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## Perspectives on Islam in Europe

### MUSLIMS IN EUROPE: RESEARCH AND ENCOUNTER

DARRELL JACKSON

In 2016, the Pew Research Centre estimated that one in every twenty Europeans self identifies as 'Muslim', making a total Muslim population in Europe of just under 26 million. This is a significant increase over the 2010 population that Pew reported at 19.5 million. With the dramatic rise in the number of migrants arriving in Europe between 2014 and mid-2016, Pew refocused its interest on the EU countries and attempted to project future shifts in the religious population as a result of immigration. Their research shows that 53% of migrants entering Europe between 2010-2016 were Muslim.

In addition to the increase in the Muslim population in the EU through immigration between 2010 and 2016

(3.5 million), there was an increase through 2.9 million children born to Muslim parents. Importantly, the Pew research also estimated that over the same period 320,000 Muslims switched or abandoned their religion.

Brill's *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* (Volume 5, 2013, p.18) points out that literature about Islam in Europe can be broadly distinguished according to its region of origin. Literature from the West tends to focus on Muslim immigration whereas literature from south and eastern Europe focuses on Muslim ethnicity and history. Of course, since the rapid acceleration of immigration between 2014 and 2016, all regions of Europe have been faced in new and challenging ways by the immigration of Muslims.

CONTINUED INSIDE

## EDITORIAL

### Islam in Europe: Threat or Opportunity?

What is your perspective on the huge increase in Europe's Muslim population? Do you see it as a threat or a huge opportunity for the gospel? Or both?

In this edition of Vista you will almost certainly find one article that supports your perspective. But perhaps more importantly you will find another that challenges it.

Darrell Jackson's lead article sets out the most recent statistics on Muslim populations in Europe but also highlights important qualifications regarding the interpretation of this data and of concepts of Muslim identity.

The heart of this edition though are four opinion pieces. Bert de Ruiter writes of the Europeanisation of Islam and gives a call to loving engagement. Jenny Taylor provides a critique of integration narratives and highlights the threat that Islamic terrorism continues to pose. Bryan Knell tells stories of conversions among some communities and stubborn resistance among others. And Colin Edwards provides a classification of Believers from a Muslim Background (BMBs) and writes of how the need for intense community among these converts is a challenge to our concepts of church in Europe.

Finally, Jo Appleton set out some helpful resources for Christian Muslim engagement. Our prayer as an editorial team is that this edition of Vista would make you think more deeply about these different perspectives. But perhaps more importantly, to think about how to "love your neighbour" who in today's Europe is often a Muslim.

Jim Memory

Reflecting this trend, the Pew Report provides definitions for key terms such as 'migrant' and 'refugee' but worryingly does not define 'Muslim'. The widely regarded *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, now in its 9th edition admits that 'attempting to define 'Muslims' is not an easy task' (*Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, 2009, pp.9-14). The Pew Report states on page eleven, 'Europe's Muslim population is diverse. It encompasses Muslims born in Europe and in a wide variety of non-European countries. It includes Sunnis, Shiites and Sufis. Levels of religious commitment and belief vary among Europe's Muslim populations. Some of the Muslims enumerated in this report would not describe Muslim identity as salient in their daily lives. For others, Muslim identity profoundly shapes their daily lives. However, quantifying religious devotion and categories of Muslim identity is outside the scope of this report.'

These are important qualifications for a report that some readers of Vista might have consulted and used as they have considered responses to the presence and growth of number of Muslims in Europe. The statement from Pew obscures the fact that self-identifying as 'Muslim' does not necessarily signify devout observance of the pillars of Islam. It also overlooks the decision by Pew (in the absence of census or survey data) to assume that Muslim identity can be predicted by ethnic and national origin. Whilst the report's authors acknowledge that, for example, 'there is a higher share of Christians among Egyptian migrants to Austria than there is among those living in Egypt.' It continues, 'this type of data is used to estimate the religious composition of new migrants, but only when available' (emphasis mine). The problems of such an approach are underlined by Jørgen Nielson who realises that 'religion becomes an ambivalent marker for ethnicity and national belonging' (*Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, 2013, p.18).

A further eccentricity of the Pew report (seen on p.46) is that their estimate of religious switching across Europe is based on a figure of 10% reported from

the French Trajectories and Origins survey of immigrants in France. It found that 'approximately 10% of those raised Muslim later switched to no religious affiliation or to some other religion'. I am aware that there is little hard data available on conversions by Muslims to another or no religion, but this edition of Vista features important stories of Muslims who have become followers of Christ and descriptions of many thousands of Iranians who are now also following Jesus. This frequently comes about through the active witness of evangelical protestants and it is not as common to evangelical Christians in France as it is elsewhere. The likelihood is that the witness of evangelicals in historically protestant countries (rather than the traditionally Catholic and officially secular nation of France) is likely to contribute to conversation rates of higher than 10%. However, until we have access to hard data, we can only rely on the estimates of organisations like Pew.

More important, perhaps, are the many stories that point to significant movements of migrants towards faith in Christ and who have migrated from countries that are historically Muslim. Reza Gholami is not a Christian but has investigated the question of why so many migrant Iranian Shi'a Muslims seem determined to distance themselves from Islam (Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 2015). He worked with Iranian communities in Aarhus, Paris, and London and discovered something he calls 'non-Islamiosity' to be widespread among Iranians. He saw that they seemed determined to find a secular explanatory framework for expressing freedom-related concepts, such as 'identity' and 'community', both personal and social. Doing this meant that they had to jettison the explanatory framework of Islamiosity held previously.

He rejects an either-or approach to 'secularity' and 'religiosity'. He argues instead that secularity allows an individual to negotiate new ideas of self

and community which are not necessarily non-religious; rather, they are non-Islamic. This finding is of significance for Christians with experience of Iranian (or Persian) background believers. The offer of faith in Christ must be offered as a journey into new forms of religious-framed freedom for them. Those of us with personal experience of talking with new Iranian believers will probably be able to testify that this is a central part of their stories of coming to faith (alongside their frequent reporting of a vision or dream in which they encountered the risen and exalted Christ).

In the face of the politics of fear, Christians in Europe have new opportunities to present Christ to new Muslim friends, for the Muslims of Europe are here to stay. Robert Pauly (*Islam in Europe*, 2004, p.174) makes this point in arguing that European governments should develop domestic policies of social integration as these are more appropriate and more effective than Governments directing their immigration policies towards excluding Muslims. Intentional and committed Christian witness to Muslims, even in the face of the revivalist Islamic movements such as Tablighi Jamaat (see Jenny Taylor's article in this edition of Vista), is a particularly evangelistic way of working towards greater social stability in the countries of Europe. It is costly and long-term, but the Iranians who are now faithfully and joyfully following Christ are a shocking reminder of the power of God to change lives and hearts at a time of unprecedented Muslim migration into the nations of Europe.

### Darrell Jackson

Rev Dr Darrell Jackson is Associate Professor of Missiology, Morling College, Sydney, and continues to research and lecture in the area of Islam and Muslims in the contemporary world.

Endnote  
 1 Europe's Growing Muslim Population, Pew Research Center, 2017. Available from <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

**“In the face of the politics of fear, Christians in Europe have new opportunities to present Christ to new Muslim friends”**

**“Pew’s research obscures the fact that self-identifying as ‘Muslim’ does not necessarily signify devout observance of Islam.”**

How should the church in Europe respond to the growing visible presence of Muslims in our continent? I suggest in a fourfold way, with i. a compassionate heart; ii. an informed mind; iii. an involved hand; and iv. a witnessing tongue. Nevertheless, before we seek to touch the hearts of our Muslim friends with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to honestly look at our own hearts.

**Fear of Eurabia and its consequences**

The growing visible presence of Muslims in Europe is a cause of concern to many Europeans, including Christians. There are many people across Europe who fear the Islamization of Europe. They believe that Islam is considered a problem or an obstacle to modernization and point out that the tense relationship between Islam and Europe is a clash of civilizations. Others state that Islam is hostile to and incompatible with the values of the western world and argue that key European values, e.g. secularism, freedom of speech and security, are threatened by the presence of Muslims in Europe.

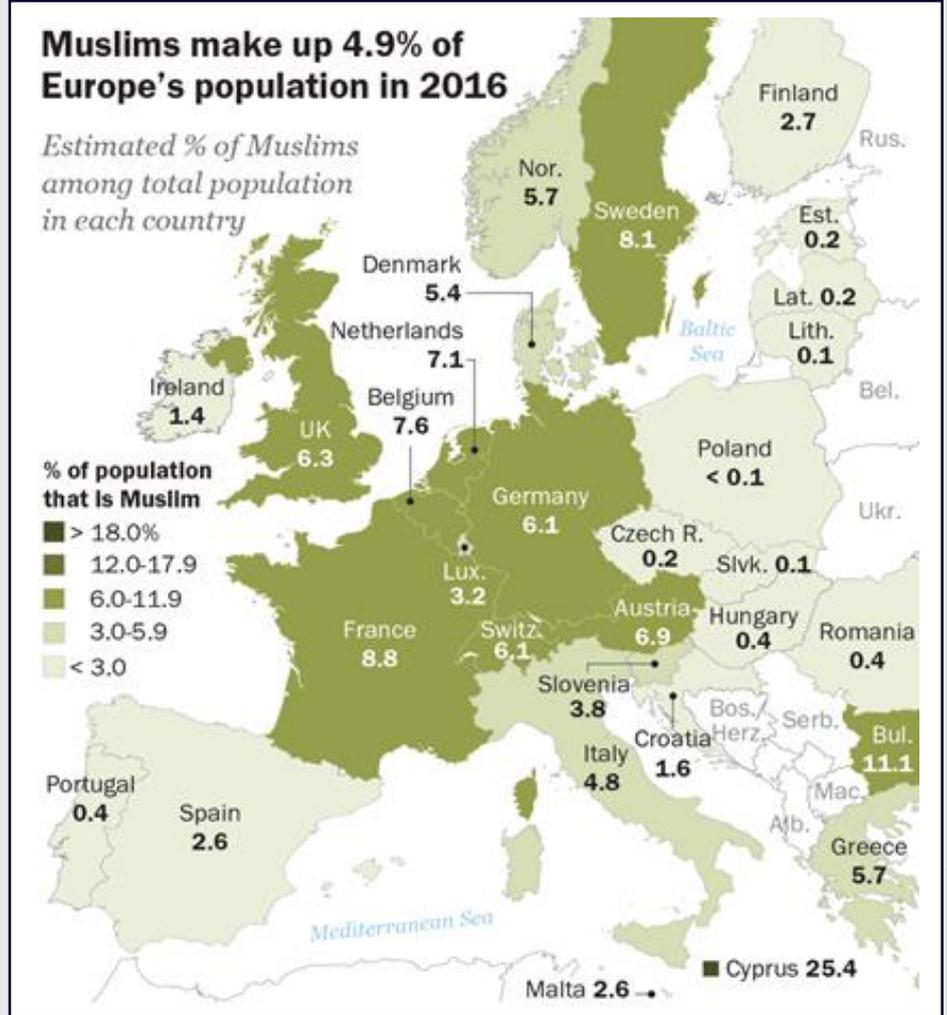
Some write that the presence of a substantial number of Muslims in Europe is a deliberate strategy to make sure that Muslims will form a demographic majority within a few generations, in order to impose their *shari'a* law on this continent.

Islam's progress in establishing itself in Europe continues to be a difficult phenomenon to accept. European societies essentially have

**“Islamophobic attitudes remain strong in Europe... unfortunately Churches and Christians often share this**

a negative response to the growing visibility of Islam in their midst. An Islamophobic attitude continues to remain strong in Europe and is expressed in public with increasing frequency. Islamophobic attitudes can also be found among Christians and who seem to be moulded by the societies in which they live.

These negative sentiments have several consequences. Firstly, it leads to a marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion of Muslims in finding housing, jobs or internships; and secondly it



Source: Pew Research Centre Report, 29 Nov 2017

contributes to growing xenophobia and resurgent nationalism.

Unfortunately, often Churches and Christians share the negative sentiment that permeates the societies they are part of. This might be one of the reasons why many of them are not interested to look more closely at what actually takes place within the Muslim communities across Europe.

**Phases of Relations between Islam and Europe**

When we look at the relationship between Islam and Europe in history, we can identify several phases. A long **first phase**, lasting for at least the first ten centuries of the history of Islam, was one of major conflicts, symbolized by the Crusades. The **second phase** can be seen historic waves of Islam in Europe that have left an imprint on Europe till the present day, such as: the Islamic civilization in Iberia, the Muslim Tatars in the northern Slav regions; the Ottoman

Empire. In the **third phase**, we see European dominance of Islamic lands, through colonialism and economic globalization. In the **fourth phase**, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s Islam began to spread in Europe through migration of first-generation immigrants coming from former colonies and labour migrants in response to European demand. In the **fifth phase** we see an increasing indigenization of Islam in Europe. The result of this is the formation of a European Islam, with its own pronounced identity different from that of Arabic Islam or that of countries of origin. This can be considered the **sixth phase**.

Today, most European countries find themselves somewhere between the fourth and fifth phases and in some countries we see the development of the sixth phase. I see three trends among Muslims in Europe, namely i. immigrants have become citizens; ii. Islam is being revitalized in the Balkans and Russia; iii. Islam in Europe is not a monolithic entity but expresses itself in a variety of ways.

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Image from: <http://kineem.nl/U2>

Regarding *theology*, I see the development of a new hermeneutics of interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, particularly in the writings of four renowned Muslim reformers, based in Europe: Bassam Tibi, Tariq Ramadan, Tareq Oubrou, and Abdennour Bidar. These four are all contributing to the idea of a European Islam. Other theologically inspired developments I see are: A desire for gender equality, expressed by Muslim female theologians who explain, define and redefine several key concepts of Islam. Changes in the ways shariah is being interpreted. Changes in how the law of apostasy is being interpreted. Discussion about the legal conditions connected to minority status in Europe.

A growing number of Muslim scholars in Europe believe that European Islam is possible, both theologically and politically. But we have to understand that it is not yet an existing fact, but an ongoing process. In their understanding, such a European Islam integrates modernity values and links them with the divine. It preserves the divine in its modernity.

**The response of the Church: bystander, follower or trendsetter?**

The presence of Islam in Europe should be high on the agenda of the Church in Europe. What happens to Europe and Islam is not something that the Church can ignore. We cannot afford to be a bystander when Europe and Islam sort out their future together. Nor, should we be following the mindset of Europeans at large. Instead of agents of change and transformation in a society estranged from God, many European Christians mimic its sentiments towards Muslims. I believe we should speak of and with Muslims with attitudes that are influenced by the way God deals with us. Our thinking, attitude, behavior with regard to Islam in Europe should be guided by God's self-giving love manifested at the cross of Golgotha. I suggest that Churches and Christians across Europe respond to the presence of Muslims in Europe with: a) a compassionate heart; b) an informed mind; c) an involved hand; d) a witnessing tongue.

The Church can shape the future of Islam in Europe when we are willing to

Generally speaking Muslims in Europe are urbanized, young, economically less well off and diverse.

The number of Muslims in Europe is expected to continue to grow from about 44 million now (6% of the population) to 58 million by 2030 (8% of the population). Depending on future migration, the number of Muslims in Europe in 2050 might be as high as 75 million (14% of the total population).

It is important to be careful in using demographical statistics. Statistics often do not give any indication of the religious commitment, beliefs and practices of a person. Some believe that only a third of all Muslims in Europe actively practice their Islamic faith.

**Gradual Europeanization of Muslim theology and practices**

I see several changes taking place within Islam in Europe.

Regarding *structure* I see an institutionalizing of Islam in Europe with the establishment of National Islamic Councils; the emergence of Muslim political and civic leaders; the formation of organizations, such as associations, schools, mosques; the westernization of mosques and the democratization of religious authority, where 'cyber imams' compete with mosque imams.

This institutionalization of Islam in Europe is a complex issue and not completed. Governments in North Africa, Turkey and Middle East are still a highly influential force on Islam in Europe. There are still a large number of mosques that are foreign-run and foreign-staffed. There is still a big need to educate imams in Europe and to develop domestic sources of financing for Islamic institutions.

Regarding *practice*, I see an individualization of Islamic religious beliefs and practices. It is an Islam where the believer autonomously decides which elements of Islam (s) he considers to be binding or not. The individualization

expresses itself in the following ways: the development of an Islamic Youth Culture; decreasing influence of traditional law schools; the development of European Fatwahs; the organization of slaughter during the feast of sacrifice and growing diversity in religious practice and convictions among Muslims.

The outcome of this individualization of Islamic faith and practices does not automatically mean a decline in religious practice, nor a liberalization of Islam, although some of this is happening. It sometimes leads to a critical attitude among second-generation Muslims towards the Islam of their parents and religious authority. Some break away from the Islamic culture of their parents in search of pure Islam.

reflect the truth, the glory and attitude of God in the way we relate to Muslims in our midst.

### Bert de Ruiter

Bert is a Christian-Muslim relations consultant with OM and the EEA, and has been involved in Christian-Muslim relations in Europe for over 30 years. He has a DMin in Christian-Muslim relations and has authored two books: *A Single Hand Cannot Applaud* (on evangelizing Muslims) and *Sharing Lives* (on how Christians can overcome their fears of Islam and engage with Muslims). He also edited the book *Engaging with Muslims in Europe*.



Photo: Colin Edwards

## MUSLIM MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN EUROPE

JENNY TAYLOR

**The lack of realism that has plagued the question of Muslim migration into Europe continues. There is still significant dissonance between the sanguine conclusions of major surveys and facts at grassroots, which belie the seriousness with which social integration is being handled.**

A case in point: the German think-tank Bertelsmann Stiftung produced a report entitled *Clear Progress for Integration of Muslims in Western Europe*. It concluded: 'Despite social tensions, integration is making clear progress. This is the central finding of our Religion Monitor 2017.'<sup>1</sup>

Stephan Vopel, Monitor in question, investigated the language competence, education, working life and interreligious contacts of Muslims in five countries, France, the UK, Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and concluded that despite the fact that none of the five offered particularly good opportunities for integration, there was clear evidence of increasing identification by Muslims with these countries (94%), including improved employment prospects, particularly in Germany and Switzerland, even for the devout, and better relations with non-Muslims (75% reporting they spent free time with non-Muslims).

Surveys based on such factors are important, but do not necessarily correlate with Muslim domestic arrangements where the rubber of

integration and future stability hits the road.

An inquiry by the UK Home Affairs Committee into shariah councils which has just closed found that there is *no data* on the number of Muslim marriages in Britain: most are unregistered, a significant legal lacuna affecting particularly child stability.

There is also *no data* on the number of shariah councils in Britain, despite the fact that there has been much evidence from Muslim women's groups that 'these courts are violating people's rights' and 'are giving rise to parallel legal systems'.<sup>2</sup>

The tendency of some neo-fundamentalist Muslims to shun laws they believe are man-made is exacerbated by the host nations' nervousness of unwittingly sanctioning sharia law by the back door. Setting a precedent when striving to integrate justice into national legal systems particularly for women for example is carefully avoided.<sup>3</sup>

It is not possible to talk seriously as, Bertelsmann Stiftung does, about according Islam 'the same legal status as other institutional religious groups, thereby recognizing religious diversity' when Muslims themselves resist it.

### Terror incidents

Another way of looking at the European future for Europe's 25.8 million Muslims is through the prism of terror-related

incidents reported across the continent. For Britain, with the highest level of Islamic migration,<sup>4</sup> the statistics are alarming, indicating perhaps that the country is being singled out.<sup>5</sup>

2017 saw an 'unprecedented level of activity' by police and security services tracking down people suspected of being involved in Islamic terrorism offences in UK. There were 400 arrests in Britain alone in the year to the end of September 2017 - the 'highest recorded figure, up more than 50% on the previous year', according to the BBC's Dominic Casciani.<sup>6</sup>

In 2016, the number of 'failed, foiled or completed attacks' for the whole of Europe, according to Europol, was 142, but more than half of these were in UK. This compares with around 200 across the continent as a whole just ten years before.

In Britain, there were nearly 8,000 referrals to the Government's Prevent scheme, a quarter of them under-15s - greeted perhaps oddly as a 'sign that the scheme is working'.

The Head of Britain's intelligence service unusually broke his silence on what he called 'an upshift in the threat'. The spy chief said: "That threat is multi-dimensional, evolving rapidly and operating at a scale and pace we've not seen before." He added: "It's at the highest tempo I have seen in my 34-year career. Today there is more terrorist activity, coming at us more quickly, and it can be harder to detect."<sup>7</sup>

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Given the German think-tank's observation that 'integration' is at its best in the UK, where in-migration has been the highest in Europe, the conclusions are obvious: either the criteria by which 'integration' is assessed are inadequate, or there is a correlation between numbers of migrants and amount of terror activity, or the connection between elites and reality is tenuous. Perhaps it is all three.

Chatham House in London produced data on 7th February 2017 after polling all 28 EU countries on their attitudes to Muslim immigration, indicating that people everywhere wanted to see restrictions. There was still a lot of vagueness in the responses. No country polled more than 50% for restrictions and around 30% of 'don't knows'. It was clear, according to Dr Paul Stott, formerly the School of Oriental and African Studies' terror expert, that 'a Trumpian position is held by the public but not by the élites'.

'The argument for restrictions seems to be winning publics but not the political consensus' he adds. In Germany, Mrs Merkel has struggled to form a government, following her drastic decision to welcome nearly a million refugees in 2016. The right-wing Alternative for Deutschland party has entered politics for the first time, eating into the support for her brand of social democracy.

Pressure for restrictions is coming not just from historic European populations but also from intellectuals such as those in the Ex-Muslim Council of Britain, run by secularized Iranian defectors who came to Britain via Germany after experiencing persecution in their homelands.

Such groups, and those like the outspoken Muslim Institute which co-publishes the acclaimed *Critical Muslim* with Hurst, are influencing the left who historically support comprehensive unrestrained immigration. Pew notes a figure of 160,000 across Europe who have 'switched' out of Islam, although quite how they arrive at such a figure is unknown.

Elsewhere in Europe, notably the historic four Visegrad<sup>8</sup> nations of Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and now Austria, there is evidence of defiance of EU immigration

policies that will play out this year. They will not accept EU rules on the allocation of asylum seekers and migrants, which looks set to be one of the real challenges facing Brussels operating as it does a non-veto policy on immigration for Schengen countries.

There is no doubt that Muslim groups like the Tablighi Jamaat, the religious enforcers of the Muslim world, are unlikely to further Muslim interests as the picture hardens.

This, the world's biggest Muslim 'mission' with 80 million followers worldwide has been attempting to build Europe's biggest Islamic training centre adjacent to the Olympic site in east London. After twenty years of flouting a planning system that bent over backwards to accommodate it, or just ignoring it altogether, they are still refusing to give up, grinding through the minutiae of the judicial review process.

They are in Europe in significant numbers, are well-organized with regional centres, and practise a training methodology, backed by Saudi finance, that has earned it the epithet 'antechamber of terror' from the French secret service.

Anti-syncretistic by definition, their brand of methodological Islam is unlikely to favour a form of harmonious co-existence prevalent in

other once-Christian majority nations such as Sierra Leone and Lebanon which are dependent on inter-marriage – a practice that Tablighi Jamaat reviles.

**Jenny Taylor**

**"across the EU, a Trumpian position [on Muslim immigration] is held by the public but not by elites"**

Jenny Taylor is a journalist, author and campaigner who pioneered religious literacy in journalism, founding Lapid Media in 2005. An online newspaper and publishing house, it helped to change the national secular discourse by providing resources for journalists needing to 'get religion' in an age of globalization. Jenny has a doctorate in religion from the School of Oriental and African Studies, and her published works include *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in 'Secular' Britain* (with Lesslie Newbigin and Lamin Sanneh, 2005) and *A Wild Constraint* (2008).

Jenny is Managing Director of a not-for-profit limited company of like-minded individuals from the worlds of journalism, diplomacy, development activism and mission who 'get' how the spiritual impacts reality. Her work can be supported at: [www.give.net/20232433](http://www.give.net/20232433).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/aktuelle-meldungen/2017/august/clear-progress-for-integration-of-muslims-in-western-europe/>.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence from witnesses to Home Office Committee inquiry into Sharia councils operating in the UK. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/160623-new-inquiry-sharia-councils/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lapidomedia.com/new-model-muslim-marriage-contract>.

<sup>4</sup> '...in the medium migration scenario, the United Kingdom would surpass them, with a projected 13 million Muslims in 2050 (compared with a projected 12.6 million in France and 8.5 million in Germany). This is because the UK was the top destination country for regular Muslim migrants (as opposed to refugees) between mid-2010 and mid-2016...' <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/#eu-restrictions> (Accessed 17 January 2018).

<sup>5</sup> 'Everywhere except in the UK, highly religious Muslims—and 41 percent of Muslims can be identified as such—have more difficulty than less devout Muslims finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications.' <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/aktuelle-meldungen/2017/august/clear-progress-for-integration-of-muslims-in-western-europe/> (Accessed 17 January 2018).

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**When I look at the way the Spirit of God is working amongst those from a Muslim background in the UK, I am both very excited and hugely disappointed at the same time. It is a strange experience to have – praising and crying, rejoicing and pleading, very encouraging and sadly frustrating. If you want it in a biblical expression try ‘perplexed, but not in despair’ (2 Corinthians 4:8).**

Most of the positive responses to the gospel come from the Iranian population. I have no statistics, but stories abound of churches, which are overflowing with Iranians. A Mahabba colleague of mine visited the evening service of a small church last year. The church only had about 40-50 members, who were mainly elderly and they had been in survival mode for some time. But on the occasion of my friend’s visit, the church baptised 15 Iranians. The church was totally amazed and reacted with, ‘We don’t understand, this doesn’t happen to us!’

I was talking to a vicar living near me recently. He told me that one Sunday in November 2017 four Iranians turned up in his church. A couple of weeks later there were seven Iranians and a few weeks after that there were nine. I told him that, if the experiences of other churches were anything to go by, then he would have 30 Iranians by the summer. Hopefully, my vicar friend will get hold of ‘Joining the Family’ or some other resource to help him prepare to minister to these Iranians.

I have no figures to back this up, but someone who probably knows and whose opinion I respect, suggested that hundreds of Iranians were coming to faith in Christ each month in the UK. Large numbers of UK churches have Farsi language groups and are taking on Farsi-speaking staff to disciple new believers. In addition, there are smaller but significant numbers of Afghans, Syrians, Somalis and others coming to faith.

### **Mirpuris from Pakistan**

In total contrast, the largest group of Muslims in the UK, over 1 million, are the Mirpuris who come from a valley in North Pakistan. Large Mirpuri communities can be found in Birmingham, Bradford, Oldham and

the surrounding towns. Luton and Slough have the largest Mirpuri communities in southern England. Mirpur was considered a rural and conservative area of Pakistan and Mirpuris came to the UK soon after the Second World War. They were pushed out of their area because a dam was being built and were welcomed into the UK because at that time we needed workers in factories and transportation.

Over the last 40-50 years, many individuals and Christian groups have tried to evangelise the Mirpuri. Every effort has been made and several people have resolutely committed themselves to the task. However, despite all this effort and prayer it has been suggested that less than 100 Mirpuris have admitted coming to Christ in the UK, although there may be more secret believers.

### **Sylhetis from Bangladesh**

A similar statistic would be true of the Sylhetis from Bangladesh. There are about half as many Sylhetis as Mirpuris and they started coming to the UK after Bangladesh got its independence in 1971. The most notable borough in Greater London where Sylhetis live is Tower Hamlets. Many of the curry shops in the iconic Brick Lane are owned by Sylhetis. Many Sylhetis also live in the West and East Midlands in places like Birmingham, Loughborough and Solihull. Sylhetis are concentrated in these areas, and in general make up 95% of the British Bangladeshi population, making them one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in England.

One church I know which has been intentionally reaching out to Sylhetis in the East Midlands for several years admits that they have seen no converts yet and the same could be said for outreaches in other areas.

### **Why? Why? Why?**

So why this huge disparity? Why have many godly people struggled for years amongst the Mirpuris and Sylhetis and seen very little fruit, while Iranians are walking into churches, which are often not prepared to receive them? The reasons are multiple and complicated.

Iranian history means that Iranians see themselves as Persian first and Muslim



Photo: Bryan Knell

second. Both Mirpuris and Sylhetis come from very conservative, rural backgrounds where English is still rarely spoken by the older people and young women are brought from Pakistan or Bangladesh to marry young men here. Many suggest that society and the UK church missed an opportunity to welcome new arrivals in the 1950s and 1960s and the result has been social and cultural isolation.

These, and a host of other factors, are relevant, but ultimately it is because the Spirit of God is working in remarkable ways among some groups and not amongst others. We are curious and would love to know why, but the Lord hasn’t chosen to tell us.

We rejoice in what is happening and the numbers coming to faith, but those working amongst Muslims in the UK have been praying for many years for a Mirpuri/Sylheti breakthrough. We need many more people to join us in prayer and when God answers our prayers and the Spirit of God begins to work in the hearts and minds of Mirpuris and Sylhetis, we are expecting a great harvest. Please may it be soon, Lord.

### **Bryan Knell**

Bryan worked for AWM for 16 years and hosted the Islamic Course at All Nations Christian College, UK for 17 years. He was the founding coordinator of CRIB (Christian Responses to Muslims in Britain) and is now a trustee of Mahabba.

Gone are the days when mission agencies gave advice to new missionaries going to Muslim communities that said something like “You won’t see people come to faith, but you’re called to be faithful. Serve God, and look after your walk with Him, and you may see some minor breakthrough”. That was good advice for my uncle’s generation. Years after his time in South Asia, I met up with my uncle just before he died and was able to tell him that there were 20 Believers from a Muslim Background (BMBs) in the town that he had worked in. He wept with joy as he told me that he had given up hope of seeing any. For the two of us it was a real sense of celebrating that God is able to do more than we can ask or imagine.

People around the world are coming to faith in Christ. There are more BMBs alive now that in all the rest of history put together. There are some silly figures being put out by overzealous mission agencies, but I’m confident in saying that in Bangladesh, where I worked, there were about 5,000 BMBs in 1990 and about 120,000 in 2005. That is God at work, and we had the privilege of sharing the faith walk of many BMBs as they explored what it meant to follow *Isa al Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) in their context.

**BMBs in the UK**

We moved back to the UK in 2007 with the conviction that what we were seeing in Bangladesh would also happen in the UK, but not by the same means. This is, indeed, what we are beginning to see. A couple of years ago some colleagues and I did some informal maths and figured that we knew of



Photo: Colin Edwards

about 5000 BMBs in the UK, with half of those being Iranian. This compared to about 120,000 converts to Islam in the UK, which sounds daunting but the ratios of the population converting either way is about the same.

Since then, we have begun to see the numbers of BMBs grow. I hesitate to say “grow dramatically” yet, but they *are* beginning to grow. If the trend follows what is happening in some areas overseas then we will indeed see some dramatic growth.

**Who are these BMBs?**

We are seeing three distinct groupings of BMBs taking shape. As Bryan Knell reports, the major grouping of BMBs is made up of Iranians. Associated with them are others who have migrated away from war torn areas, destroyed by Islamic factions. This group is

characterised by (nb: gross generalisation alert) a starting point of dislike of Islam and what it’s done to them, their family and their home country. In the walking away from Islam

**I hesitate to say “grow dramatically” - but the numbers of Believers from a Muslim Background are beginning to grow**

they then find Christ. Thus, mixed feelings toward, and sometimes outright antipathy to, Islam is typically a part of their faith walk.

Related to this group are those that are coming from refugee and asylum-seeking situations. Such people have huge physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs. They may find that these needs are met by Christians and that they are attracted to Christ. The faith walk of this group is mixed up with their marked sense of need and finding those needs met in Christ.

The third grouping of BMBs is drawn from the settled, often ethnically-oriented Muslim communities that are

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

# Don’t bend over backwards.

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now part of the UK scene. Bryan Knell refers to the Mirpuri and Sylheti communities and rightly notes that there are very few coming to Christ from these types of communities. Around the country we are just beginning to hear stories of enquiries and baptisms that involve such people. Their faith walk is not one of dislike for Islam and then finding Jesus. Indeed it's the opposite of this, in that they first encounter Jesus (maybe over years of friendship with Christians or maybe through dreams and visions) and then, once they are attracted to him, take quite some time of investigating who he is and should they follow him. This involves a slow re-evaluation of what Islam is for them. So rather than coming from a place of antipathy to Islam and then finding Christ, they start with an attraction to Christ and then need to re-evaluate Islam.

### Rising to the challenge

These groupings give different positive challenges to the church. We tend to see the Iranian groups as the norm, for they are, indeed, the largest group. But their needs are not the same as the others. The second group brings the

challenge of long-term, hands-on care to help meet the deep needs they bring. The third group brings the challenge of working through respect for history, culture and roots in Islam whilst following Jesus. There is real wisdom needed in what the walk with Christ looks like for someone from these communities, for they need to both stand up for Christ and respect their family and roots.

All believers present the church with the positive challenge of providing family, being family, for new believers. They need big sister and big brother figures. They need wider family. They are used to the idea that praying five times a day is a normal ideal and maybe even did manage to pray three times a day. To move to a church that lives for Sunday worship and a midweek homegroup is just not sufficient. The church in the UK needs to rediscover deep community, being in each other's houses and eating together, and being family through the week.

The other shared need of BMBs is for good discipling and teaching. Like all new believers, they need to work through what their new faith is all about and how

it can relate to their history and background, as well as how they fit into their new family of faith. This means wise and sensitive input and the ability to walk with them as they make decisions for them and their family.

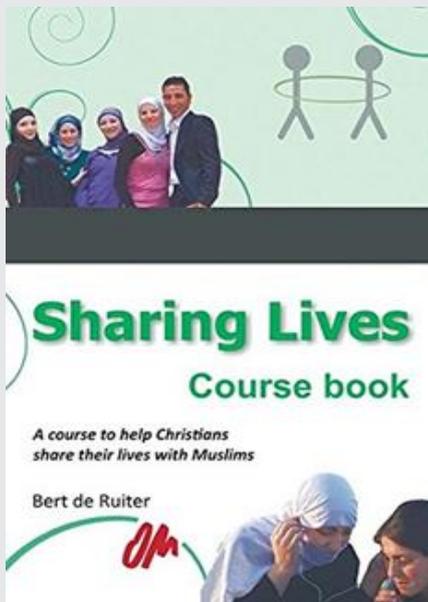
There are good resources in "Joining the Family" and in "Come Follow Me", which can help with background issues and wisdom in discipling BMBs. However, the more important challenge is that of deepening our sense of being family, of being a close community. I see this as a remarkably positive challenge to the church today. Maybe we need BMBs to awaken us to the need, but ultimately, it's the church itself that will be the richer for it.

### Colin Edwards

Colin is Vice Principal of Redcliffe College and course leader for its MA in Contemporary Missiology. His area of interest is Muslim/Christian Relations, particularly looking at socio-cultural aspects, interfaith dialogue and mission.

## COURSES AND RESOURCES TO EQUIP YOU

JO APPLETON



*Sharing Lives* is developed to help Christians look at their view of Muslims and encourage them to begin to share their lives with Muslims. The course consists of five lessons, to be taken over five or ten weeks. The participants will look at their own hearts, reflect on their

attitude towards Muslims in the light of the Bible, learn about basic elements of the Islamic faith, and how to befriend Muslims.

- Lesson 1: Our View of Islam
  - Lesson 2: Developing a Grace Response to Muslims
  - Lesson 3: Understanding Muslims
  - Lesson 4: Meeting with Muslims
  - Lesson 5: Building relationships that last
- Supported by PowerPoints, videos and DVDs

The course books are printed in twelve languages. Once or twice a year Bert de Ruiter will be teaching potential trainers in the use of this course material. With a sufficient number of trainers you can organize your own trainer's conference.

Other courses developed and taught by Bert include:

### Approaches to Islam

This course is developed to familiarize Christians with various ministry models

that are being used in reaching Muslims with the Gospel. The course requires about 30 hours of class room lectures and an equal amount of time for reading and other assignments. The course book (180 pages) is available in English only. The course assumes a basic knowledge of Islam and some prior contact with Muslims. It is course that is particularly helpful for mission candidates and could made fit into a curriculum of a Bible or theological seminary.

### Engaging with Muslims in Europe

This course gives insight into the various expressions of being Muslim in Europe and how to best reach out to them with the love of Christ. This course explores the history and development of Islam in Europe and the implications of this for European society and church. The course requires about 30 hours of classroom time and additional time for reading and doing other assignments.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

Besides these existing courses, Bert is available to conduct training seminars and workshops on a variety of topics related to Christian-Muslim relations in Europe.

For more information contact Dr Bert de Ruiter, [bert.deruiter@om.org](mailto:bert.deruiter@om.org)

### Friendship First [friendshipfirst.org](http://friendshipfirst.org)

This six session course in English is aimed at Christians who want to be able to befriend their Muslim neighbours and colleagues and 'be an effective witness to Jesus Christ'. Developed by Interserve UK, it has a DVD and leaders study guide so groups of between 6 and 12 people can study it in their own home,, but it is also possible to contact the team with questions that arise from your discussions.

Course content:

- Week 1: Islam and Muslim people
- Week 2: Muslim values and cultures
- Week 3: Our Muslim friends
- Week 4: Good news for our Muslim friends
- Week 5: Ways to witness
- Week 6: Next steps

### Encountering the World of Islam [encounteringislam.org](http://encounteringislam.org)

For those looking for a more intermediate level course to give a greater depth of knowledge about Islam and ways of connecting with Muslims, the EWI course will help. The course itself takes up to 9 sessions and is organised by a local EWI team. It is interactive and can include hearing from local Muslim leaders to better understand their views.

Courses are available in France, several Russian speaking countries, Portugal, Spain and the UK and Ireland. <https://encounteringislam.org/aroundtheworld>

The text book of the same name gives different perspectives on many aspects

of Islam, including the life of Muhammad, the history of Islamic civilisation, Islamic beliefs, Muslims today and the everyday lives of Muslims, and how Christians are responding to Islam.

### More than Dreams DVD <http://morethandreams.org/>

This inspiring subtitled video features 5 dramatized testimonies from Muslim background believers around the world who have had their lives transformed though experiencing dreams and visions of Christ. Suitable to give to Muslim friends who are interested in faith, each story includes an explanation of what it means to follow Christ, and a prayer for salvation. A list of available languages is on the website.

### Life and work in Muslim contexts

23-27 July 2018. Redcliffe College, Gloucester, UK

For those working in Muslim contexts, this week-long course will enable you to wrestle with the complexities of mission in these areas, alongside others facing similar issues.

The course includes:

- Socio-cultural dynamics
- Contextualisation
- Use of Scripture
- Taking a Jesus-centred approach
- Review of current missiological and evangelistic approaches
- Gender issues
- New believers
- Identity, persecution and social positioning
- Developing local theologies

You can study this module as part of Redcliffe's MA programme, or audit it as a stand-alone course.

[www.redcliffe.ac.uk/mimc](http://www.redcliffe.ac.uk/mimc)

### Islam – Getting to the heart

2nd-8th December 2018, All Nations Christian College, Ware, UK

This course is designed for those who have a particular interest in Muslim people, whether they are involved in or preparing to work with Muslims, or interested in finding out more about Islam. Content includes:

- Historical perspective on Islam
- Islam as a diverse religion
- Apologetics
- Political ideologies & Extremism
- God and Christ in Islam
- Islamic Theology
- Islam in different parts of the world
- Discipleship
- Qur'an and Hadith
- Women and family in Islam
- Extremism

[www.allnations.ac.uk/courses/short-courses/islam-getting-heart](http://www.allnations.ac.uk/courses/short-courses/islam-getting-heart)

### Find out more:

The Additional Information page of the 'Sharing Lives' website gives links to many other books and resources <http://sharinglives.eu/additional-information/>

### Jo Appleton



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Please Note: The views expressed in Vista are those of the authors of each article and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

## Study at Redcliffe College

If you are involved in Christian mission anywhere in Europe (and that includes the UK even after Brexit) and want the opportunity to reflect on it further, the European stream of the **Contemporary Missiology MA** gives you the opportunity to do just that.

Find out more at [www.redcliffe.ac.uk](http://www.redcliffe.ac.uk)

