, when Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was asked if she could forgive Egypt for killing Israeli soldiers, she replied, 'It is more difficult for me to forgive Egypt for making us kill their soldiers.'

How do Jews view death?

In Judaism, death is not a tragedy, even when it occurs early in life or through unfortunate circumstances. Death is a natural process. Our deaths, like our lives, have meaning and are all part of God's plan. In addition, Jews have a firm belief in an afterlife, a world to come, where those who have lived a worthy life will be rewarded, and live on in memory. Perhaps the worst 'punishment' is to be forgotten or remembered for evil (such as Hitler). Mourning practices in Judaism are extensive, but they are not an expression of fear or distaste for death. Jewish practices relating to death and mourning have two purposes: to show respect for the dead (kavod ha-met), and to comfort the living (nihum avelim), who will miss the deceased.

How does Judaism guarantee human rights?

A commitment to human rights is founded on the recognition of the importance of human life, which is also fundamental to the Jewish faith. Human rights and the relationships between humans in general are firmly established by the Torah and the Talmud. These form the very substance of Jewish faith and practice.

Many Jewish festivals celebrate basic human rights such as freedom from slavery, self-determination, freedom of association and freedom of worship.

Jewish conceptions of the rights of humans stem, ultimately, from the Genesis account of the creation of humanity and the declaration that human beings are made in the 'image and likeness' of God.

What about food?

Food plays a great part in Jewish life and worship. An old joke, with more than a grain of truth in it, suggests that all Jewish festivals can be summed up in three sentences: 'They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat'.

While it is not as simple as that, yet every festival is marked by its own distinctive foods. In addition, there are foods that are prohibited to Jews. Dietary rules were first established in Leviticus 11 and were

expounded upon over the millennia by the rabbis and sages of Judaism. In a nutshell, the rules forbid eating any land-dwelling animal that does not both chew the cud and have cloven hooves, any water dwelling animal that does not have both fins and scales, all carrion-eating birds and almost all insects. As well as this there is a prohibition against eating meat and dairy products together.

Despite these restrictions, Jewish food is both varied and justifiably famous and includes such modern staples as bagels and chicken soup.

What is Christianity?

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life

Christianity is centred on Jesus the Christ, born in the land of Israel-Palestine about 2,000 years ago. Christianity is a missionary faith, with an ambition to transform the lives of all individuals and communities. Today about a third of the world's population are Christians.

Those who put their faith in Jesus Christ need fellowship with one another to keep their faith alive. This living faith is experienced in the ongoing work of God within 'the Church', in the nurture and sustenance of worship, community, teaching and encouragement. While there are many denominations of Christians, with many church congregations, all are part of 'the Church'. Throughout history, the Church has fallen into temptation and become corrupt, but it is also constantly capable of renewal.

Christians might be viewed in three traditions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant. The call of Jesus that his followers might 'all be one, so that the world might believe' remains a challenge to Christians through the world.

What do Christians believe?

Christians believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God, and that this One God is revealed in a dynamic relationship of three expressions: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, known as the Trinity.

God the Father is Creator of the world, in fact of everything that exists (no contradiction to science or evolution is necessary). The Fatherhood of God points to care, love and relationship, not to be understood literally or in terms of a male God. As in a caring family, the love of God the Father is unconditional, and our human response God's greatest joy or sorrow. God the Creator is all-powerful, ruling over the material world, which is distinct from God. God the Creator can redeem the world and human nature from their imperfect state and create them anew.

It is a Christian conviction that God began to do so through the people of Israel and in particular through Jesus Christ, a unique revelation of God, fully human and fully God. Jesus is known as the Son, the expression of God within humanity, space and time: the Incarnation, God enfleshed.

Christians look forward with hope to the time when God will complete this new creation. The Holy Spirit is God at work in the world: sustaining, guiding, empowering and encouraging Christians today in countless ways.

Christianity explicitly emphasises God as love. This love takes the initiative, not waiting to be deserved. It seeks actively to bring peace where there is conflict, good out of evil, hope out of despair, and love out of hatred. It is also called 'grace'.

The sources of our knowledge about God are the Bible, human experience, reason and tradition.

How does someone become a Christian?

Outwardly, a person becomes a Christian by being baptised. Baptism symbolises cleansing, dying and rising with Christ (dying to sin and rising to new life), and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In many traditions, infants are baptised and later confirm the promises made on their behalf, claiming that faith for themselves.

Inwardly, it is through faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit that a person becomes a Christian.

What does the term 'Christian' mean?

The term 'Christian' is taken from a Greek title given to Jesus, 'Christ', which is a translation of the Hebrew 'Messiah', both meaning 'Anointed One'. 'Christian' effectively means 'follower of Christ'.

Roman Catholic Christians recognize the Pope as their spiritual head, understood to be heir to St Peter; Protestant Christians are the descendants of the Reformation, who no longer share loyalty to Rome; Eastern Orthodox Christians are inheritors of shared early Christianity, independent of Rome. They have a rich sense of ritual.

Does Christianity share origins with Judaism and Islam?

Christianity grew directly out of Judaism. Jesus was born a Jew, as were the first Christians. Like Islam and Judaism, Christians trace their faith-ancestry to Abraham, and understand that they are inheritors of the promise that he would become a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Who is Jesus?

Born about 2000 years ago, Jesus probably lived most of his life as a carpenter in the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He travelled around the country with a group of disciples, teaching and healing the sick, challenging his hearers to welcome the 'Kingdom of God', to embody love and justice, and to turn aside from religious hypocrisy. He was crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem (a brutal Roman execution technique), probably in his early thirties. His disciples, however, became convinced that he had been raised from the dead and was present with them, alive in a new, more glorious way. Ever since then Christians have continued to find that they could stand in a close, personal relationship with him, and also with God who sent him.

How did he come to be seen as a revelation of God?

Jesus was recognised by his followers as the promised Messiah to the Jewish people, who would usher in a new age of God's presence. Although shattered at his death by crucifixion, they experienced repeated encounters with the risen Jesus. They came to believe that this figure who did not hold back from confronting suffering and death was both truly divine and truly human. All of God that could be contained in a human being was to be found in him — he was God 'focused' in a human person. Jesus reflected God's character, and if people wanted to know what God was like, they should look at him and see.

Jesus showed that God's love was limitless, for all peoples, and present even in the midst of the most terrible suffering. His resurrection from the dead signified victory over all suffering and evil, even death.

What is the Bible?

The Christian Bible ('book') is divided into two main sections, the first of which is also Scripture for Jews.

The Old or First Testament was originally written in Hebrew and contains a wide variety of types of literature: history, stories, laws, psalms, poems, proverbs and prophecies. It represents different people's experience of God over more than 1,000 years.

The second part of the scriptures is called the New Testament. It was originally written in Greek, and it consists of four gospels ('good news'), a brief church history, a large number of letters written by St Paul and others, and an apocalyptic book called Revelation, rich in symbolism and encouragement for a persecuted Church.

What is the Bible about?

Beginning with symbolic stories about human origins and human nature, the First Testament tells chiefly of God's dealings with ancient Israel, a people chosen for service and witness to God. It recounts their relationship and often their distance from God, and the call to be what God desires us to be.

The heart of the New Testament, the gospels, provide accounts of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. They were not intended to be history as we understand it. They are written, as John 20:30-31 puts it, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

The letters of the New Testament offer encouragement and teaching for the first Christians, and for Christians today.

Are there any other sacred sources?

Yes, the Apocrypha are a part of the sacred writings that are viewed slightly differently, notably between Catholic and Protestant Christians. These writings, from the period between the First Testament and the New Testament, are not considered fully part of the Bible by most Protestants. The Eastern Orthodox canon is slightly different again.

Does Christianity tolerate other beliefs?

While Christians have always had a missionary impetus, there is nothing in the writings of the Christian Bible that suggests compulsion or violence is an appropriate way to spread 'good news' (the gospel). On the contrary, Jesus' example invites us to interact with people as they are. It is by living the gospel that people will be drawn to it. Jesus' example also makes it clear that living justly is to be honoured over an empty profession of 'religion'.

What do Christians think about Moses and Mohammed?

Christians accept Moses unreservedly as part of their faith-ancestry. The New Testament explicitly links Jesus with Moses. Many Christians recognise too that the prophetic voice is uttered in all generations, and some would view Mohammed as falling within that tradition. Dogmatically, however, Christians do not recognise the position or writings attributed to Mohammed.

What about Christian women?

Like other faiths, Christianity has been influenced by and encountered in cultures that are patriarchal. The stories of Jesus' first followers, many of whom were women (most clearly the witnesses to the Resurrection), suggest that the position of women in the early Church challenged the male-dominated culture of the time. As a living faith, this challenge goes on. Differing parts of the global Church are at different points on the journey

Why is family so important to Christians?

Contemporary Christians will respond in many different ways to issues and definitions of 'the family'. Families are where, it is to be hoped, we learn first to be loved and to love others. This is central to a Christian response to God. The use of relational terms like 'Father' in talking about God emphasise God's care for the human race, and an intimacy we see reflected in the family.

What does Christianity say about war?

The Christian ideal is for peace, not war. While there have always been significant voices within Christianity advocating pacifism, Christian history and other voices would say that on occasions there is such a thing as a 'just' war. Many issues need to be thought out in the light of both basic Christian convictions and contemporary circumstances.

How do Christians view death?

By Jesus' death and Resurrection, Christians are encouraged not to fear dying. Christians understand that death will not separate us from God, and most believe that the faithful are in fact brought more fully into God's presence after this life (often called 'heaven'). In the classic words of Paul (a hugely influential early Christian): 'I am sure that neither death, nor life ... nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:38-39).

How does Christianity guarantee human rights?

The Christian assertion, together with others, that humankind is created in the image of God must stand as a fundamental impetus towards universal human rights. The central Christian festival of Easter (which draws on the imagery of the Jewish Passover) explicitly tells of our freedom from slavery and invites all people to enter into that freedom.

The fact that Jesus was (by virtue of the method of his death) essentially a political martyr in the wider sense, has inspired some Christians with a very strong sense of social justice.

What about food?

Although Christianity has no dietary laws, some traditions make use of fasting and voluntary self-denial. The Church emerged in a context where there were many issues around foods (as both sacred and prohibited), and Christians are urged to be respectful of the positions taken by others.

The Eucharist or Holy Communion is a significant expression of faith for almost all Christians. This is a ritual meal, remembering the final meal of Jesus with his disciples, his life and death, and looking for the full coming of the Kingdom of God. Christians are also invited to enter into the hospitality of God, and like Jesus to share food and fellowship with the poor and outcast.

Understanding Islam and the Muslims

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

What is Islam?

Islam is not a new religion, but the same truth that God revealed through all His prophets to every people. For a fifth of the world's population, Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life. Muslims follow a religion of peace, mercy, and forgiveness, and the majority have nothing to do with the extremely grave events that have come to be associated with their faith.

What do Muslims believe?

Muslims believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God, in the Angels created by Him, in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind, in God's complete authority over human destiny and in life after death. Muslims believe in a chain of prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, John the Baptist and Jesus, peace be upon them. But God's final message to man, a reconfirmation of the eternal message and a summing-up of all that has gone before was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH through the Angel Gabriel. (The Prophet's name is always accompanied by the acclamation 'peace be upon him', or PBUH.)

How does someone become a Muslim?

Simply by saying with conviction that 'there is no god apart from God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' By this declaration the believer announces his or her faith in God, all his messengers, and the scriptures that were revealed to them.

What does 'Islam' mean?

The Arabic word 'Islam' simply means 'submission', and is derived from a word meaning 'peace'. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God. 'Allah' is the Arabic name for God, which is used by Arab Muslims and Christians alike.

Do Islam, Judaism and Christianity have different origins?

No. Together they go back to the prophet and patriarch Abraham, and their three prophets are directly descended from his sons — Muhammad PBUH from the eldest, Ishmael; and Moses and Jesus, upon them be peace, from Isaac. Abraham established the settlement which today is the holy city of Makkah (=Mecca), and built the monument known as the Ka'ba towards which all Muslims turn when they pray.

Who is Muhammad?

Muhammad PBUH was born in Makkah in the year 570, at a time when Christianity was not yet fully established in Europe. As he grew up, he became known for his truthfulness, generosity and sincerity, so that he was sought after for his ability to arbitrate in disputes. Historians describe him as calm and meditative. At the age of 40, while engaged in a meditative retreat, Muhammad PBUH received his first revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel. These revelations, which continued for twenty-three years, are known collectively as the Qur'an.

As soon as he began to recite the words he heard from Gabriel, and to preach the truth which God had revealed to him, he and his small group of followers suffered bitter persecution, which grew so fierce that in the year 622 God gave them the command to leave Makkah for the city of Madinah some 260 miles to the north. After several years, the Prophet PBUH and his followers were able to return to Makkah, where they forgave their enemies and established Islam definitively. Before the Prophet PBUH died at the age of 63, the greater part of Arabia was Muslim, and within a century of his death Islam had spread to Spain in the West and as far east as China.

What is the Qur'an?

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is a record of the exact words revealed by God through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. It was memorised by Muhammad PBUH and then dictated to his Companions, written down by scribes, and cross-checked during his lifetime. Not one word of its 114

chapters (Surahs) has been changed over the centuries, so that the Qur'an is in every detail the unique and miraculous text which was revealed to Muhammad PBUH fourteen centuries ago. This is in fulfilment of the promise given by God to preserve the Qur'an unchanged for all time.

What is the Qur'an about?

The Qur'an, the last revealed Word of God, is the prime source of every Muslim's faith and practice. It deals with all the subjects which concern us as human beings: wisdom, doctrine, worship and law, but its basic theme is the relationship between God and His creatures. At the same time it provides guidelines for a just society, proper human conduct and an equitable economic system.

The astounding scientific accuracy of the Qur'an attests to its truthfulness. For example, the verse 'With power did we construct the heavens and we are ever expanding it' (51: 47) reflects modern conceptions of an expanding universe. And the Qur'an describes the stages of development of the baby in the womb in detail that has been observed only in the last 30 years or so using modern endoscopic techniques (23: 12-15).

Are there any other sacred sources?

Yes, the 'Sunnah', the practice and example of the Prophet PBUH, is the second authority for Muslims. A hadith is a reliably transmitted report of what the Prophet PBUH said, did, or approved of. Belief in the 'Sunnah' is part of the Islamic faith.

Examples of the Prophet's sayings:

'God has no mercy on one who has no mercy for others.'

'None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.'

'Powerful is not he who knocks the other down, indeed powerful is he who controls himself in a fit of anger.'

'God does not judge according to your bodies and appearances, but He scans your hearts and looks into your deeds.'

(From the hadith collections of Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi and Bayhaqi)

What are the 'Five Pillars' of Islam?

They are the framework of the Muslim life: faith in one God, prayer, compulsory charity, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.

Does Islam tolerate other beliefs?

It is one function of Islamic law to protect the privileged status of minorities, and this is why non-Muslim places of worship have flourished all over the Islamic world. History provides many examples of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths: when the caliph Omar entered Jerusalem in the year 634, Islam granted freedom of worship to all religious communities in the city.

Islamic law also permits non-Muslim minorities to set up their own courts, which implement family laws drawn up by the minorities themselves.

What do Muslims think about Jesus?

Muslims respect and revere Jesus, upon him be peace (UHBP), and await his Second Coming. They consider him one of the greatest of God's messengers to mankind. A Muslim never refers to him simply as 'Jesus', but always adds the phrase 'upon him be peace'. The Qur'an confirms his virgin birth (a chapter of the Qur'an is entitled 'Mary'), and Mary is considered the purest woman in all creation.

Jesus UHBP was born miraculously through the same power which had brought Adam (UHBP) into being without father: 'Truly, the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, and then said to him, "Be!" and he was.' (3:59)

Neither Muhammad PBUH nor Jesus UHBP came to change the basic doctrine of belief in one God, brought by earlier prophets, but to confirm and renew it. In the Qur'an Jesus UHBP is reported as saying

that he came 'To attest the law which was before me. And to make lawful to you part of what was forbidden you; I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear God and obey Me.' (3:50)

The Prophet Muhammad PBUH said: 'Whoever believes there is no god but God, alone without partner, that Muhammad PBUH is His messenger, that Jesus is the servant and messenger of God, His word breathed into Mary and a spirit emanating from Him, and that Paradise and Hell are true, shall be received by God into Heaven' (*hadith from Bukhari*).

What about Muslim women?

Islam sees a woman, whether single or married, as an individual in her own right, with the right to own and dispose of her property and earnings. A marriage dowry is given by the groom to the bride for her own personal use, and she keeps her own family name rather than taking her husband's. Both men and women are expected to dress in a way that is modest and dignified; the traditions of female dress found in some Muslim countries are often the expression of local customs.

The Messenger of God PBUH said: 'The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife.'

Why is family so important to Muslims?

The family is the foundation of Islamic society. The peace and security offered by a stable family unit is greatly valued, and seen as essential for the spiritual growth of its members. Children are treasured, and rarely leave home until the time they marry.

What does Islam say about war?

Islam permits fighting in self-defence, in the upholding of religion, or on behalf of those who have been forcibly expelled from their homes. It lays down strict rules of combat which include prohibition against harming civilians and against destroying crops, trees and livestock. As the Qur'an says: 'Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors' (2.190). As Muslims see it, injustice would triumph if good men were not prepared to risk their lives in a righteous cause.

War, therefore, is a last resort and is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the sacred law. The term often used for war, jihad, literally means 'struggle', and Muslims believe that there are two kinds of jihad. Firstly, physical war, as discussed above, and the inner struggle which everyone wages against egotistical desires for the sake of attaining inner peace.

How do Muslims view death?

Muslims believe that the present life is only a trial in preparation for the next realm of existence. Belief in the resurrection of the body, the Day of Judgement, heaven and hell are articles of faith. When a Muslim dies they are washed, usually by a family member, wrapped in a clean white cloth, and buried with a simple prayer—preferably on the same day. Muslims consider this one of the final services they can perform for their relatives, and an opportunity to consider their own brief existence here on earth. The Prophet PBUH taught that three things can continue to help people even after death: charity which they had given, knowledge which they had taught, and prayers offered on their behalf by a righteous child.

How does Islam guarantee human rights?

Freedom of conscience is mandated by the Qur'an: 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2.256). The life and property of all citizens in an Islamic state are respected whether a person is Muslim or not. Racism is incomprehensible to Muslims, as the Qur'an urges equality: 'O mankind! We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another' (49.13).

What about food?

The dietary code which Muslims observe forbids the consumption of pork and any kind of intoxicant. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught that 'your body has rights over you', and wholesome food and a healthy lifestyle are seen as religious obligations.

