

## Muslims and Christians

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Strong Faith

Does Not Mean

a Closed Mind

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The methods of honest conversation designed to address racial and economic divisions in Richmond proved highly relevant to building trust between faith groups in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. In Richmond, as in many parts of the United States, concerns about terrorism and civil rights stimulated a desire for better understanding.

Richmond is fortunate that relationships between the faith groups have stood the test of the pressure of global events. During the conflict in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Imad Damaj of the Muslim Coalition of Virginia says that his solidarity with Christian and Jewish colleagues actually increased. “Of course,” he adds, “you have to have the relationship in place before the crisis.”

Rev. Canon J. Fletcher Lowe Jr., a former director of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, makes a similar point. When he took up his post in 1997, he was immediately drawn to two members of the board, Muhammad Sahli, a Palestinian-born Muslim, and Leivy Smolar, a rabbi.

“When the center embarked on an endowment campaign, we became the principal visitors to potential donors,” says Lowe. “Most of the significant pledges came from our visits, with me giving some background on the center, Muhammad speaking to its interfaith dimension, and the rabbi, from his experience as a college president, ‘closing the deal,’ in terms of requesting a pledge. I don’t know whether any of the donors were impressed, but I sure was, going around raising money for an interfaith organization with a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian.”

In the wake of September 11, the three men were in daily contact. “By Monday, September 17, we felt there needed to be a communitywide expression of solidarity and unity. We decided to ask the rabbi of the largest

synagogue in town if he would host an interfaith service on Sunday, September 23. He agreed. With minimal publicity, the service was held, filling the 900-plus synagogue.”

In Richmond, Christians, Muslims, and Jews have worked together to build houses in some of the city’s neediest areas. It is not unusual for Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims to join Jews at a Seder table for a Passover meal, hosted by a conservative synagogue. Richmond’s Muslim community regularly welcomes religious, political, and nonprofit leaders to Iftar meals during the month of Ramadan. In many American communities, such gestures of inclusion are common. But the bridges between Muslims and evangelical Christians have been harder to cross.

The first steps toward much-needed dialogue between these groups in Richmond were set in motion by a couple in their eighties. Ben and Virginia Brinton live in a retirement home in Richmond’s far West End. They have been part of the Initiatives of Change team since its early days in Richmond and are strong supporters of Hope in the Cities. Their energies are limited, but their commitment to bridge building is undiminished. Shortly after September 11, they joined the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond. “Neither my husband nor I knew any Muslims in Richmond personally,” says Virginia. But at their first council dinner, they met Malik and Annette Khan. Annette is a Caucasian who grew up in Wisconsin. Malik is a chemical engineer who had come from Pakistan twenty-five years earlier. At the time, he was the president of the Islamic Center of Virginia. Over the meal, the two couples quickly discovered mutual connections and concerns. “From then on we just kept talking, and our hearts were open to each other,” says Virginia. A month later, the Brintons welcomed the Khans to their home for dinner, and a friendship was born.

Soon after the Brintons’ intervention, Muhammad Sahli, who served on the board of Hope in the Cities, invited me and a few colleagues to a consultation with Malik Khan and other Muslim leaders at the Islamic Center. They told us: “Since September 11 we have been invited to speak in dozens of churches, but this is not the same as dialogue. Also, these are mostly churches already sympathetic to us. The people we really need to talk with are conservative and evangelical Christians, and we have no contact with them. Can you help us with this?”

I called Ben Trotter, a Baptist friend of conservative views whose son had just returned from Afghanistan. Trotter and I met with Malik Khan to

explore the possibility of a dialogue. He suggested we meet a young Iranian-born American, Hadi Yazdanpanah. Hadi was enthusiastic at the idea.

We agreed to invite Muslims and Christians for face-to-face, honest, and sustained conversation about concerns and perceptions, and to consider ways in which the two communities, which share the Abrahamic faith, might move beyond accusation and their isolated circles to take constructive action together. We went on to hammer out the purpose of the dialogue as follows:

- Enable understanding of different faith traditions
- Affirm values held in common
- Encourage critical self-assessments and acceptance of individual responsibility
- Appreciate the role of history in shaping attitudes and fostering divisions
- Begin to build bridges of trust
- Discover opportunities to work together to build a healthy, inclusive, and hopeful Richmond metropolitan community
- Explore how future dialogues might include others in the region and beyond

With the advice of Andrew Fuller, who is engaged in international evangelism, we set out to contact other Christians. Muslims, seeing their civil rights threatened and their religion maligned, were eager to engage. But some Christians were hesitant, and it took months of one-on-one conversations to convene a group. We stressed that the Muslims were looking to meet Christians who were firm in their faith. Everyone would be encouraged to express his or her belief without reservation. Often the statement that the primary purpose was to build relationships proved to be the clincher. Even so, one of the Christians who had agreed to participate (provided he could be assured of confidentiality) withdrew at the last minute, saying that he would not be comfortable. Ironically, he had told me that he had come to Richmond partly in reaction to old racial attitudes in Kentucky; yet he could not bring himself to meet with Muslims.

## Finding Common Ground

The task of identifying participants and preparing for the dialogue took a year of careful work. Finally, one Saturday morning, the president of the Islamic Center of Virginia and a prominent evangelical Christian sat side by side for six hours to begin an honest conversation. Six other Muslim leaders and five Christians joined the dialogue. The Muslims represented diverse backgrounds, including Pakistan, Iran, and Lebanon, as well as native-born black and white Americans. The Christians were generally conservative and evangelical.

As we began the introductions and discussed the purpose of the dialogue, Cricket White, my cofacilitator, and I could sense the tension in the room. The ice was soon broken in an unexpected way. Fritz Kling, an evangelical Christian, described how his grandparents had been missionaries in Brazil, losing one child to disease and contending with thirty-foot pythons in their garden. “Admittedly, some things [done by missionaries] were not done right. But as a Christian I’m not going to beat myself up, because a lot of schools and hospitals would never be there but for the sacrificial work of those missionaries.”<sup>1</sup>

To our surprise there was no argument from the Muslims. Instead, Malik Khan turned to Kling and said: “That’s true. I went to a Catholic school and received a first-class education.” Immediately several other Muslims shared similar experiences. Somehow this simple affirmation helped everyone relax as people said to themselves, “It’s going to be okay—we’re not going to get ambushed.”

After introductions and agreement on ground rules, we asked the group to break into pairs and to engage in some simple storytelling in response to a question:

*We are living in a world of great change and mobility. The cultural context in which your parents or grandparents practiced their faith may be very different from your experience today. Would you please share a personal story or experience from your family that illustrates a value that is important to your faith tradition?*

This proved a very effective way to find common ground. As the pairs reported back, many of the values mentioned were valid for both Christians and Muslims. Our second question was:

*Are there things in your everyday experience of American life and culture that you feel support or run counter to the values of your faith tradition?*

Both groups expressed concern at a secularism that “excludes faith from public places” and imposes values contrary to faith traditions. Muslims and Christians found common ground in their views toward abortion and sexual purity. But, while deeply concerned at the impact of the moral laxity of popular culture on their families, Muslims also said they were amazed and challenged by American Christians’ engagement on issues of social justice.

The dialogue was marked by surprising openness. Differences were acknowledged. “If I did not believe Islam was the best religion I would not be a Muslim,” said one participant. Christians voiced similar sentiments from their own faith perspective. At one point, someone said, “In the spirit of free enterprise, let the best win!” Everyone was comfortable with this. Yet both groups were pleasantly surprised to discover that the other group was not monolithic in its views. “This is my first time sitting with evangelicals who don’t all believe Jerry Falwell speaks for them!” said a Muslim. The dialogue surfaced the complexities and fissures not readily apparent in both groups.

“Can interfaith dialogue, without compromising core principles, really lead to a world that works?” asked one participant. “How can we show that a faith-filled community is not necessarily a constrained community?” asked another. “Strong faith does not mean a closed mind.”

One evangelical participant commented later that liberal Christians befriend Muslims because they value inclusion above all, and don’t put theology or dogma over tolerance: “Evangelicals value theology and doctrine so highly that they will enter into dialogues and relationships only if we don’t have to ‘give away the store’ theologically, intellectually, or morally. We fear being compromised. I know that is something many Muslims can relate to. In this way evangelical Christians are much more similar to observant Muslims who are used to no-compromise strictures of their own.”

### **Tough Questions**

The next phase of the dialogue explored the personal, family, and community impact of September 11. *What stereotypes had emerged? What did the participants think was in the mind of the other group?* Again they broke into

pairs to talk about personal experiences with a person of another faith that ran counter to the stereotypes.

The Muslims' fear of government repression through the Patriot Act and other measures surfaced early and often. A young woman said: "We Muslims find ourselves in a very strange situation. After September 11, the liberals embraced us and supported our civil rights, and for that we are grateful. But they did not embrace our values and that concerns us." Turning to the Christians, she went on: "On the other hand, we share your values and we would like to be embraced by you, but you are the ones trampling on our civil rights and locking us up. In the coming election, we are being forced to choose between values and our security." Another Muslim said, "If there is another September 11-like event, I fear the evangelicals will be the first to turn on Muslims."

The group shared a simple meal together. Later that day, a breakthrough moment occurred when Muslims and Christians met separately to consider two further questions:

*Both Islam and Christianity have great traditions of peace building. What have we in our group done, currently or historically, that undermines this tradition? What do we need to hear from the other group in order to begin to build bridges of trust?*

On reconvening, the Christians began by acknowledging the negative legacy of the Crusades and colonialism. They also admitted their complete failure to recognize that Islam could be an ally in fighting social and moral ills, and expressed regret that they had never built any personal relationships with Muslims. They asked Muslims to be unequivocal in denouncing acts of violence and anti-Jewish statements. They admitted a slowness to stand up against public expressions of Islamaphobia, or to challenge their peer groups, and they offered to help with media, which, they conceded, does not always cover positive statements by Muslims.

For their part, Muslims said they realized that they were too isolated, that they had secluded themselves from involvement with the concerns of the wider community and had not been vocal enough on human rights violations. From the Christians they wanted to hear a "commitment without reservation" to the principle of religious pluralism, rights, and privileges. They also urged them to learn about Islam from reputable sources.

Conversations ranged over religious schools, freedom of the media,

treatment of women, and insensitive use of language. The participants pledged to support each other in speaking out against stereotyping and acts of violence.

That afternoon, as the group adjourned, everyone insisted that the conversation continue the following month. Five years later, the group was still in dialogue. The group generally meets on a Saturday morning once a month, although busy schedules sometimes hamper regularity. After the first few dialogues that took place at the Hope in the Cities office, the group unanimously accepted the offer of Dr. Charles Beckett, who directs the Center for Christian Understanding of Islam, to host the dialogues at his center. Beckett had spent many years as a missionary in Bangladesh. His scholarly knowledge of both religions is deeply respected and valued by all participants.

During the first summer, Fritz Kling and Malik Khan met over coffee for more personal conversation. Later Kling told the group: "I have begun to be an advocate for what I know from one Muslim friend. We've built a level of trust." Malik Khan responded: "When Fritz called it was a pleasant surprise. His genuine effort was touching." Their honest sharing provided a focus for a rich exchange on several critical issues.

For the Christians, the issue of violence remained an overriding concern. "I think someone is a nice guy, but what does he say at home, or at the mosque?" said one.

"What are you afraid of?" a Muslim asked.

"Before September 11, 2001, when I thought of the term 'Muslim'—if I ever did—it was pretty benign: carpets and shoes with pointy turned-up toes. Ignorant, yes, but benign," the Christian replied. "But after September 11, we are afraid of terrorism, suicide bombings, and the killing of innocent people. . . . Terrorists expressly state that Americans and Christians are their enemies. It's difficult not to take that personally." Another added: "And we have been taught that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world, that it will overtake all of our churches. We have been taught much of our fear."

The Muslims were unequivocal in their condemnation of atrocities from a personal and a religious standpoint. "We can say from a human and civil behavior standpoint, regardless of politics, this is wrong," said one.

"But how often do we need to apologize for acts of Muslim terrorists?" asked a student. "Muslims in the West have to answer for Muslims ev-

erywhere, but Christians are not expected to apologize for slavery or the Crusades.”

“Yes,” responded a friend, “it is unfair, but we cannot hold onto the past any more. At this point in time, we need to take the position that we stand with the truth whether it is with Muslims or against Muslims.”

Muslims and Christians pressed each other to clarify their beliefs. “It seems that evangelicals have a high regard for Jews. Muslims have a high regard for Jews and Christians. So why don’t evangelicals have a high regard for Muslims?” asked a Muslim. “We acknowledge that there is truth in both the Christian and Jewish theology. Why is it that you don’t acknowledge that sometimes we have a part of the truth, too?” he continued. Someone observed that fundamentalism in all religions is usually a reaction to loss, threat, or humiliation. The negativity that Muslims experience in America is sometimes more a reaction of Christian conservatives to liberal secularism than an attack on Islam.

Charles Beckett challenged the group to “look beyond the discussion of *what we believe* about each other, and to instead look at *how we live*, and at the eternal nature of God/Allah as we understand him and how that informs and guides our behavior.”

As the dialogue progressed to more sensitive areas, the group talked about personal risk and the need to support each other in speaking out against “fringe” individuals who do not represent the large center of either religion. Muslims also looked for affirmation that all human life is equally valuable. Sometimes it did not appear that Christians believed this, for example in their attitude to the Palestinian people.

A Christian cautioned against asking others to “take risks that we ourselves are not prepared to take”: “It is very hard for groups who have been oppressed or who feel threatened to be honest about their own internal issues. Therefore we need to think about what risks we ourselves are prepared to take that will give moral support to our Muslim colleagues.”

“Muslims showed great courage today in being very open,” said a Christian at the conclusion of one dialogue. “No one will go out the door the same as they were when they came in. I wish that my congressman could have been here!”

## New Insights

Six months after the dialogues began, a leading evangelical participant e-mailed the group from Indonesia, where he had met with the head of one of the world's largest Muslim organizations: "I told him that American Christians have much to learn about living in a society of religious pluralism, and Indonesia has a long history of that. He was an extremely impressive man. For their part, I heard from every quarter that that fragile balance is now being tested. I also had the opportunity to visit a Muslim school. It was all very enlightening, and I was received much more warmly than I could have expected. I met with all of them in a desire to learn more about Islam worldwide, and it was extremely helpful."

Two years later, I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences.

Charles Beckett told me, "I was surprised that my statement of personal faith was accepted without hesitation by the Muslims, and that I did not feel I needed to apologize for my convictions."

For Farouk Ali, who served as the student body president at Virginia Commonwealth University, the greatest fear was that the dialogue would be "a gigantic waste of time." His Muslim friends at college asked: "What's the point of dialogue? It seems we have to compromise every time." "But," said Ali, "my expectation of all talk and no action has changed. I am trying to interact more with Christian groups on the campus." Ali is now a policy analyst at the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy.

Fritz Kling said: "I was concerned that Muslims might perceive me as the mission-focused evangelical out to colonize the world. It was helpful, during the dialogue, when Muslims and Christians recognized that both groups proselytize, and should not fault the other for that."

Malik Kahn concluded: "We need a revival within the Muslim world. Our scholars must teach the true message of Islam. More importantly, the *spirit of the message* needs to be imparted, which is much more peaceful than it has been made out to be. We condemn violence. I will always do that. The press must be responsible and not promote hatred or schisms. I also want Muslims in the West to understand that they are living in an open, free society. We need freedom with personal responsibility and accountability."

## Ten Agreements

In the third year of dialogue, the participants agreed on the following ten points:

1. We all value hospitality and graciousness, and want the greater Richmond area to be a region that welcomes, accepts, and affirms people of different backgrounds.
2. We all feel blessed to live in the United States, a country for which we feel love and to whose Constitution and founding principles, especially religious freedom and separation of church and state, we express loyalty.
3. We all strive to maintain very high standards for moral behavior in our personal lives, families, and communities.
4. Our faiths call us to be agents of morality, compassion, and justice in our community. We value opportunities to pursue all these aspirations together jointly in public and private ways.
5. We welcome and protect the privilege of propagation of our faiths (evangelizing and da'wa) as essential religious duties in both Christianity and Islam.
6. We treasure relationships based on who we know each other to be, and not on how others of your faith act or speak.
7. We will, based on our personal relationship with each other, feel free to dialogue on religious issues, here and around the world, which cause us concern.
8. We will openly attest, among others of our own faith, to the positive relationships and respect we have for each other.
9. We pray that God's wishes and direction in our lives will find expression in our continuing relationships.
10. We recognize and affirm our humanity as a gift from God. We will honor all of the above "agreed-upons" and, if we still don't see eye-to-eye, we will agree to disagree while holding hope for future positive discussions and eventual affirmation.

The group is considering how to expand its outreach through roundtable discussions with different congregations.