

# How should North American Christians be thinking about Muslims?

*A conversation with Joe Boot and Carl Medearis*

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**C**arl Medearis has spent 12 years living in Beirut, Lebanon. He has been working with Christian and Muslim leaders in the Middle East and North America for the past 25 years and is the author of *Muslims, Christians and Jesus* (2008 Bethany House). He lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Joe Boot is an evangelist and apologist who has debated Christianity with Islamic scholars in universities around the world. He pastors Westminster Chapel in Toronto, and has written *How Shall We Then Answer?* and *Why I Still Believe*.

ChristianWeek hosted a conversation with these two men to find out what Christians in Canada can do to get to know their Muslim neighbours.

*The Church in the West needs to be constantly reminded to pray for, befriend and reach Muslim people.*

**Do you perceive an unhealthy fear of Muslim people in the Christian community?**

**Carl:** Yes I do. Any and all fear that hinders us from a life of freedom and a life that would share Christ with others is not from God. I think the Church in the West is captive to the enemy in that we're afraid of Muslims. It leads to nothing good!

**Joe:** Yes, there is a considerable unhealthy hype and fear of Muslims. This is in part due to the media hype concerning terror and partly due to a lack of understanding and relationships with Muslim neighbors. People are rightly cautious of Islamic ideology, but we must distinguish between Muslim people and [their] Islamic religious commitments.

**Carl:** I think what Joe says here is good. Unfortunately, most of us cannot distinguish between a religion and its followers. So when I say "Islam," my friends don't know what that means. Likewise, if I mention the words "my Muslim friend," they also don't understand and are confused. What this breeds in the Church here in the West is a lack of concern and action. We don't want to throw a life preserver to our enemy who's drowning.

**Joe:** I agree. Most people's fears grow out of a lack of personal exposure to the real needs, concerns and fears of our Muslim neighbours. The Church in the West needs to be constantly reminded to pray for, befriend and reach Muslim people. We tend to perceive them either as a threat, as inevitably hostile or as not a legitimate group for evangelization.

**It's easy to get into arguments about doctrine. How helpful are such debates?**

**Carl:** I don't often find them helpful. If a Muslim asks me a real question, not a trick theological question, then I answer. I think the typical Western form of apologetics doesn't work well with the Muslim mindset—a more Jesus-like approach rather than our typical Pauline approach is what we've found useful.

Focus on truth and grace both, but start with grace. That means friendship, food, fun, and all the while talking about our experience with Christ. And honouring where they're coming from. Not debating my religion over theirs. That's more the way of Jesus. I know this is a huge topic and I'm not doing it justice. This is what my whole book address, *Muslims, Christians and Jesus*.

**Joe:** I agree to an extent. It depends almost entirely on the individual, in my experience. The big public debate is of very limited value. I have had some wonderful and fruitful discussions with Muslims both in Western contexts and in the Middle East and Pakistan.

I often debate with Muslims on current affairs programs. Certain groups (sects) more "spiritually" oriented or "mystical" are more open than others to doctrinal and critical discussion; others tend to see critical discussion as unfaithful to Islam

by definition. So I don't think there is a hard and fast rule on this.

The average Muslim, when alone, is usually very willing to discuss his or her faith and hear about Christ. In public settings in the Islamic world, when we've approached

people with respect, courtesy and honesty we've not only seen warmth in response, but Muslims actually coming to faith. I think we need to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves and use discernment.

**You both agreed that there's an unhealthy fear in the Christian community. What do we need to do to get past this?**

**Carl:** Oh, now that's an easy one! We need to go [to where they are]. There's no way we can get over our fear of flying unless we fly. So when we see Muslims, we're changed! Nothing beats a short-term experience. It works to some degree in your own city, but it's more powerful when a group goes to Morocco or Beirut and sees and meets people first hand. I just returned from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank. I took eight senior pastors from large U.S. churches. They were so impacted—changed forever.

You can also get to know your Muslim neighbors in North America. Go to the local Middle Eastern market and buy food, hang out and talk. They love that. Or just call up the local mosque or Islamic center and say, "Hi, I'm an ignorant Christian and would like to learn some things about Islam and Muslim culture. Can you teach me?" Who wouldn't like that? Start with friendship and things shared in common—which are so many!

**Joe:** Fear of the unknown is a natural human phenomenon. Carl is right, we have to go to them. Get into their lives, understand what makes them tick. Discover that they are frail human beings as well, who need a Savior, forgiveness etc. We also need to educate believers so that they are prepared to engage. My parents have lived now in Pakistan for 14 years.

The sure cure for our fears is going. This would include short-term trips overseas, but also long-term efforts across the street. We have the first downtown Toronto minaret going up across the street from our church. We are already planning to personally visit every home in our neighbourhood—which has many Muslim people. We introduce ourselves honestly: "We are a local church in this area visiting families in our parish and asking if there is anything we can do for them." More often than not our teams report a warm response. They share their own concerns with us about the children, their countries of origin etc. Two steps are needed: preparation by education and first hand experience.



Toronto's Joe Boot is an evangelist and apologist.



The Baitunner Mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Calgary, Alberta.



Carl Medearis lived in Beirut, Lebanon for 12 years.

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