

# Facing Our Fears of Engaging Muslims and Strategies for Navigating Them

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## Abstract

In a recent study of U.S. evangelical churches engaging Muslim communities, four primary fears were expressed as obstacles to Christians reaching out to their Muslim neighbors. These included Muslims being dangerous, offending a Muslim person, jeopardizing relationships when a Muslim chooses to follow Christ, and the internal struggles that Muslims and Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) face over rejection by their families. This article unpacks root causes for these fears as well as some ways to navigate them.

**Key Words:** Evangelicals, Islamophobia, Muslim Background Believer, Muslims

## Introduction

In a recent study of evangelical churches engaging Muslim communities in Chicago, four primary fears were expressed as obstacles to Christians reaching out to their Muslim neighbors (Urton 2021). These included Muslims being dangerous, offending a Muslim person, jeopardizing relationships when a Muslim chooses to follow Christ, and the internal struggles that Muslims and Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) face over rejection by their families. This article first details the four fears and then offers some ways to navigate them.

The first section starts with exploring the use of the term *Islamophobia*, highlighting a constructive use of this term over against ones that can be detrimental to genuine Muslim-Christian relationships. Regarding the second fear of offending a Muslim person, the perception of cultural mistakes and apprehension over sharing the gospel are discussed. A specific example from a church with a long-standing relationship with a mosque is unpacked for the third fear of jeopardizing the relationship. The internal struggles of Muslims and MBBs are then considered from the perspective of those working with them.

The second section offers ways to circumnavigate these fears. It looks at studies of U.S. Muslim attitudes, as well as the similarities between U.S. Muslims and U.S. Evangelicals. The central roles of training and the local church engaging Muslims are also discussed. The need for developing partnerships with other ministries is explored to alleviate the dilemma of jeopardizing relationships. Finally, suggestions are offered for helping Muslims, when they are wrestling with trusting in Christ, and MBBs as they face challenges as Jesus's followers.

## Four Fears

*Fear #1: "Muslims are Dangerous"*

The term *Islamophobia* is often used when describing the fear that Muslims are dangerous. While oft employed, this term usually suffers from being ill defined. John Azumah offers this helpful definition: "the fear and demonization of Islam and the stereotyping of Muslims" (Azumah 2013, 113). The 2019 American Muslim Poll outlines a five-point *Islamophobia* Index that gives flesh to Azumah's definition. These five points are:

1. Muslims are prone to violence.

2. Muslims discriminate against women.
3. Muslims are hostile to the United States.
4. Muslims are less civilized than other people.
5. Muslims “living in the United States are partially responsible for acts of violence carried out by other Muslims” (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019, 19).

These five points, along with Azumah’s definition, offer guidelines to apply accurately the term Islamophobia in a way that avoids extremes. For example, Christians raising apologetic objections to Islamic doctrine, such as the prophethood of Muhammad or the divine revelation of the Qur’an, do not run afoul of the above definitions. However, when Muslims are physically assaulted or verbally harassed for being Muslims, then the term Islamophobia can be rightly applied.

Sadly, Evangelicals were the religious group that scored the highest on the Islamophobia Index. According to the American Muslim Poll, 44 percent of Evangelicals held unfavorable opinions about Muslims, while only 20 percent expressed favorable views (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019, 6). A 2015 study by LifeWay found that “two-thirds of Protestant pastors agree Christianity and Islam should seek to coexist in America.” But it also discovered that evangelical pastors viewed Islam as “a violent and dangerous faith” (Green 2015). Moreover, a set of interviews of four pastors in the Chicago suburbs, along with 40 congregants, showed some conflicted and contradictory results. These included, “Muslims are neighborly, but they want to get on the school board so that they can maneuver into political power; Muslims are nice, but behind that they have an agenda to convert people; etc.” (Bhatia 2017, 153).

While some of these attitudes are based on stereotypes and irrational fears, Azumah concedes that is not the whole story. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in London by those who called themselves Muslims have contributed to the fears and mistrust that many Westerners experience (Azumah 2013, 121).

Furthermore, evangelical Christians are concerned about the persecuted church. According to “The World Watch List 2022,” a list of countries around the world where Christians are the most persecuted published by Open Doors, 33 of the top 50 countries where Christians are persecuted are Muslim majority countries (Open Doors 2022).

Another concern stems from the fact that Muslims have freedom to spread their faith and seek converts in the United States and other Western countries, but the favor is not returned in Muslim majority countries. Many times, Christians are not free in Muslim lands to do evangelism and plant churches. Often Muslims who convert, even in Western countries, are threatened with death for leaving Islam to become a Christian (Redman 2010, 141-42).

### *Fear #2: Offending a Muslim Person*

There were two primary ways that Evangelicals in the Chicago study expressed this fear. First, they were afraid to make cultural mistakes. One woman interviewed in this study recounted when she was asked to pray at an Easter Tea for Muslim and Christian women, “When we got to the Easter Tea, she [the Christian leader] asked if I could open in prayer and I thought well, but sure is it okay to pray in Jesus name? What am I supposed to say? Are there things I shouldn’t say? I want to know how to be sensitive to our guests and I want to be appropriate” (Urton 2021, 119). A church leader described some conversations with people in his congregation about interacting with Muslims which went like this: “There is this Muslim family that lives on our street. I’d like

to reach out to them, but I'm kind of unsure of how to do that, or I thought about inviting them to our house, but I was afraid I might offend them" (Urton 2021, 171-172).

The second way this fear was expressed involved hesitations about sharing the gospel. One volunteer involved in his church's ESL program described his hesitation this way: "That is honestly something that I wrestle with a lot, how, and this is where I need some training. I don't think that I have a good sense of how can I present the gospel. At what point is it appropriate? ... At some point there needs to be a way for us to share our faith in an appropriate way" (Urton 2021, 129).

While this volunteer had a hesitation about when it was proper to share his faith, he still showed a desire to do so. As he suggested, his dilemma could be resolved with adequate training. Another attitude toward evangelism discovered in the Chicago study was more concerning. A leader at a church where the main demographic were people in their thirties and forties said that there were some in his congregation who expressed concern about reaching out to Muslims in the community. He said there was an "aspect of why do you want to do this and are you going to, sort of, evangelize and push religious crusade on them in some degrees?" (Urton 2021, 140).

Unfortunately, this sentiment was found in two other studies looking at a similar age demographic. The first one, conducted by the Barna group, discovered that 47 percent of Christian millennials in the U.S. "agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith" (Barna Group 2019). The second study reported that some self-described progressive evangelical Christians believed, "if a conservative Christian is spending time with a Muslim with the hopes of telling them about their faith, they are failing to care for them authentically and are not fully listening to the marginalized. Instead, they have alternative goals and an immoral desire to dominate with their more culturally pervasive form of religious beliefs" (Yancey and Quosigk 2021, 182). In short, there is a growing number of U.S. Christians in the 30-40 age demographic that view evangelism among Muslims, along with people of other religions, as immoral.

### *Fear #3: Losing the Relationship*

One church in the Chicago study had had a 12-year relationship with a local mosque. During that time, the church had done some amazing things. They had collaborated on some work projects with the mosque, such as PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) and soup kitchens. The church and mosque had an ongoing small group dialogue and Bible study on the prophets, the mosque hosted the church specially every year for an Iftar dinner, and the church reciprocated with an annual Advent dinner for the mosque where they would sing Christmas Carols and have a devotional that presented the gospel. The Muslims thought so highly of this relationship that at one of the Advent dinners the Imam shared about a civil war that broke out in his country among different religious and ethnic groups, then he said, "If we had had a group like this one, the war would not have happened" (Urton 2021, 157).

While this church had a long-standing relationship with the mosque with these positive aspects, the possibility of jeopardizing the relationship over Muslims who became more interested in the gospel was a major challenge. One leader commented, "If people have deeper questions about Jesus it doesn't feel like this is the right safe place to do it" (Urton 2021, 153). Another leader at that same church said, "We want the Holy Spirit to drive that person to wherever they go and in their good timing make their decision.... We've been a little hesitant in terms of what effect that

would have on our overall program.” He continued to explain that in their relationship they were combating hatred and presenting the gospel, but he had this question about a Muslim who was interested in becoming a follower of Christ: “If you’re a Muslim in America, where do I go now? I’m starting to fall in love with the Lord. What’s my next move?” (Urton 2021, 153-154).

*Fear #4: Internal Struggles among both Muslims and Muslim Background Believers (MBBs)*

The fourth fear shifts the focus from Christians involved with Muslim ministry to those that they are trying to reach and serve. Both Muslims and MBBs have internal struggles in relation to following Christ. One leader in the Chicago study, whose church had baptized ten MBBs, described how he had witnessed this struggle among Muslims who were drawn to Christ:

I’m drawn to this, even, I wish this were the truth and that I could come home to God through Jesus. But also, I’ve been told things, I’ve been taught things. It’s been impressed upon me you have to be loyal to your religion. And you have to be loyal to your family. So, if I say yes to this and follow this, does that mean that, am I saying that my family is wrong, and they’re lost? Can I say that? Can I do that? (Urton 2021, 173).

This leader also gave the example of a MBB who had come to Christ through the fellowship. This man said, “My daughters are still in Syria and if I tell them I’ve become a Christ-follower, I’m afraid that they will cut me off, or the rest of the family will cut me off and I’ll lose my relationship with my daughters” (Urton 2021, 173).

### **Ways to Navigate**

Having detailed the four primary fears discovered in the Chicago study, the discussion now turns to ways to circumnavigate these fears. The fears are addressed in the order that they were laid out above.

*Navigating “Muslims are Dangerous”*

This fear can be addressed by providing adequate training to Christians. Such training should include elements like understanding American Muslim attitudes, examining the similarities between American Muslims and Evangelicals, the necessity of interpersonal interactions, and an emphasis on Jesus's teachings to love our enemies.

Regarding the attitudes of American Muslims, a 2017 Pew Forum study found that many American Muslims (55 percent) believed that other Americans are friendly towards them in general. Also, most of them were “proud to be Americans (92%), believe that hard work generally brings success in this country (70%) and are satisfied with the way things are going in their own lives (80%)” (Lipka 2017).

Surveying mosque leaders, The American Mosque Study 2020 found that “the vast majority of mosque leaders do not feel that American society is hostile to Islam or that American society is immoral: only 18% agree that American society is hostile, and only 19% agree that American society is immoral. These results point to a low level of negativity toward American society” (Bagby 2021). Overall, it appears that American Muslims have positive feelings about living in the United States, thus the fear that most Muslims are dangerous has little or no basis.

Another reality which can help to resolve this fear consists of the similarities between American Muslims and American Evangelicals. Among the key findings in a 2019 study, entitled

*Evangelical Christian and Muslim Relations in the U.S.*, was how both Muslims and Evangelicals place a high importance on issues like prayer, family, making the world a better place, and attending religious services (Foundation for Ethnic Understanding 2019, 4). Also, the 2019 American Muslim Poll highlights how these “two groups stand out as the most devoted to their faith amidst a sea of growing secularism” (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019, 13).

A conclusion of the just-cited study *Evangelical Christian and Muslim Relations in the U.S.* is that the more frequently Muslims and Evangelicals interact the more positively they will view the others’ faith (Foundation for Ethnic Understanding 2019, 11). This finding is corroborated by interviews from the Chicago study. One volunteer shared about a Thanksgiving dinner that her church hosted for a local mosque. She remarked,

The Thanksgiving gathering was the first time I’ve ever actually had a conversation with a Muslim.... The table conversations, the questions that were established I thought were excellent. It really got people talking.... We all had things to say and at least at my table was a very talkative group, so in terms of building trust it’s like we just got to talk about life and normal things and what we were thankful for, you know, family, children, those commonalities. So, I guess it built trust in that particular way (Urton 2021, 120).

Another volunteer shared about how his involvement with a church’s ESL program helped to change his attitude towards Muslims:

I can tell you for those who are directly involved it’s absolutely been transformative for us.... For myself, for my wife ... we get out of there ... and we’re just like, we’re fired up. Like this is the best thing we did all week. We feel like we’ve made such a difference, we’ve made new friendships, these folks are so grateful to have us there... No longer is it this mistrust of Muslims.... These are people I pray for now with names and faces and histories (Urton 2021, 131).

A final and perhaps the most important consideration when resolving the fear of Muslims being dangerous is Christ’s command for Christians to love their enemies (Matt 5:44-45). As we saw above, one reason that American Evangelicals fear Muslims is the reported persecution of Christians in Muslim-majority countries. The Lord Jesus encourages his followers in Matthew 5 to extend neighbor love to those who persecute them by praying for them. Thus, American Evangelicals can practice neighbor love for Muslims persecuting Christians in other countries by praying for them. Praying in that way may in turn help Christians gain a heart of love for Muslims living in the United States and lessen their fears and suspicions of them.

### *Navigating Offending a Muslim*

Like the fear addressed above, this fear of offending a Muslim can also be addressed through adequate training and opportunities for Muslims and Christians to interact. The motivation for these interactions is firmly grounded in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) to make disciples of people from all nations and the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbor (Matt 22:37-40). These passages should be emphasized in any training that is offered.

A lack of training was noted as a hindrance in the Chicago study for Christians who were reaching out to Muslim neighbors. In these relationships some Christians felt hesitant in sharing the gospel, praying before an event, and leading Bible study. Thus, training plays a vital role not only as a tool for getting people over their initial fears but also in assisting those who are already

interacting with Muslims. It may also help those who express a moral objection to evangelism see the necessity for sharing their faith and inviting Muslims to believe the gospel.

The significant role that the local church can play in reaching out to Muslims is another reason Christians should move past their fears and hesitations. A study released in 2017, entitled *Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora*, interviewed 18 former Muslims who became Christians while living in North America. The study suggests that the two top reasons for Muslims coming to Christ were an experience with a local evangelical church and a relationship with a Christian friend. Furthermore, three-quarters of the 173 participants in this study who work with converts from Islam did so in “the context of a ‘western’, non-Muslim background convert church.” Thus, the authors of this study encourage local churches in North America to “prepare themselves for what it means to provide an adequate welcome and orientation to the Christian faith for Muslims who may attend as part of their faith journey” (Kronk, Daniels, Chapman, and Watson 2017, 9).

### *Navigating Losing the Relationship*

One leader in the Chicago study, whose church had a long-standing relationship with a local mosque, suggested that churches who are interacting with local Muslims should form partnerships with other churches, ministries, or individuals that are outside of their relationship with the mosque. Doing so would enable a Muslim person who becomes interested in following Christ to be connected to Christians who are independent of the church/mosque relationship (Urton 2021, 154). Such a connection might have the effect of keeping the church/mosque connection intact, while at the same time a Muslim person can explore following Christ more deeply with another church, ministry, or individual Christian.

A study of Muslims converting to Christianity in French Evangelical Protestant Churches (FEPC) seems to align with this suggestion. It found that a relationship with a church, Christian friend, or family member provided “the potential convert with opportunity to explore the new religious option and observe its impact on real world circumstances” (Kronk 2016, v). Hence, a church developing partnerships with other local churches or individual Christians might be a way to help Muslim seekers whom the church is serving continue to have Christian connections without jeopardizing the church’s relationship with the mosque or Muslim community center.

### *Navigating the Internal Struggles Experienced by Muslims and MBBs*

This final issue of a Muslim’s struggle over trusting Christ or a MBB’s struggles in following Christ is probably the most complicated of the fears mentioned. Even so, advice from two Muslim ministry practitioners may prove helpful. Phil Parshall suggests, “If a Muslim becomes a believer, he should be urged to witness quietly and carefully to his friends and family. If necessary, he may have to share his faith more by deed than by word” (Parshall 2003, 199). Roland Muller highlights the importance of a supportive Christian community: “New believers from Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist backgrounds need support, friendship-discipleship, a place of refuge, and much more. If it is not apparent that these things are available in the body of Christ he or she may turn away from the Gospel” (Muller 2015, 145). Therefore, looking for subtle ways that a MBB can share his newfound faith with his Muslim family and friends, and the support of a loving Christian community, may help to navigate these internal struggles.

## **Conclusion**

Most Christians who interact with Muslims will deal with some combination of the fears detailed above. Identifying one's fears will help a Christian to deal with them, move past those fears, and reach out to Muslim neighbors with the gospel in both word and deed. In doing so Christians can demonstrate the perfect love that both casts out fear from their own hearts (1 Jn 4:18) and perhaps create a curiosity in their Muslim friends to know the one who inspires such love.

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