INTRODUCTION

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The matter of Christian–Muslim relations cannot these days be ignored. While the term itself may not be mentioned all that often, relations between the two faiths and their perceptions of one another are undeniable influences behind many current conflicts, declarations of mutual recognition and peace negotiations, not to speak of the brooding hatred of religious extremists. Since the destruction of the New York World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 – the simple expression 9/11 is enough to stir distressing memories – relations between the two faiths, in one form or another, have hardly been away from the news.

An outline sketch

The re-emergence of questions about relations between Christians and Muslims in the last few decades is only the latest phase in a history that goes back to the early seventh century. The overrunning of great tracts of the Eastern Roman Empire by Arab forces in the decades following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632 were the first sign to the wider world of a new power and the faith that inspired it, and a signal that Christians would need to get used to it. The invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century, the Crusades in the eastern Mediterranean in the twelfth and following centuries, the overthrow of Constantinople by Ottoman forces in 1453 and the capture of Granada by the ‘Catholic monarchs’ from the last Muslim ruler in Spain in 1492 all forced theologians and laymen alike to come to terms with one or another aspect of Christian–Muslim relations. The Portuguese discovery in the later fifteenth century of the sea routes to the East Indies and the subsequent European seizure of territories bordering the Indian Ocean, followed by the Ottoman expansion into south-eastern Europe, European alliances with Islamic powers (Queen Elizabeth I maintained a regular correspondence with Ottoman and Moroccan rulers) and European colonisation of great parts of the Arab Islamic world – all these were among earlier phases in which Christians and Muslims were compelled by practical as well as religious reasons to confront one another not only militarily but also theologically and culturally. Aggression and belligerence were not the preserve of one tradition only, while fantasies about religious superiority were frequently forced to yield to the more realistic acknowledgement that the ‘other’, wrong though they may be, were not inferior in either their intellectual constructions or the structures according to which they built their society. Relations have usually
been confrontational and filled with resentment and mutual condemnation, though the more perceptive in either faith have grasped the short-sightedness and wrongness in rejecting outright everything the other has stood for.

The term ‘Christian–Muslim relations’

Even the briefest outline summary of crisis encounters between the two faiths reveals that the term ‘Christian–Muslim relations’ extends wider than may at first appear. In its most obvious sense it can be taken to refer to individuals, nearly always scholars, from either faith reflecting on elements of the other and setting out ways in which these relate to their own, until the mid-twentieth century almost always to the detriment of the other. The great majority of written records about Muslim–Christian relations have been produced in this way by individuals seeking to gain a picture of the nature of the other faith, or to persuade others to adopt particular attitudes towards it, or else to defend their own faith from accusations that by comparison with the other it was incoherent or in some other way deficient. Sometimes, such individuals have written at the request of a religious superior or on the orders of a political ruler, and some works have been requested to complement or justify military advances – the first translation of the Qurʾān into Latin in the twelfth century was part of an explicitly Christian initiative to gain understanding of Islam in order to confront and overthrow it intellectually at a time when crusading armies were setting out to eradicate it by force of arms.

To what extent the Crusades were a religious endeavour may be debatable, though it is undeniable that both European and west Asian armies acted ostensibly as representatives of the two faiths and with conspicuous religious zeal. This is an example of the term ‘Christian–Muslim relations’ being applied in a less direct and more extended sense to encounters between people calling themselves Muslims and Christians. In these successive military clashes, as in later Portuguese and Spanish expeditions into the lands bordering the Indian Ocean or Ottoman expansions into south-eastern Europe, it would be shallow to impute actions to strictly religious motives. But religion is visibly present and is usually the rhetorical framework by which they are legitimised.

Religious language is much less common in present-day accounts and analyses of encounters between west Asian and other majority-Muslim states and countries whose constitutions and cultures stem from Christian teachings. Here it would be downright wrong to say that agreements and disagreements are primarily religious in nature, though it is equally incorrect to deny traces of religious sentiment behind mass attitudes and political motivations. Thus, when twentieth-century ideologues in Islamic countries have condemned the West as immoral and profane, they have found it hard to explain how it could have advanced socially and technologically when its values appear indifferent to God-given guidelines and are evidently not those of Islam, while commentators in the Western media tend to condemn the lack of liberalisation and material advancement they expect to see in Islamic societies on the constraints imposed by clerical interpretations of religion.

All this suggests that the term ‘Christian–Muslim relations’ is open to a multitude of interpretations that range from focused analyses or diatribes in which specifically religious differences are the main points of discussion to more general outlooks that impute differences to social and political structures or the exigencies of history and seem loathe to include religious reasons, even though closer examination shows these are invariably lurking somewhere beneath the surface.

While the terms ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’ can be used in this way to refer to attitudes that spring from contexts in which religious sentiment and ways of construing the world have fallen into disuse as well as to consciously religious contexts, the term ‘relations’ must be used with care. Maybe ‘encounters’, ‘interactions’ or something similar would be more appropriate (though
neither of these carries the same resonance), because ‘relations’ can be thought to suggest a more constructive link than the generally gloomy historical record permits. Nevertheless, there is an appropriateness to it because it gives a reminder that there are close links between the two faiths in their monotheism, their reliance on scripture, their shared reverence for figures such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and many of the moral and ethical principles that relate to their beliefs.

Images of the other

It is quite possibly the beliefs and practices which at first glimpse bear close resemblances that have led to Christians and Muslims through history repeatedly producing images of one another that distort the truth, often to the point of destruction.

From a very early stage in their shared history followers of the two faiths depicted the other’s beliefs as the virtual reverse of their own. This, of course, served the function of explaining important differences in belief and world view and met the apologetic need to prove that one’s own faith embodied the truth and was the secure means of salvation. The trouble was that these depictions, as they were handed down through successive centuries, became universally accepted almost without question, and they settled into the stereotypical image of what the other was like. Maybe the two starkest examples are the Christian depiction of Muḥammad on the one hand and the Muslim depiction of the Bible on the other.

It has always been Christian dogma that Jesus embodied the last and complete revelation from God, with all stages in earlier times leading up as preparation for his coming. It followed that, since there could be no new revealer or revelation after him, Muḥammad must be a fraud. He was called a liar and a cheat from at least as early as the eighth century (though in less harsh interpretations he was regarded as a preserver of the simple faith of Abraham), and by the time of the Crusades he was reviled as an agent (or dupe) of the Devil, or even demonic in his own self. This image persisted for centuries, and it was first seriously questioned only in the nineteenth century. It has still not been fully relegated to the misdemeanours of history, and in Christian circles these days not much is said about him, presumably to avoid acknowledging what has always been a theological impasse: either to condemn him completely or accept him sincerely. Thus, for example, in *Nostra aetate* from 1965, a declaration on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and other faiths made at the Second Vatican Council, which more than any other Christian statement puts relations with Muslims on a positive footing, he is not mentioned at all.

In a similar way, the Bible was rejected by Muslims at an early point as corrupt scripture. The Qurʾān talks of Torah and Gospel among the books revealed by God, and it also says that Muḥammad is predicted in them. In the perspective of the Qurʾān all revealed texts cohere because they come from the one divine Author, though it seems that when Muslims discovered that Christians held doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation, which appeared to contradict their own monotheism, and were told there was no mention of Muḥammad in the Bible, they concluded that the Torah and Gospel possessed by the Jews and Christians must be wrong, and to support their view they invoked verses in the Qurʾān that hinted at concealment, substitution and alteration by the possessors of these texts. This conclusion is also recorded from as early as the eighth century, and from that time onwards hardly any Muslims (with a few salient exceptions) appear to have given the Bible more than a second thought. When polemists quoted from it in their accusations against Christians and rejoinders to them, they generally appear to have employed lists of specially chosen proof verses rather than study the biblical text itself, which became an increasingly closed book. Apart from a few scholars, this generally continues to be the case today. Thus, in the ground-breaking letter *A Common Word*, sent as a gesture of recognition and call to reconciliation by Muslim scholars to Christian leaders in 2007, the biblical quotations used to
support the points that are made all tacitly harmonise with Muslim teachings about the character of God and of Christ, and none that talks of the close relationship between Jesus and God or hints at Christ’s divinity is included.

These and related depictions of the other have long been embedded in the shared understanding of both Christians and Muslims. They perpetuate assumptions and attitudes that only remotely reflect the truth (at least as it is seen by the adherents of the two faiths), and more seriously they inhibit Christians and Muslims from encountering one another as real individuals rather than perceived upholders of unreal views and beliefs. In its coverage of the topics included here, this Handbook seeks in part to bring many stereotypical images into the light and to expose them for what they are.

This handbook and its predecessors

The history and characterisation of Christian–Muslim relations is relatively new as a topic of academic exploration. Generally speaking, before the mid-nineteenth century followers of the two faiths tended to regard one another as defective versions of themselves, Muslims looking on Christians as errant monotheists who had abandoned their pristine revelation and in consequence had slipped into irrational and unviable beliefs about God, and Christians seeing Muslims as deniers of the true forms of belief because they had adopted the deceptive versions given in the Qur’an. These religious attitudes were closely bound up with cultural and sometimes political attitudes that can be gathered together under the headings Orientalism and the less common though nevertheless prevalent Occidentalism, each the tendency to view the other as a reverse image of themselves, lacking the restraint and self-possession they recognised and valued in what they themselves thought and did. The consequence of this ‘them and us’ approach was that ‘Christianity’ and ‘Islam’ tended to be perceived by the other as two internally homogeneous blocs in which, for example, Sunnīs and Shi’is on the one hand and Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox on the other were hardly distinguished from one another – hence the tendency to see all Muslims as militants or all Christians as missionary colonialists. More seriously, the relationship was invariably presented in confrontational terms, with accusations and denials to the fore, and influences, borrowings and indebtedness often forgotten: the translations of scientific and philosophical texts from Greek into Arabic by Christians for Muslim sponsors in the early ‘Abbasid era, the translation of such texts from Arabic into Latin by Muslims in collaboration with Christians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, discussions on matters of common concern by Christian and Muslim philosophers in tenth-century Baghdad and in Córdoba and Palermo in later centuries, not to speak of positive appraisals of Muḥammad by Deists and Unitarians in eighteenth-century Europe and North America or the recognition of European scientific and social achievements by Muslim intellectuals in nineteenth-century India and Egypt – all these tended to be set aside.

This strain of mutual recognition and respect is important to note although it is admittedly minor, and it remains to be more fully explored alongside the dominant strain of misperception and reproach.

Documentation of works devoted to the refutation of the other faith can be found as early as the tenth century, when the Muslim bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 998) included in his Fihrist (Catalogue), a bibliography of the works written within the Islamic world up to his own time, works written against Christianity (often together with other faiths) among the writings of many major Muslim theologians from the ninth and tenth centuries, although this cannot be regarded as a focused listing of a specific genre of works. A similar work in this respect is the Coptic Christian al-Mu’taman ibn al-‘Assāl’s (d. before about 1286) Majmā’ uṣūl al-dīn (Compendium of the principles of religion), which contains references to earlier Arab Christians from many
Introduction

denominations who had written apologetic works for Muslim readerships. Maybe the first intentional listing of works written against the other faith was made by the Ottoman scholar Mustafâ ibn `Abd Allâh, known as Ḥajî Khalîfâ (1609–57), in his Kâshf al-ẓunûn (Inventory of the disciplines), though this is no more than a quick series of authors’ names (Ḫajî Khalîfâ 1835–58: vol. 3.353).

The first systematic history of polemical and apologetic works written by Arab Christians and Muslims (together with Jews) was Moritz Steinschneider’s Polemische und apologetische Literatur, which appeared in 1877. Later listings include Georg Graf’s monumental Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, which appeared between 1944 and 1953. This is not specifically on Christian refutations of Islam, though it is one of the fullest documentations, superseding other works from the early twentieth century.

A clear indication that in the post-Vatican II period, from the mid-1960s onwards, the study of Christian–Muslim relations was becoming a recognised part of the discipline of religious studies was the appearance of the ‘Bibliographie du dialogue islamico-chrétien’ in early volumes of the specialist journal Islamochristiana (Caspar et al. 1975–89). This sought to give full information about works by Christians and Muslims, including publication data, though an indication of the expanse of the field is that it ceased before it had reached the end of the late medieval period.

This bibliography is complemented and now superseded by Christian–Muslim Relations, a Bibliographical History, an even more ambitious project to compile an encyclopaedic history of all known works by Christians and Muslims about and against one another in the period 600–1914, covering all regions and languages of the world (Thomas et al. 2009 continuing). It comprises entries composed of biographical notices on authors, with supporting primary and secondary bibliography and descriptions of the works they wrote, together with appraisals of their significance, supplemented by full publication data and lists of studies. Designed as a fundamental research tool, it traces attitudes towards the other faith in all parts of the world and even in works that are not usually associated with relations between Christianity and Islam. In many ways, the present Handbook supplements this Bibliographical History, and some chapters draw on entries from it.

A growing number of histories of Christian–Muslim relations have appeared in the last half century or so. Probably the best known is Hugh Goddard’s comprehensive A history of Christian–Muslim relations (Goddard 2000), which covers the whole conspectus from the origins to the present day. This was preceded by J.W . Sweetman’s Islam and Christian theology (Sweetman 1945–67) and W.M. Watt’s Muslim–Christian encounters: Perceptions and misperceptions (Watt 1991), among other works, and followed by an increasing array of full histories and accounts of particular periods, notably the Crusades, about which whole libraries exist, and of particular parts of the world. The increasing impetus with which new titles appear is a clear attestation to the recognition that Christian–Muslim relations is an important and growing field of study and one that is necessary in order to understand the origins and shape of the all too blood-soaked clashes between people acting in the name of Christianity and Islam that have occurred throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

References


