

# FACING OUR FEARS ABOUT MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

*After 9/11 IN THE USA and 7/22 IN NORWAY*

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The Bush Administration responded to 9/11 with 'the war on terror'. Anders Breivik committed his crimes on 22 July 2011 because he felt that Europe as a whole and Norway in particular had been naïve in their response to Islam. Have we learned anything from what has happened in the last ten years about the way we think about Islam and relate to Muslims, and can we articulate a considered, long-term response to these events? This is my own personal check-list of ways in which I believe all of us in Europe – and Christians in particular – should be responding to these challenges.

**1. Establishing genuine relationships with Muslim.** Many of those who are most fearful about Islam have little or no personal contacts with Muslims. A recent doctoral researcher in the UK has concluded that 'those who had ongoing friendships with Muslims tended to be more eirenic than those who had not lived in the Muslim world or had no Muslim friends.' Perhaps therefore we need to be much more intentional in this area and ask ourselves 'How can I/we develop natural relationships with the Muslims in my community?'

**2. Challenging our fears and prejudices.** One way to deal with our fears about the growing numbers and influence of Muslims is firstly to articulate them, and to talk them through with people who have a lot more to do with Muslims than we do. This should help us to recognize the important issues which really *do* need to be faced and to challenge the scaremongering about scenarios that are never likely to happen. We also need to be honest about our prejudices, which are related either to race, religion, culture or politics – or a potent mixture of all of these.

**3. Learning more about Islam and Muslims.** Fear is often a product of ignorance or prejudice. If governments in the West have realized the importance of ensuring that children in schools are made aware of other faiths, all our churches and voluntary organisations need to find ways of encouraging all their members to learn more about the faith and practice of Islam. This may require strong leadership from the top, and has implications for teaching at all levels – including preaching, discipleship teaching, and lay and ministerial training.

**4. Understanding the diversity within the Muslim community.** Ignorance and fear often combine to make us think that many Muslims in their heart of hearts are like the stereotypes that we see in the media. The basic core of beliefs and practice that are required of all Muslims is much more clearly defined than it is in the Christian community. But a moment's reflection on the wide diversity that exists among Christians of different countries and cultures all over the world should convince us that there are likely to be similar differences among Muslims. They're not all the same!

**5. Listening to the concerns of Muslims about our societies.** Because we're incurably ethnocentric, we tend to think that the way we do things in our society is bound to be the best or the right way. So instead of constantly defending everything that we do, perhaps we need to listen more to what Muslims think about our societies. While they may sometimes be very affirmative – partly because of what they are glad to have left behind in other countries – at other times their criticisms may help us to 'see ourselves as others see us.'

**6. Understanding our history of immigration.** If we have at the back of our minds ideas about the 'purity' of our race or nation, we need our historians to remind us of the many different kinds of immigration that have taken place all over Europe for centuries. We also need our sociologists to help us to understand how immigrants (like the Irish, Poles, European Jews) have actually adapted to their new host countries. If some have refused to adapt or assimilate, others have done so quite quickly and with considerable enthusiasm.

**7. Supporting those who are working more closely with Muslims.** If we have no Muslims around us to relate to or feel that we are unable to do anything practical ourselves, we should be helping those who are at the cutting edge in ways that we ourselves cannot be. Many churches and organisations working in multi-racial areas really do understand what the issues are and how to relate to the Muslim communities around them, and desperately need spiritual, moral and financial support for their hidden work which seldom hits the headlines.

**8. Engaging in the public debate about the sensitive and divisive issues.** Whether these debates are about immigration, quotas for asylum seekers, the *hijab* and the *burqa*, minarets or the admission of Turkey into the EU, instead of criticising from the sidelines, more of us need to be involved in these debates in the media. This may mean contributing to a phone-in on local or national radio, writing to a newspaper or meeting with our member of parliament. If we make excuses like 'It takes too much time and work', 'It won't achieve anything' or 'Other people are better at this sort of thing than I am', we should stop complaining about the ways our societies are changing. If we reject the models based on certain understandings of multiculturalism and those which seek to return to some kind of Christendom, do we have an alternative model to commend which is convincing and attractive?

**9. Understanding the big international issues.** One of the saddest things about the American response to 9/11 was that instead of stopping to ask themselves 'Why are these people so angry and do they have good reason to be angry?', they channelled their anger largely into 'the war on terror.' But it's hardly surprising that Palestinians feel angry that the only super-power in the world (the USA) has been unable and/or unwilling to persuade Israel to stop building its illegal settlements on the West Bank; and it's hardly surprising that for many Arabs and Muslims the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is high up on their list of grievances against the West. So in our globalized world where everything is inter-connected, perhaps we need to be more aware – and perhaps more critical – of the policies of our governments regarding North Africa and the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, because these are bound to affect the attitudes of Muslims towards our countries.

**10. Engaging in the 'hard talk' with Muslims.** We shouldn't be surprised if Muslims are defensive when we challenge them over issues like honour killings, the equality of the sexes, the treatment of Muslims who convert to another faith, and the desire of some to establish a parallel legal system for Muslims that is based on *shari'a* law. It's sad when these are the first or the only issues that some want to talk about with Muslims. And it's equally sad when others – out of ignorance, fear, excessive respect or political correctness – feel that it's never appropriate to raise these questions. But if we have established meaningful relationships with Muslims and begun to practise some of the principles outlined here, we may have won the right to challenge them on these difficult issues. There certainly is a place of 'hard talk'; but it should be only one aspect of our wider dialogue with Muslims.

While soundly condemning the atrocities of 9/11 and 7/22, therefore, Christians, Muslims and people of no faith are called to some deep soul-searching. Are there any ways in which what we believe and what we say in public could ever encourage someone else to commit crimes like these? In our democratic and pluralist societies, facing our fears and anxieties in ways like these should help us to live together – as fellow-citizens – even when we differ profoundly in our beliefs. And for Muslims and Christians in particular, these responses may contribute to a real meeting of hearts and minds which enables us to bear witness to our knowledge and experience of God.

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