

# FIGHT? FLIGHT?

or something better?

Grace Munro, Editor



*"I had a person come to do some gardening for us, and we began talking. Then I discovered he was a Muslim. And I told him, 'You are all cheats and liars and murderers!'"*


Believe it or not, these words thundered from the pulpit of a Baptist church in Australia in 2002. My serious regret is that I and others in the congregation did not openly challenge the preacher for his offensive attitude, or simply walk out. Maybe we were all too stunned. I did hear later that he was never invited again to that church as a guest preacher. Praise God for that! Rarely would preachers or parishioners be so blatant

with their anti-Muslim sentiment. But undoubtedly fear and negativity towards Islam and Muslims have permeated our communities, and to some extent our churches.

History shows that waves of fear sweep our society, sometimes with good reason, sometimes with little basis. The level of fear and the extent of its impact may be commensurate with, or disproportionate to, the events that trigger it. This article focuses not primarily on the validity or otherwise of the fear, but rather on our response when these waves of fear spread in our society.

Are you old enough to remember the "yellow peril" era? Or the "red under the bed" period? I remember my parents' peers during the "yellow peril" era being vocal in their anxiety that Australia might be overtaken by the "millions of Asia". That fear was widespread and was exemplified in the White Australia policy, which aimed to protect our "Christian" / white / British-based culture and values. The fear was that, if we opened the doors of our sparsely populated country to the peoples of the lands to the north of us, in no time we would be totally outnumbered and all of our cultural and religious values would be gone forever, to Australia's great detriment.

Then came the terror of communism. Would it be the communists of the United Soviet Socialist Republic or of China who would wipe western countries out of existence? The Cold War generated a huge and pervasive sense of danger and threat. Any people who showed leanings to the left politically were readily labelled as communists or socialists, and were feared and





ostracised by many. Overt members of the communist party were of even greater concern. Spy movies and books proliferated, feeding the fear that there may indeed be a “red under the bed”. Sadly, the fear was not limited to the political leaders of communism. All people of communist countries were at times seen as an imminent and serious threat.

### A “Christian” view?

Sometimes, Christians have been among the most afraid and the most vocal about the “them” in the “them and us” dichotomy. In the “red under the bed” era, there was widespread alarm in some Christian groups that atheism was about to overwhelm Christianity. In the “yellow peril” period, the perceived threat was that people from our north would bring an influx of strange religions and philosophies which would drown out our faith. Some preachers spoke out forcefully about the awful peril this presented. Some such preachers condemned not only the beliefs, but also all of the people whom they thought held those beliefs.

Since that time, the Berlin wall has fallen, the ice of the cold war has melted, Australian tourism to Asia has flourished and we have opened our doors to numerous people from the countries of Asia. Most of us have discovered that the huge majority of “them” are delightful people. Their beliefs have not overwhelmed us, and their cultures, on the whole, have enriched our own. We have found that most people of communist countries and Asia are just as nice and just as flawed as we are.

Well, we have discovered this truth if we have made the effort to get out of our mono-cultural comfort zone to interact with people of other cultures, religions and backgrounds.

### Yet another era of fear



Today, we are in the midst of a new era of fear. It could be designated “Blame the *burqa*”, or “Hostility to the *hijab*”, or “Accuse the *kuffi*”. The scarf (*burqa*) and body-covering clothing (*hijab*) of Muslim women and the prayer cap (*kuffi*)<sup>1</sup> of the men have become symbols of threat – real, exaggerated, or unfounded? There is no question about the validity of the sense of threat from extremist Muslim terrorists. But for some people the sense of threat has extended to all Muslims, especially from the Middle East and Indonesia.

This negativity can even flow over to people of other countries and religions – even to fellow-believers! One Egyptian man in Melbourne has experienced suspicion from another member of his church. After all, he is of “Middle Eastern appearance”! During the recent conflict between Lebanon and Israel, some people assumed that all Lebanese people are Muslim, while in reality about 40 percent are Christians. In one church, while most members were celebrating the recent entry of people from





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a range of countries (as diverse as Tanzania, Vietnam, Korea and Venezuela – none of them Muslim), a few showed some anxiety about the impact of “them” on “us” and the church’s life.

Responses such as this are symptomatic of the fear that so easily pervades communities. To some Australians, thankfully not all, anyone who is different, and particularly any wearer of the *burqa*, *hijab* or the *kufi*, has come to represent “the enemy”. Of course, fear of the unknown is common to all societies. Muslim societies are afraid of the west. Han Chinese are wary of non-Han Chinese. But, while this is a common human response, our question is whether it is right for us.

### Flight or fight?

There are two instinctive responses to fear: fight or flight. Some people express their fear of Islam and Muslims in “flight” – avoiding contact with Muslims, refusing or neglecting to learn about their culture or religion and assuming that all Muslims share, at least in part, the characteristics of the extremists, the Muslim terrorists.

Some people, like the preacher whose words I quoted above, move into “fight” mode. Islam is depicted by those in “fight” mode as being totally and completely “of the devil” with no redeeming features and no truth at all, and is portrayed as a powerful and destructive force which seriously threatens us and our faith. In the church context, thankfully the negativity and aggression are usually expressed against Islamic beliefs and doctrines rather than against Muslim people in general. Yet, sadly, even when the rhetoric is overtly against the religion rather than its followers, it is all too easy to drift into anti-Muslim as well as anti-Islamic sentiment. Even when that distinction is made by the speaker, there is the potential for the words to stir up negativity towards Muslim people as well as against Islam, against all Indonesians and Arabs as well as the religion that predominates in their respective countries.

### A Jesus-perspective?

What if we try, as best we are able with our human inadequacies, to look at the results of fight or flight responses from a Jesus perspective?

Christmas isn’t long past, with its reminder of the amazing truth that God chose to become one with us – one of us – with a view to making us one with him. Rather than distancing himself from Jewish people, some of whom were seriously distorting the truths of the covenant he had made with them, God entered their world. Rather than distancing himself from all the other people of the world, with all of their differences and their flaws, God continues to come to them.

God in Christ had a unique method of interacting with people who were opposed to him or whose beliefs were distorted: he came to them in love and offered them the option of new life. He did not force them, and only if they refused his offer did they then experience the consequences of their actions.





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In this context, then, “flight” from Muslims or “fight” and aggression towards them directly contravene God’s methodology. Either response leaves Muslims isolated from the very thing that God wants them to have. Either option leaves them without the possibility of new life. Either option leaves them without the hope that Jesus came to offer to all people, to them as much as to us.

If we were to follow God’s methodology, we would enter into the world of Muslims – as far as is possible – to become one with them, to understand them, befriend them, love them, and tell them of Jesus and the life and hope he offers.

Entering the Muslim world and attempting to understand their worldview does not mean that we endorse all that they believe. We hold firmly to Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth, the life and the only path to God. We do not have to compromise our walk with Jesus in order to walk with Muslims – or with people of any other religious or cultural group. In fact it is in being close to others in Jesus’ name that we fulfil important aspects of our faith in him.

### Alternative three – faith

Fear and flight are the two instinctive responses to fear. But for believers there is a third alternative: faith, expressed and passed on to others in the deep and powerful love of God.

Our faith in God addresses not only inappropriate responses to fear. First it deals with the fundamental fear that motivates the fight or flight responses. Neither the millions of Asia with their philosophies and religions, the communists of the USSR and China, nor the Muslims of the Middle East and Indonesia will overwhelm true Jesus-centred faith. They cannot. Christ said so: “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Paul wrote, “Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ.” John added, “He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world.” Faith affirms these truths.

Second, Jesus was radically counter-cultural. He did not “go with the flow” of society’s values, biases and trends. He redefined what it means to be fully human in unity with God. He challenged widely accepted prejudices against people, choosing to eat with sinners and tax-collectors, talking with women, touching people with leprosy and so on. As his followers, we have the right and the responsibility to examine cultural and societal trends and to choose a Christ-like response. Individuals and groups need to discern what that response might be. I suspect that it would be a long way from “hostility to the *hijab*”, but, rather, be closely aligned with love to all people, including those who follow Islam.

Third, our faith affirms that God is able to transform individual Muslims and Islamic communities and countries just as he has transformed those who followed other religious beliefs. In the November 2006 *Vision* we looked at the Dani people of Papua, Indonesia. If ever there were people bound by their beliefs, it was the Dani. Yet God’s love and power transformed them radically. That same divine love and power is able to give life and hope to transform Muslim





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communities – not into Western Christians, but into true Christ-followers within their own context and culture. Why do we so easily limit this belief by our fear, expressed in flight or fight?

Fourth, in this “blame the *burqa*” environment, there are unprecedented opportunities to reach out in God’s love to Muslims – whether they live on the other side of our street, the other side of the Timor and Arafura seas, or the other side of the world. With these opportunities to bring Christ’s light to students in Australia or groups around the world, does our Christ-directed faith allow us to ignore their needs, or indeed to ignore Christ’s call? Waves of fear will come and go. Our choice is always between a flight and/or fight response, or a faith response.

