

## MY HUMANIZATION OF MUSLIMS

By: Jason Bunn-Parsons

I am a murderer! A mass murderer in fact! Jesus taught in Matthew 5:21-22, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." In short, Jesus equated hatred to murder. That is because God wants us to be righteous from the inside out. Not only does God want us live righteous live; He also wants us to have righteous desires. He wants us to do what is right not because we have to, but because we want to. The way that God wants us to respond to those that have wronged us is with merciful actions and a heart full of compassion. Yes, those who commit crimes (such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks) should face justice in accordance to the laws of God and man; but He forbids imperfect mortal man to carry out acts of revenge.

On April 19, 1996, I committed genocide against every Muslim who adhered to the Islamic faith. It is not that I desired that we kill every Muslim man, woman and child; only to make them pay for what I thought they had just done to us. That was the day of the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. By the time that I went to bed that night, all the speculation that I had heard that day is that it had to have been done by the Muslims. After all, every American knew that only Muslims committed such acts — or so we thought. My mind was still full of wrath when I went that night. I wanted us to declare war on every Muslim nation in the world and then go over and teach them a lesson. And just to rub it in, I wanted us to go out of our way to destroy every Muslim holy site starting with Mecca and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. I was ready to step down from my position as a kindergarten Sunday School teacher at my then church in order to help do my part. When it was revealed the next day that the authorities had their first suspect in custody, Timothy McViegh, God convicted me of my hatred and bigotry. Hatred and violence is not the way of the Christian, but yet that was the path that I had taken. How did I get there? And what did God do to get me to where I should be?

My long downwards journey began on November 4, 1979. I was 10½ years old and had never heard of Muslims, Islam, Arabs, the Middle East, etc. until that day. On that day militant Muslim follower of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Teheran, Iran, stormed the U.S. embassy there and took 90 people (including 62 Americans) hostage. The students then turned the Americans over to the Iranian Government who continued to hold them for a total 444 days. As a patriotic American, I saw this as an attack against our beloved country. This set a negative tone for the entire decade of the 1980s. All I ever heard in regards to Muslims was trouble. It seemed like they were cursing us while burning our flags just about every day. The list of the acts of terrorism that they committed by them against us — the numerous bombings, airplane and cruise line hijackings, the Beirut "peace keeping" fiasco, the taking of numerous civilian hostages in Beirut, etc. — would take pages to write. These events developed a view that Muslims were our mortal enemies. This belief was strengthened even more when I became a Christian. I would hear endless reports of them persecuting our Christian brothers and sisters in their home countries. I was taught that they were mortal enemies that we would be at war with forever and therefore could never live in peace with. I was also taught that God was on our side and concluded that their defeat would advance Christianity which would bring Him glory.

The decade of the 1990s started off just as bad. On January 16, 1991, we launched a successful full-scale military operation against Iraq with Operation Desert Storm, which we finished on February 17, 1991. During this engagement, I took sadistic delight in our routing of the Iraqi military. As the decade continued, there were some more skirmishes between us and Iraq, the bombing of U.S. embassies in Africa, as well as the first attack on the World Trade Center. The one almost bright spot of the 1990s started on December 9, 1992, when we commenced Operation Restore Hope in order to provide protection for relief workers in Somalia who were trying to help the starving victims of that country's "civil" war. The first few months were great! The warlords left us alone as we went about the business of helping the needy civilians there. The news footage was full of grateful Somalis with big smiles on their faces as they received their allotment of food. One scene showed women and children sing and clapping as our troops walked past them. All though I did not understand a word that they were saying, their sincerity transcended all language barriers as they expressed their genuine gratitude towards us. One of our soldiers told a news reporter, "Hey, its Christmas time! And this is what Christmas is all about!" It looked like this would be an easy international public relations victory for America, but it was not to be. The local warlords found that the relief workers who were outside our sphere of protection were easy targets. The U.N. put a bounty on the head of one of the warlords, Mohamed Farah Aidid, when his faction killed 23 Pakistani peacekeepers. We took it upon ourselves to hunt down Aidid only to be baited into an ambush that cost the lives of 18 U.S. Rangers. The news footage change from Somalis who were grateful for our desperately needed help; to that of Somalis celebrating over the fallen bodies of some of our finest soldiers. Seeing this inflamed my anger towards them. I wanted us to extract retribution against everyone that was celebrating, even though many were women and children.

So, that is how I got to were I was on April 19, 1996, but how did I get to where I am now? Obviously that started the next day when God convicted me of my hatred and bigotry. It is so easy to hate a nameless, faceless enemy who is less then human. Every campaign of genocide that has been lunched by man was not started until after a successful campaign of "dehumanization." Once you convince yourself that your enemy is less then human, then it is easy for you to justify to yourself that it is okay to "just killing them all." If "dehumanization" is the cause of the disease, then "humanization" is the cure. Seeing them not as a subhuman mortal enemy, but as another human being just like ourselves. I am not talking

about simply reeducating your mind with a new way of thinking, but allowing our hearts to be transformed by the power of God's love so that we can be capable of loving even the most unlovable. That is because the problem is not that our minds lack knowledge; but that our human hearts are — as the Bible correctly states — full of sin, hatred, and violence.

My Muslim "humanization" journey started off unexpectedly. In 1998, a friend and I went to see a movie called "The Siege". It was about a wave of terrorist attacks in New York City that the authorities responded to by proclaiming martial law. The rights of everyone of Arab decent, American and other wise were trampled upon. All males of Arab decent over the age of 12 years were sent to an internment camp. The most thought provoking scene of the movie was when an Arab American FBI agent assigned to the case finally vents his anger and disgust once he learns that his American born son was sent to the camp. As my friend and I left the movie, we shared our impressions of what we just saw with one another. The over all thought that had never occurred to be before that night dominated my mind as a result of watching was: **MUSLIMS ARE HUMANS!**

The next step in my humanization process can be summed up in one word: **FELLOWSHIP**. In March of 1999, I started helping my then church, (Covenant of Grace Christian Fellowship, Phoenix, Arizona) with an ESL (English as a Second Language) class. As a result, I met students from just about every country torn apart by "civil" war during my lifetime. One of our students was a Kosovar Muslim by the name of Zanel. I learned a lot first time that I went to visit his apartment on a purely social call. If you asked him what country he was from, he would tell you "Yugoslavia." He had no interest in their "war of independence." Zanel had sold children's toys that he made by hand. I left his apartment that night with one word dominating my thoughts: **DIGNITY!** He was as proud as any American husband and father; who just trying to take care of his wife and children in spite of the circumstances that surrounded him. All he really wanted was to for them all was to raise his family in safety and provide for all of their needs. These were desires that he share with all fathers.

There was yet one more significant event in my Muslim "humanization" process. Several of the families that attended our ESL class were from Somalia. The head of one of these families was a husband and father named, Hussein. He and I sat down and had a nice social conversation the first night we met. During this time he presented me with the moderate Muslim view that all peace loving Christians and Muslims were both friends and brothers. After I left him that night, one thought just dominated my mind: he was just so **PEACEABLE!** I then thought about the first time I was presented with such a concept of Muslims, I rejected it. Back in the months following the Persian Gulf War, a couple that had served as my Sunday school teachers were getting ready to go over to Kuwait in order to repair the damage done by the Iraqis. They told us that not all Muslims were like the one on TV cursing us and burning our flags. Most of them just wanted to live in peace. I found that hard to believe. This reinforces my assertion from 3 paragraphs back, that the solution to hatred and bigotry is not educating our minds. After all, my mind was being educated by a couple that I had the highest regard for, but what I really needed was to have my heart transformed by the power of God's love. I rejected the notion that most Muslims were peaceable people until I had allowed God to perform such a transformation of my own heart!

It was not until October of 2000 did I finally realize that I had been this life-altering journey. I was watching a documentary on T.V., part of which was about Operation Restore Hope, our attempt to bring relief to the people of Somalia. They replayed all of the news footage that I had remembered from back when it first happened. This included the post ambush footage which showed many of them dancing in celebration over the bodies of our dead soldiers. But my reaction this time was much different. There was no hate filled desire for retribution this time. One of the boys jumping up and down on the rotor of our downed helicopter resembled Adnan, one of Hussein's sons. And as I watch I asked myself, how could I ever pour out such wrath on Adnan? Another clip showed one of their women dancing in the street. And when I looked closer at her I thought to myself that she looked just like Oto, a sweet Somali widow that I knew. How could I ever pour out such wrath on Oto? They were no longer just nameless faces; they were **PEOPLE!** People that I care deeply about!

A few days later is when footage of the 12 year old Palestinian boy being killed in a cross fire between Israeli security forces and Palestinian protesters. News footage poured in from around the world, including Egypt. It showed a crowd of Muslim women marching and cursing Israel and the US. But my attitude as I watched this march was different then in the past. I did not see thousands of enemies. I saw women that resembled a group of Iraqi women that had attended our ESL class. As I watch I thought to my self, I could be friends with these women if only we were given a chance to do so. And as I sat their pondered the attitudes that I had just 4 years earlier and compared them to the ones I have now, I realized that God had taught me a key lesson about being a Christian: **NO MAN IS MY ENEMY!**

After the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack, several Somalis asked me I was angry while we watch news footage about it. I told them with all honesty, "No." They snickered a little as if they did not believe me, but it was the truth. My feelings were not of hatred towards Muslims, but of worry that Americans might hold all Muslims responsible and seek revenge against them. I fully desired that every terrorist responsible be brought to justice, but I was also filled with sorrow for all of the innocent civilians that I knew would loose their lives in the cross fire as we went after those who were responsible. I pray not only for the safety of our troops, but also for all of those who desire to just live in peace and harmony. These attitudes that Jesus instructed all of His followers to embrace: **LOVE THE LORD GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOAL, MIND AND STRENGTH! LOVE YOUR NEIBOURS AS YOURSELVE! FOR ALL MAN IS CREATED BY OUR LOVING GOD!**