



RESOURCES

• Ministries to Muslims •

# Seeing with our inner eye

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In the book *The New Religious Intolerance -overcoming the politics of fear in an anxious age*, the author Martha C. Nussbaum argues that in Europe we are living in a time of anxiety, ugly fears and suspicions of the majority people towards the Muslim minorities.

As examples of this new religious intolerance she points to the banning of the Muslim burqa and niqab in several European countries-despite the acknowledged fact that only a tiny minority of Muslims actually wear these garments; the ban on the construction of minarets in Switzerland -despite the fact that few mosques actually have minarets (namely 4 out of the 150); the banning of kebab shops in some regions in Italy; discrimination in employment of women wearing the Muslim headscarf in some Northern European countries; the termination of serving special meals for Muslim children on play grounds; the cancelation of having special opening hours in swimming pools for Muslim women; the crimes committed by Anders Breivik in Norway based on the idea that Europe must fight against Islamicisation; and the exploitation by politicians eager to whip up aggression against unpopular groups.

I could add many more examples from my own ministry throughout Europe that support the Nussbaum's conviction. For the past three years I have been preoccupied with making Christians aware of their own religious intolerance of Muslims and provide them with Biblical tools to deal with it.

Nussbaum's approach to this anti-Muslim attitude combines the following three ingredients:

1. Political principles expressing equal respect for all citizens. This is based on assumption that all human beings have equal dignity. Governments may not violate this equal dignity, and ought to show respect for the equality and dignity of all its citizens. Because conscience is closely related to one's dignity, to violate conscience is an assault on human dignity.
2. Rigorous and critical self-examination, whether or not we violate the words of Jesus "*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*" (Matthew 7: 3, 4) When people make special cases of themselves, exempting themselves from criticisms that they bring up when they look at other people they violate this principle.
3. A systematic cultivation of the "inner eye", which is the imaginative capacity that makes us ask what life is like for the other, what his or her emotions or ambitions are. Such empathetic imagination moves in a direction opposite to that of fear. Fear is a self-focused reaction to danger. It stems from a desire to survival and well-being in face of something that threatens us. In empathy the mind moves outward, to include the others and their well-being in one's behavior and decision-making.

Although Nussbaum states that these ingredients are "inspired by ethical philosophy in the spirit of Socrates", I believe that they are equally inspired by the Bible. Every Christian who loves God will all his soul, heart and mind, should equally love his neighbor as himself (Matthew 22:37-39).

By loving the Muslim neighbor as ourselves, we recognize his or her dignity as human beings that is entitled to freedom of conscience and religion. By loving our Muslim neighbor as ourselves we apply Jesus' words in Matthew 7 to him and her and be very much aware of the plank in our own eyes. God who demands us to love our Muslim neighbor will through His Spirit in our inner being develop our inner eye, thus enabling us to move towards our Muslim neighbours with genuine friendship and interest.

Let us not be mistaken: respect for persons is not necessarily respect for everything they do. On the other hand, disagreeing with a group's religion, and indeed its entire way of life, does not mean that we cannot appreciate its people's virtues, or treat them as less than fully human.

The approach that Nussbaum advocates *“demands the bare bones of friendship: curiosity, listening, responsiveness, a willingness to acknowledge a full life and world over there, outside ourselves. Friendship is rarely uncritical, and friends may well differ in their evaluations and argues, sometimes fiercely. But to remain friends they must take the first step of trying to see the situation from the other point of view. They must avoid the error of making a special case of themselves. And that means that they must avoid seeing the world through the narcissism of anxiety.”* (187)

Wouldn't it be great if each Muslim in Europe would have a Christian friend who lives out the principles mentioned above?