

What We Carry

Joyful Witness: An Excerpt on Muslim-Christian Attachment

by Evelyne A. Reisacher

Editorial note: This is a short excerpt from Evelyn Reisacher's recent book, Joyful Witness in the Muslim World: Sharing the Gospel in Everyday Encounters, published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, www.bakerpublishinggroup.com (Grand Rapids, 2016), pp. 29–35. It is the most recent publication in the series, Mission in Global Community (editors, Scott Sunquist and Amos Yong). Used by permission.

Enjoying Muslims

Through the years, I have taught numerous Muslim-awareness seminars in churches worldwide. Inevitably, participants would say, “We would love to connect with Muslims in our neighborhoods but don’t know how.” Given that joy is a primary attachment emotion, I recommend the obvious: first start to enjoy Muslims as human beings, to delight in them; this is how the bond will form, as it did when we first learned to attach to our caregivers as human beings. As joy is necessary in the formation of the bond in early childhood, so it continues to be important in the formation and growth of human bonds throughout life.

Unfortunately, I noticed during these same seminars that participants were primarily motivated to connect with Muslims not by delight but by fear, competition, or urgency of the task. Fortunately, compassion and love are now emerging motives, but joy still rarely appears, and as seldom among full-time missionaries to Muslims as among ordinary church members. If God enjoys his creation, does it not seem awkward that his children find no delight in those they evangelize? Furthermore, as joy is so important for healthy relations, it is inconceivable that Christians befriend Muslims for the sake of the gospel without feeling overwhelming joy toward them. When students share their experiences in the Muslim world with me or with their classmates in a class I’m teaching, I often ask: “What joy did you experience?” I put the same question to my readers: can you remember joyful interactions you had with Muslims? If you cannot, you probably never connected with them. If you can, you may agree with Henri Nouwen, who wrote, “True joy is hidden where we are the same as other people: fragile and mortal. It is the joy of belonging to the human race. It is the joy of being with others as a friend, a companion, a fellow traveler. This is the joy of Jesus, who is Emmanuel: God-with-us.”¹

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Exploration

Joy is an exploration-eliciting emotion. Have you noticed that when tourists are in a sightseeing mood, they display unique behaviors? Their bodies seem to be in starting blocks, ready to move forward, conquer new spaces, and engage with unfamiliar people. The cameras around their necks signal they are eager to capture new visual sensations. Their eyes are wide open. This allows them to marvel at the wonders they discover. They feel enthusiastic, full of energy, and harbor a huge smile. Neuroscientists would say that they are in a sympathetic drive² and high on dopamine. Words that come to mind are “seeking,” “curiosity,” “exploring,” “awe,” “anticipation,” and “amazement.”

When we engage with the Muslim world, having a similar attitude will help us greatly. In effect, interest plays a critical role in attachment. According to Schore, “The combination of joy and interest motivates attachments.”³ To connect with Muslims, we must show interest in them and a joyful expectation that we will learn new things from them. Unfortunately, the tourist analogy falls short when one realizes that tourists often connect better to a place than to its inhabitants. Rejoicing over objects and places can help us enjoy a culture but will not automatically cause us to enjoy its people. It is people, therefore, whom we must be interested in and excited about.

In order to form secure bonds with Muslims, we must participate in joyful moments with them. When Christians engage with Muslims, “positive emotions widen the available array of thoughts and actions, thereby facilitating flexibility, exploration, and play. These behaviors in turn promote social bonding.”⁴ Yes, joyful play associated with interest/excitement should become an integral part of meeting Muslims. Some of the best contexts in which to experience such feelings are ordinary encounters. I naturally connected with Muslim classmates at school, at sport, at work, or in leisure activities. Too

often, Christians limit their interactions with Muslims to religious spaces. They forget there are many other ways to meet and enjoy others.

Genuine Joy

There are two kinds of joy. The first is cognitive, basically processed by the left side of the brain. It is often called social joy. The other is affective and is processed by the right side of the brain. Only the latter, being spontaneous and bodily based, fosters human attachment. Cognitive joy is sometimes used to mask negative emotions with a smile⁵ or other playful behaviors for the sake of civility. This faked joy does not have the same infectious effect. For attachments to build, joy must be spontaneous—like



a gut feeling. Imagine seeing someone you enjoy and instantaneously feeling joy bubble up in you.

Unfortunately, mission practitioners sometimes approach Muslims with a fake smile. They use relationship building as a strategy to share the gospel with Muslims. Their so-called interest in the Muslim world appears more like an evangelistic marketing technique. When they see Muslims, they mask their negative emotions with a smile and pretend they are happy to see them. They offer to connect with them only because they want to witness. I am all for sharing the gospel, and I support civility, but misunderstandings may occur if Christians smile at Muslims only to evangelize them, because the latter may understand

the smile as an invitation to deeper relations. Once a Muslim refuses the gospel, a Christian who has been thus motivated will probably rupture the bond, leaving the Muslim even more confused about the real reasons Christians engage with Muslims. I assume that Christians would be as bewildered if they discovered that Muslims became friends with them only to convert them.

An experience of social joy does not always guarantee that people will attach. Genuine, affective joy is the rule in attachment. This spontaneous and authentic joy is communicated via the right brain of one person and resonates with the right brain of the person to whom joy is being communicated. Right-brain joy is the key to attachment. True joy is not something you can just reason or figure out. One must experience spontaneous joyful emotions originating from a relational context. During interactions with Muslims, joy may suddenly pop up, unexpectedly. One cannot say, “Now I am going to find Muslims pleasant.” No one can arbitrarily create happiness by being together with people from another culture (unless happiness is cognitively induced for social purposes). One has to personally be immersed in an unfamiliar environment and feel the spark of joy when it happens. No one can predict when it will happen. It is the path of discovering how one’s right brain reacts to the sensory and verbal stimuli in the context of relationship with a Muslim. To those who want to feel the joy of the Muslim world, I can only recommend going and exploring Muslim societies and being open to the joy that will enable them to connect. It may start with a single encounter like the one I had with my neighbor when I was a teenager.

Facial expressions are important means to convey emotions. I remember walking on the beach when a teenager came out of the water where he had surfed, beaming with excitement. His face radiated with joy. As he walked past me, my face beamed with joy in return. His joy was infectious. I believe that at that moment

I experienced the right-brain-to-right-brain affective resonance that child and caregiver experience when they are together and feel nonverbal joy. The cultural display of joy did not matter in this circumstance. Facially communicated joy bypassed words, which was convenient because this teenager did not speak the same language as I do. Was our relationship strong at that point? No! Attachment is a long process that involves more than a one-time affective resonance. But this fleeting positive emotion could have become the springboard for subsequent moments of joy, which could have shaped a bond. I wonder how many of these experiences my readers have had with Muslims. When have our faces beamed with joy in their presence? Can we stop for a moment to recall these memories?

Unfortunately, these days, happy faces of Muslims in the media are in short supply. How can there be mutual sharing of joy if Muslims only get the role of villain in movies and if only their angry faces make newspaper headlines? Recently I googled the word “Muslim” and was shocked by the number of angry faces that appeared in the “image” section. This is strange, because Muslims can be as happy as anybody else on this planet. Unfortunately, most people are introduced to Islam through fearful faces.

Sometimes, at the beginning of a lecture or a church meeting, I ask Christians to think of Muslims and choose a facial expression. I show them a variety of emoticons. Very rarely is the smiley face chosen. That is quite unfortunate for relationship building, because happy faces are inviting, but angry or fearful faces lead to shame-based transactions such as we described earlier. How can someone build healthy relations with Muslims in a context of fear, anger, and terror when few people have memories of joyful encounters with Muslims? Usually relationships start with positive emotional experiences, even if later there might be stress or conflict. In such cases, repairing the relationship will be easier because of the memory of the joyful times of

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the past. But when people try to initiate connections with Muslims, when all they hear about Muslims is negative, how will healthy relationships ever develop?

The intergenerational transmission of negative feelings regarding Muslims also makes it difficult for non-Muslims to form bonds with Muslims. Terror stories that have been transmitted over generations make it almost impossible to establish healthy bonds, since terror has traumatic effects on human relations. I grew up in France during the Algerian War of Independence. Most young men the age of my brother were drafted. I remember conversations I heard as a child referring to Algerians as enemies. I heard people say, “If you see an Arab, change sidewalks; they might kill you.” How do you think this must have shaped my feelings as I resonated at an early age with the fear of an entire country? I was anxious and distant until I met an Arab Muslim girl, with whom I experienced some joy. These positive memories allowed me to form other bonds with Muslims until I was able to experience the entire attachment cycle of joy, shame, and a return to joy with Muslims. Therefore, today, when I speak with anxious people all around the world, I ask them, “Can you get a Muslim smiley?”⁶ Besides the angry and fearful faces of terrorists, there are many other faces of Muslims who are like you and me, with no desire to harm Christians but instead are eager to develop friendships with them. You can form healthy bonds with Muslims. I regularly show my students a visual survey filmed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, over a week, in which researchers asked random pedestrians a single question: “Are you happy?” Scores of interviewees share about their daily joys and struggles, many with genuine and spontaneous smiles that are warm and welcoming. As was noted earlier, another video, called the “Happy British Muslims,” surprises Christian audiences

when Muslims sing along with Pharrell Williams’ “Happy.” These infectious faces of delight, joy, and elation are often suppressed by communities waging war against each other, since they know all too well the power such expressions have to connect people with each other.

Dyadic Joy

Another important aspect of attachment joy is its capacity to be mutually shared. Self-happiness does not create bonds. Playing alone, enjoying a delicious meal alone, or even using recreational drugs alone—all these experiences eliciting joy that raise the level of dopamine may render life more pleasant but do not contribute to developing human bonds. Dyadic joy,⁷ or joy shared with another human being, is what leads to attachment.

Dyadic joy is mutual. When for my doctoral research I interviewed North African Christians in French churches, I noticed that they were making many efforts to enjoy French Christians. But the latter did not always reciprocate. This is not the best recipe for a lasting bond. Both members of the dyad must feel joy. Therefore, when developing bonds with Muslims, we must identify mutually felt joys. Unfortunately, interfaith relationships are sometimes emotionally imbalanced. One person is trying hard to enjoy the other (trying to like her food, appreciate her customs, etc.), but the other is not. Immigrants who want to integrate often make greater efforts to connect in order to be accepted. But this does not necessarily lead to secure bonds, because both members of the dyad must try to find enjoyment in each other. When a relationship is positive for one person in the dyad, this does not mean the two have become securely attached. I have talked to many cross-cultural workers coming back from overseas and saying: “We had such a great time; we laughed with people; we

feel really connected; we have become friends.” But the words “connected” and “attached” can have diverse meanings and do not necessarily mean securely attached. After their comments, I always ask them to tell stories of mutual joy to assess whether they formed an attachment bond. I then ask if they experienced shame and the return to mutual joy.

I have noticed that in times of cross-cultural conflicts, members of one group tend to forget that the opposite group has the capacity to share joy, laughter, and other positive emotional experiences. This is probably why peacemakers include times of common celebration and play to rebuild broken relationships after wars and conflicts. Joy is not meant to erase all the pain but is a necessary ingredient to repair broken relations. And peacemakers know that every culture has feasts and celebrations that can become spaces for experiencing mutual joy.

The use of the word “dyadic” in human attachment theory, referring to a relationship between two people, implies that attachment takes place one relationship at a time. In childhood, although entire communities can be involved in child rearing, children attach to individuals who are sensitive to their emotional regulatory needs. It is the same with Muslim-Christian relations in adulthood. Have you ever heard people say, “I love Muslims,” or “I love the Saudis”? What does this really mean? Bonding occurs with individual people whom you can name. Why do I emphasize this? Because I have seen too many people say, “Oh, I love this culture. I think the people are fantastic!” But they have never even developed one single secure attachment with a person from that country or religion. Attachment takes place one dyad at a time until large networks of relations are formed. A friend of mine, born in a Muslim family, reports that a member of her church made derogative comments about Muslims, saying that she would never trust any. My friend replied, “But I was one of them! Why do you then trust me?” The person replied, “But with

you it’s different. I have gotten to know you throughout the years.” So much was her mind filled with negative images, this church member was not consciously aware that she liked a person from a Muslim background. Once she became aware of it, this changed everything. She realized she could develop bonds with other people from the estranged community. This example comports with my belief that to secure healthier relationships between Muslims and Christians we must start at the micro level, and more specifically with healthy dyadic relationships between Muslims and Christians.

But interfaith and intercultural affective transactions can prove challenging. Anthropological observations highlight that cultures and religions diverge in the



ways and contexts in which they display and experience positive or negative emotion. For example, wedding celebrations in certain cultures can be perceived as funerals in others because outsiders don’t see the same intensity of joy displayed. Likewise, it may be improper to scream and yell when meeting a friend in some cultures. Anyone observing people welcoming their loved ones in an airport can see differences in the way people from various cultures greet one another. When the intensity or display of joy does not match across cultures, relationships may rupture. There is no universal way to share joy in a relationship.

“Objects” of joy may also differ across cultures and religions. If I asked people from

different cultures what they do to enjoy a relationship, the responses vary widely. Some may say, “Going to a baseball game together.” Other will say, “Taking a cruise together.” And others will say, “Enjoying a meal together.” This poses a problem for dyadic encounters. What if the joy that other cultures value is not joy to me? Am I ever going to experience moments of shared joy, or pleasurable moments that strengthen the bond? When I meet a person from another culture and want to develop a bond with her, I often try to find out what she enjoys doing. But doing what the other person enjoys will not bring a secure bond in the long run. Finding these cross-cultural or interfaith spaces where both members of the dyad can say that they truly enjoy each other is the key to developing healthy bonds. It often takes time. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 38.

² The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is called the energy-expanding branch. See Allan N. Schore, “Effects of a Secure Attachment Relationship on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health,” *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22, no 1–2 (2001): 7–66.

³ Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 97.

⁴ Disa Sauter, “More Than Happy: The Need for Disentangling Positive Emotions,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 19, no. 1 (2010): 3.

⁵ Theorists call it a Duchennes smile.

⁶ I try to encourage people to draw Muslim faces with a smile because there are many happy Muslims in the world (but media do not often depict “happy Muslims”). Thus, Christians have to be proactive and be able to imagine that a smiley can also represent a Muslim person.

⁷ In social sciences, “dyad” is a technical term for a group of two.