

# ***HOT TOPICS***

What hot topics in your faith or other faiths do you have trouble comprehending?

# We asked people...

- *Reuniting THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM a toolkit for peace* vividly portrays conflicts and misunderstandings that arise among and within the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- To begin dialogue around these “hot topics,” we asked people inside and outside each faith community to offer their thoughts and questions in response to a particular word.

- Due to the sensitive nature of these hot topics, we have left the answers anonymous. They are not meant to be a final word on any subject, only an honest opinion. We thank everyone who took the time to ponder these difficult topics in an effort to initiate more dialogue.

- *Within each faith*, people acknowledged how these terms could generate controversy. Some were eager to offer their idea of what the hot topics truly meant, while others expressed their own discomfort with the term.
- At the same time, *outside each faith community*, we found lingering questions and unease regarding these controversial terms. Many outsiders' responses were first impressions, revealing biases. Yet their willingness to be forthright came not from hostility but from a genuine desire for interactive dialogue.

# CHRISTIAN

Most Christians thought about “**Christian**” in terms of believing in and following Jesus. A Christian...

- “is a follower of Jesus who accepts his Messiah-hood.”
- “lives one’s life now in light of the future, believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus.”

## Some Christians emphasized following Jesus as the key to salvation:

- “A Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is the son of God and that everyone can find salvation only through him.”
- “Christians follow Jesus’ invitation as the way to find forgiveness of sins and new life through him.”

## While others disagreed:

- “A Christian may also be someone who believes God would not withhold salvation from people of other traditions who have lived loving and just lives.”
- “While I believe that the gospel is the way to experience salvation, not all Christians believe salvation can be achieved only through Jesus.”

## Many outside the faith rooted “Christian” in a moral code or a church association:

- “A Christian is someone who believes in good deeds, kindness, reaching out.”
- “A Christian is humane, honest, and devoted, believing in Original Sin.”
- “It has many aspects to it -- Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, the Church of England, the Catholic Church and others.”
- This brought forth questions: “Why are there so many Christian denominations? Can nations be Christian or only individuals?”

## Christians stressed their faith encompassed more than a mere moral code or church association:

- “I believe mature Christianity includes working for justice and not just “feel good” faith. Justice is a more complex and challenging dimension of our faith as it calls us to examine and remove those conditions causing injustice. A Christian follows the mandate found in Micah 6:8 to act justly.”
- “Within the denominations of Christianity, there is a great range of diversity. I feel closer, in many ways, to some Protestant Christians than I do to some Catholic Christians.”



## Some people expressed concern regarding Christianity's relations with other faiths and groups:

- “What is a Christian position on diversity and inclusion?”
- “Christians are the majority. I think a lot of Jews view themselves in comparison to Christians, who make up most of the US. I know we have so much in common, but I also feel like Christians can oppress or misunderstand other religions because they don't have to deal with being a minority.”

## But others noted the closeness between the faiths and the situation of Christians globally.

- “There has been much conflict between Muslims and Christians throughout history, but Christians are defined in the Qur'an as people who are close to Muslims and Jesus as the Messiah, his second coming predicted in the tradition of the Prophet.”
- “Many people do not realize that in many countries, Christians are a persecuted minority.”

# MUSLIM

Submission to God and Muhammad as God's prophet was central in different people's responses to "Muslim." A Muslim is...

- "one who submits to God and lives in harmony with all of God's creation."
- "a follower of Muhammad\* and his oral revelation regarding Allah (God in Arabic)."
- "a follower of a religion that is the continuation of the religion brought by Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad\*."
- \*Muslims often recite "peace be upon them" after the names of Muhammad and the other prophets are used. It is seen as a mark of respect.

## There were comparisons and contrasts to Judaism and Christianity:

- “Muslims believe in the teachings of Muhammad, much as Christians believe in the teachings of Jesus. Muhammad, however, is not a God but a prophet, a thought that seems more approachable and acceptable to me.”
- “Islam is surprisingly similar to Judaism in that the practice of the religion each day is central.”
- “It is monotheistic like Judaism; the laws of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus are combined in the newest Testament, the Qur’an.”

## Yet some Muslims felt that there was a lack of understanding regarding their faith:

- “Islam has many outward dimensions and incorporates many cultures among its followers. Islam is a way of life more than a religion; the word ‘Muslim’ has multiple meanings and is not monolithic as it is generally perceived.”
- “Islam is misunderstood: it is peaceful in its teachings and practices, gave rights to women, and brought together people of all nations.”
- “Too often the bad is exposed, and the good remains veiled. Growing up, I fought a battle to have people to know me first, and then identify me as a Muslim. I valued being an ambassador for the faith, bridging a gap between the uninformed and a faith that has so much to offer people’s hearts.”

## Questions and comments from non-Muslims often conveyed a sense of approaching Islam from a distance:

- “I know Jews and Muslims have similar beliefs, and I connect with them by being one of the minority religions in the US. Still, I can't help but feel that their fundamentalism is scarier than anyone else's right now.”
- “I think of Muslims as like Orthodox Jews in their closed, clannish circles (as I imagine them), with clear-cut do's and don'ts; with comfort in community, prayer, custom, and socially supportive network. I'm sure I thought before of Muslims as more close-minded than I do now.”
- “It is hard to reconcile the teachings of peace and love with the violent acts done in the name of Islam, but I suppose this happens in other faiths too.”
- “What are the basic sects of Islam? What are the basic tenets of Islam? What is a Muslim position on diversity and inclusion?”

# JEW

Jews viewed the word “**Jew**,” unlike “Christian” and “Muslim,” to encompass much more than religion. A Jew is...

- “one who incorporates religion, culture, history, language, land, and mission. Some Jews would call themselves religious, others secular; some are believers and others agnostic or atheists. For many, a common history and identity, even more than belief, are at the core of what being Jewish is all about.”
- “someone committed by blood or choice (through conversion) to Jewish history, tradition, culture, faith and/or the people.”
- “someone who is proud, a survivor...by virtue of a family’s heritage, one is a Jew.”

## Most non-Jews understood the word “Jew” from merely a religious standpoint:

- They described Jews as...
- “Hebrews, as opposed to Gentiles”
- “People of the Book”
- “a descendant of a people that God chose to be a model for other nations, following the first monotheistic faith”
- a people who were oppressed by Pharaoh and delivered from oppression through Moses -- a Prophet of God”

There were also comments that addressed Jews' relations with others, in the past and the present.

- Some interviewees emphasized the history of Jews as victims: “The word ‘Jew’ summons echoes of anti-Semitic slurs, from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* to graffiti-covered walls.”
- Others saw Jews as victimizing others: “A Jew is a powerful force; oppressive.”
- Still others saw Jews as friends: “There was a sense of camaraderie I shared with Jewish kids I grew up with, being the outsiders to the mainstream kids in school. I really feel that perspective helped me break the Arab stigma of Jews.”



## One Muslim grapples with this complexity:

- “There was a long history of cooperation and conflict with some Jews in Medina at the time of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).\* Jews had a long history of peaceful coexistence with Muslims, and Muslims had sympathy and support for the Jewish cause during the Nazi era. However, there is also a painful history of conflict recently in the Middle East after the inception of the state of Israel. So the word ‘Jew’ has mixed meaning to Muslims, lately defined in terms of Israeli occupation and the influence on American policies in the Middle East.”

# *JIHAD*

- Muslims we interviewed wanted to clarify the true meaning of “**Jihad**.” They sought to counter popular perceptions of Jihad as “holy war.”

- “Jihad is NOT the Islamic war against the West. It is an inner struggle--physically, mentally, emotionally--to elevate oneself to a higher spiritual state.”
- “Jihad is NOT holy war. In the Qur’an, war is an inevitable lesser evil, not holy. The term, ‘holy war’ was coined by the Crusaders; it is not in the Islamic vocabulary. The word Jihad comes from the root Jahada, literally meaning “to exert, strive, and struggle.”
- “Anyone doing any work that is a good effort or work for the common good is doing Jihad. People doing Jihad are not looking for a reward. It is not against or for anyone. If you give your life in self-defense or in defense of Islam, you are performing Jihad. Jihad is an Arabic name. No one would name his or her child something that had to do with terrorism or suicide. Jihad has nothing to do with aggression, terror, suicide or anti-Americanism.”

A few Muslims discussed the concept of external Jihad but stressed the importance of the internal Jihad over the external:

- “I feel it and live it everyday within myself - that struggle and turmoil to constantly improve myself and my character, inwardly and outwardly. At the same time, external Jihad is also a reality of the faith. But where is there a legitimate Islamic state under attack? There is no overall Muslim movement today, and therefore there cannot be a Jihad to protect the Muslim faith and the way of life of Muslims.”
- “Jihad is an internal or outer struggle for Allah (God in Arabic). The most important one is the ‘war against oneself.’ ”

Some Jews and Christians we interviewed did view Jihad as primarily “holy war.” They associated it with...

- “putting to the sword people whom you consider ‘infidels’ ”
- “Muslim activists who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause/a form of salvation for them”
- “suicide bombers”
- “fanatical religious devotees acting rashly and without logical thought”

Others had a perspective similar to the one offered by the Muslims above:

- “Some of our Muslim friends tell us Jihad is really an internal personal struggle, not a national one, and we must let good win and reign inside ourselves.”
- “I would like to think of Jihad as a figurative war against oppression of religion, not a true and physical one, and I don't like that terrorism is being called Jihad. It gives Islam a bad name.”

Even so, the word continued to trouble  
some:

- “I know that Jihad has been explained as a ‘personal struggle’ within yourself, but it is troubling that there are Muslims using this word to mean ‘holy war’ nevertheless.”
- “I know it's supposed to refer to the inner, spiritual struggle, but it usually conjures up militant images of people out to kill Jews - particularly those living in Israel.”

The word also provoked non-Muslims to ask:

- “Do all Muslims use the word ‘Jihad’ in the same way? If not, what are the variations in definitions? Where is it used in the Qur’an and how?”
- “How do extremists justify the use of ‘Jihad’ in the Qur’an to mean holy war?”



# *Chosen People*

- The Jews we interviewed stressed that the idea of a “**Chosen People**” puts a heavy responsibility on the Jewish people, rather than bestowing elite status.

- “The phrase ‘Chosen People’ is sometimes misinterpreted as egotistical. It means to take on the responsibilities of the Ten Commandments and the Torah. One story from our tradition is that G-d asked many nations to take on the responsibilities of the Ten Commandments. All refused except the Jewish People.”

(Some Jews believe in using “G-d” to signify the holiness of the divine name. Judaism does not prohibit writing the name of God; it prohibits only erasing or defacing a Name of God.)

- “The ‘Chosen People’ is an unfortunate term, since it is so off-putting to anyone not part of this ‘chosen’ group. At the same time, since it refers to the responsibility ‘to be a light unto the nations,’ it’s an idea that has spurred learning, striving, and achievement.”
- “The idea of the Chosen People is inseparable with the idea that God makes a covenant with human beings: a compact to love humanity and not to destroy the earth. In that sense God ‘chose’ the Jews to be like an agent—to make the deal.”

Some Christians and Muslims interpreted “the Chosen People” to mean that the Jews are set apart from others. If the word was solely used in this context, it bothered some:

- “If the term is only used to define a race then it is problematic.”
- “Ethnocentrism can influence the message of any religion, including Islam. I fear that this may be the case with Jews identifying themselves as the Chosen People. Being chosen does not make one free from error.”

Others accepted a broader meaning of the term as related in the Qur'an and the New Testament:

- “This is a term used in the Qur'an, and Muslims give it credence. Do the Chosen People of God follow the teachings of the Prophets of God? If they do then they are indeed blessed.”
- “I think that love is necessarily particular, and God's love has been revealed most clearly through one group of people, the Jews, and through one particular Jew, Jesus. Because of that, the promise that Abraham's children would bless the whole world has come true. Because of Jesus, we all have an opportunity to be part of the 'chosen people.’”

# One Jewish interviewee interpreted the “Chosen People” to encompass all religions:

- “I have come to think that Jews aren't *the* Chosen People (which I was taught in childhood). I read one Jewish philosopher whom I agree with on this subject; his idea is that every religion is chosen in its own way and contributes to the world culture.”

# Yet questions about the word “chosen” remained:

- “What does ‘chosen’ mean? Chosen for what and by whom? If some people are chosen by God, what words would you use to describe those who ‘are not chosen’? Where does the concept of “chosen” come from?”

# *Evangelism*

- Evangelical Christians we interviewed were sensitive to how others equated the word “**evangelism**” with coercion and intimidating tactics. They understood the word in a different way, from the example of Jesus.

- “The Greek word, *evangel*, means good news: the good news that God made a way for everyone’s mistakes to be taken away. The way is Jesus. Evangelism that uses guilt or force is not supported by Jesus’ teachings. Jesus loved people but also told them the truth about God and sin.”
- “The good news is God’s loving outreach to people. He sent Jesus so that humans could have a restored relationship with Him again. I would like others to know this, in a way that’s respectful of their faiths and beliefs.”
- “Evangelicals believe the Bible is true. Evangelism is not extremism. Extremism *forces* one to adopt a specific belief system. In evangelical Christianity, a person is blessed with choice.”



Other Christians had mixed feelings about the term and about evangelicals' outreach to convert others:

- “My first thought is always those awful TV evangelists. Even though I am a Christian, I have some bad associations with this word. In a more positive way, I think of it as sharing that God has revealed himself in Jesus' life and death and resurrection and loves us.”
- “Some Middle Eastern Muslims assume that I am an evangelist out to convert them to Christianity. Over time, they trust that I have no desire for them to change their beautiful religion.”

The Jews and Muslims we interviewed did associate the word with extremism and coercion:

- “It makes me think of proselytizing. It makes me nervous, as it conjures up narrow-mindedness, single-mindedness, and intolerance.”
- “It means that if you’re not Christian, you’re going to hell. Evangelists place people in boxes and define them as such.”
- “The word has a negative connotation as it seems to portray a mission to convert others.”

Even those who understood “evangelism” to mean “spreading good news” had questions:

- “Does spreading the good word become a way to say that all others are less good or worthy? Can evangelicals feel secure and happy in their own faith with others who are happy and secure in their own faith?”
- “How is evangelism usually carried out? Does evangelism imply that people of other religions will be separated from God forever if they don’t convert?”

One Christian noted the elitism that could be found  
in all three faiths:

- “The attitude of some Christians who look down at non-Christians and believe they must be converted makes it difficult to establish unconditional regard for the other. It should be noted that narrow-mindedness is not exclusive to Christians, though, as I have been proselytized to by Muslims, and I have also had Orthodox Jews disregard my religious experience with an elitist tone.”

# Zionism

Most Jewish interviewees saw Zionism as the Jewish movement for self-determination in the founding of Israel. It did not necessarily imply agreement with specific policies of the Israeli government:

- “Zionism is the love of a Jewish homeland that the Jews can claim, the love of a Jewish state.”
- “It is a misunderstood word that means, in my view, self-determination. It's as central a notion as any people's longing for homeland. It conjures up idealistic images of brave and hardy souls who made their way to the holy land as pioneers determined to restore the land - ecologically, religiously, nationalistically.”
- “There has always been a Jewish presence in Israel/Palestine. My brother (may he rest in peace) fought for the Jewish Army of Palestine and was referred to as a Palestinian Jew since he grew up there since the early 1940's.”

Some non-Jewish interviewees, both Christian and Muslim, viewed Zionism as a movement that subordinated Arabs:

- “The movement of Jews to Israel is a reality that they feel that they have a God-given right to do. But at what cost are they willing to do this? Can one be truly a pious Jew when there is even the possibility that others will be oppressed and marginalized for this goal?”
- “Zionism is racism. When I think of Palestine-Israel, I think genocide, apartheid, the epitome of oppression, injustice and inhumane acts, and that the rest of the world blind and silent.”

## Yet most Jewish interviewees viewed the charge of racism as a misunderstanding of Zionism:

- “Zionism says nothing about the policies of the state, merely that Israel has a right to exist...Jews and Israel are demonized by statements that Zionism is terrorism and Israel has no right to exist as a Jewish state. Zionism was not created to kill or terrorize Arabs, Christians, Muslims, or Palestinians. It was created because we needed to be masters of our own fate. Six million Jews were massacred in the Holocaust, just 57 years ago. We needed a refuge because in our 4,500 year history we have suffered intolerance, oppression, exile, massacres, persecution or abuse.”
- “Zionism has been spun to mean racism. To call it racism is to hold the whole group responsible for actions taken by individuals. The Declaration of Independence in Israel gives rights to every minority group.”

## Unlike the majority of Jewish interviewees, some had a less supportive view of Zionism:

- “I know Jews needed a place to go after the Holocaust, but I think it was completely unfair to take land away from others. I want it to exist in a peaceful way. Unlike many of my Jewish friends, I completely sympathize with Palestinians, and that often puts me in a strange place among Jews. I feel like ‘Zionism’ connects Judaism too much with Israel, that taking over this land just because we're Jewish and the Torah says it's our land, associates Jews with injustice.”

## Other voices found inaccuracies in this viewpoint:

- “The view that Jews took away Palestinian land does not reflect the complexity of the combined history of the Middle East. Most importantly, it does not take into account the Jews and Palestinians working together. It is possible to be pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian.”



# Terrorism

Most people whom we interviewed defined “terrorism” generally, viewing it as the actions of people who...

- “are fanatical, often brain-washed folk, who cannot see two sides of a coin and cherish martyrdom.”
- “are willing to scare people using force, motivated by anger that is not totally unjustified, but not the proper way to respond.”
- “target civilians for murder and mayhem for political gains.”
- “use methods of intimidation and fear without regard to ethical and moral principles.”

Other responses showed how the term  
“terrorism” is most often associated in America  
with Arabs and Muslims:

- “The word conjures up images of suicide bombers in the Middle East, but it is anyone who uses violence to achieve his or her aim.”
- “In today's world, especially after 9/11, the profile of a terrorist is often linked to someone of Middle Eastern origin who is a religious fanatic and who cares nothing for humanity.”
- “Terrorism is committed by impressionable young men hoping to win a good place in the afterlife by furthering the Islamic cause.”

Some non-Jewish interviewees believed that Israeli policies were terrorist or provoked terrorism:

- “I think of the political terrorism of extreme Israelis.”
- “There is a link between occupation and terrorism.”

## Muslims and Jews both argued that it was unfair to label their group as “terrorist”:

- “Terrorism has deep roots and religion may be used to justify it, but it has no roots in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad struggled nonviolently for 13 years before he was thrown out of his home in Mecca. The Prophet of God did not indulge in suicide attacks and terror tactics.”
- “Although there have been terrorists associated with the Zionist Movement, Zionism itself is not a terrorist movement. However, that idea was given lots of support by a UN resolution. What a miscarriage of justice! There are terrorists within each religious group, and all those terrorists are convinced that G-d\*\* is on their side. Conviction should not be confused with righteousness.”

# **Christian. Muslim. Jew. Jihad. Chosen People. Evangelism. Zionism. Terrorism.**

- These are but a few of the hot topics that can drive a wedge between people of the three faiths. It is our hope that more dialogue can overcome tensions and past conflicts.
- One interviewee said, “We do have different truths and beliefs. It is time to break the cycles of fear, hate and violence that are destroying our world. It is time to listen to each others’ stories, without blaming or criticizing. One side is not right and one side is not wrong. It is time to work together to solve our differences and create peace through understanding, not force.”

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