This chapter outlines recent – twentieth-century – history and developments in Christian–Muslim relations with respect to the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, which, together, encapsulate the bulk of Christianity. It also discusses the engagement of the churches with Islam in the twenty-first century.

The Second Vatican Council and Islam

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65), or Vatican II, was a watershed moment in the Roman Catholic Church with respect to its relations with other religions. This council of the Church’s bishops from throughout the world expressed a determination to enter into dialogue with adherents of other religious traditions. What Vatican II decided and stated is still being implemented in the life of the Church. Vatican II produced two important texts concerning Islam as well as other religions. The first, more theological by character, is Paragraph 16 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, which opens by acknowledging that ‘those who have not yet accepted the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways’ (Flannery 1996: 21). The document asserts that it is God’s will that all humanity should be saved. Lumen Gentium first considers Judaism and articulates the esteem of the Church toward Jews and goes on to consider Islam as a nonbiblical but monotheistic religion related to Christianity and Judaism. It states that ‘the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Moslems: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day’ (Flannery 1996: 21). For the first time in its history, here the Roman Catholic Church says something positive about Muslims. This affirmation is situated within a longer passage dealing with non-Catholic Christians (Paragraph 15) and other (non-Christian) religions (Paragraph 16). Its inclusive theological nature may be best illustrated by another passage in Paragraph 16 which states ‘nor will divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life’ (Flannery 1996: 22). The theological basis for this is taken from Eusebius of Caesarea: ‘Whatever of good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the church to be a preparation for the Gospel’.

The second text is the pastoral directive Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. It started as a draft document concerning Jews, expressing
a clear stance against antisemitism and the need for reconciliation between the Church and the Jews. But it was proposed that this should be integrated into a wider text reflecting on the relationships of the Church with the major religions of the world (Oesterreicher 1969). *Nostra Aetate* is a short declaration, consisting of no more than five articles, and should be read together with other Vatican II documents, especially *Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes* (‘Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity’) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (‘Declaration on Religious Liberty’). *Nostra Aetate* was more debated at Vatican II than *Lumen Gentium*. Two contrasting groups opposed early drafts: traditionalist bishops, especially from Italy, Spain and Latin America, who determinately opposed any opening towards non-Christian religions; and bishops from the Arab world who interpreted the text to be pro-Israel, as did patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic churches living among Muslim majorities in the Middle East. At the final count there were an overwhelming 2,221 positive with only 88 negative votes and just three invalid votes. This document stands as the first clear position statement of the ecclesiastical magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church on the subject of interreligious dialogue (Velati 2006).

*Nostra Aetate* starts by noting the human longing for God and thirst for communion with the ‘ultimate mystery’. It speaks expressly of those religions in which people look for an ‘answer to the unsolved riddles of human experience’ (Flannery 1996: 569). It places other religions in the framework of salvation history and highlights the position of the Roman Catholic Church towards them. It mentions both Hinduism, in which ‘people explore the divine mystery’, and Buddhism, which varyingly ‘testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world’ (Flannery 1996: 570). It states: ‘The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions’. The Church regards with sincere reverence ‘the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often (haud raro, ‘not infrequently’) reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women’. However, immediately after, it states that the Church is duty-bound ‘to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn. 1:6) (Flannery 1996: 570–1).

*Nostra Aetate* marks a new beginning in the Roman Catholic Church’s relations with Islam, to which the third paragraph is fully devoted. It opens in an almost solemn tone: ‘The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living, and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity.’ The document notes some positive aspects of Muslim faith and practice: ‘They highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting’ (Flannery 1996: 571). The tone is certainly irenic, and even the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam concerning Jesus is muted: ‘Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke her’ (Flannery 1996: 571). The paragraph ends with two noteworthy emphases. First, it admits that ‘over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims’ and then ‘pleads with all to forget the past’. There has to be reconciliation in Christian–Muslim relations, and Vatican II seems to show one way towards it when, secondly, it ‘urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them [Christians and Muslims] together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values’ (Flannery 1996: 571–2). Doctrinal convergences between Islam and Christianity seem to be enough to justify dialogue and practical cooperation, but there is no theological view offered as to the soteriological nature of Islam as an institutional faith.

Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* explicitly speak of Muslims as adherents of Islam, but not directly of Islam as a religion. Both documents basically only repeat what Muslims say about themselves, not what the Roman Catholic Church thinks about them theologically. They recommend to Christians an appreciation of the values in Islam, a better knowledge of Islamic faith
and the recognition of errors in the past and promote an attitude of forgiveness, advocating a new start through mutual respect, dialogue and cooperation for the good of all people.

In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and still during the council, Pope Paul VI (1964–78) created in 1964 the Secretariat for Non-Christians (*Secretariatus pro non-Christianis*) as a department of the Roman Curia to search for a method and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians. Since 1967 it included an Office for Islam, and in 1974 the separate Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims established by Paul VI within the ambit of Vatican II was also attached to the secretariat. Encounters with Muslims have since then played a major role in the work of the secretariat, which in 1988 was renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). In 1995 an Islamic-Catholic Liaison Committee was established between the PCID and the four major organisations: the Muslim World League (*Rabita*), the World Muslim Congress (*Muʿtamar*) (both in Saudi Arabia), the International Islamic Council for Daʿwa and Relief (in Egypt) and the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) (in Morocco). An agreement was signed in 1998 between the PCID and the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar al-Sharif for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions (Cairo). As a consequence, the Joint Committee for Dialogue was established by the two organisations. Its purpose is to defend the great moral values of the two monotheistic religions, to promote a better mutual knowledge of each other’s beliefs and rituals and to address matters of education of their spiritual leaders. In April 2002 a Declaration of Intention was signed between the PCID and the presidency of religious affairs of the Office of the Prime Minister of Turkey in order to promote interreligious dialogue, especially at the academic level. In the same year it was decided to establish a Coordinating Committee of the World Islamic Call Society (in Libya) and the PCID.

Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) had a very positive attitude to the Islamic faith, often expressing a high regard of Muslims as monotheists. He travelled extensively and met with many Muslims on several occasions. When he visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus in 2001 he was the first pope ever to enter a mosque. On the other hand, he made critical comments about Islam. He writes in his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994) how the Qurʾān ‘completely reduces Divine Revelation’, and that the God of the Qurʾān is ‘ultimately a God outside of the world’ thus ‘Islam is not a religion of redemption’ (1994: 92). And yet at the same time he expresses high regard for the religiosity of Muslims (1994: 93).

In 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a declaration, *Dominus Iesus* (DI). Although citing *Nostra Aetate*, it strongly affirms with regard to other religions and salvation (DI 20–2) that salvation is through Christ, and this cannot be separated from the Church. It excludes any possibility of other religions’ sacred texts having an inspired character and affirms the doctrine of *praeparatio evangelica* (as in *Nostra Aetate*) (DI 8, 12). It also asserts ‘This one true religion continues to exist in the Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (DI 23). The declaration received the approval of John Paul II. Although seeming to suggest a resiling of the Church from interreligious dialogue, in fact it was asserting Catholic dogma and so, from the perspective of the Magisterium, clarifying the basis and limitations of dialogue, which continues nonetheless, and especially with Muslims.

The WCC and Islam

The World Council of Churches (WCC) came into being soon after World War II. Its inaugural Assembly was held in Amsterdam in 1948. By the mid-’50s, initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue had resulted in the formation of a Dialogue Sub-unit, with a study programme which ran until 1971. Early on, in 1960, a consultation of this programme took place which considered the Christian approach to peoples of Muslim faith. The report of the meeting noted the
‘pervasive adverse effect upon Christian–Muslim relationships of long-ingrained attitudes of prejudice and antagonism’ and that it was therefore necessary for Christians ‘to approach Muslims in a spirit of respect, friendship and common yielding to the present voice of God’ (WCC 1960). Some years later, in June 1966, an ecumenical consultation on the subject of relations with Muslims took place involving Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant participants who came mostly from the Muslim world. This event is noted as the effective point of commencement of WCC commitment to Christian–Muslim dialogue (WCC 1974). At this juncture, ‘it was possible to agree how things should look from a practical point of view, but no agreement was reached on any theological questions’ (Sperber 2000: 25). Indeed, participants were ‘widely divided on such basic issues as: Do the Muslims worship the same God . . . does God in some way work within other religions too?’ (Siddiqui 1997: 29).

In 1972 a very significant Christian–Muslim consultation took place on ‘The quest for human understanding and cooperation: Christian and Muslim contributions’. It constituted the then-largest bilateral dialogical meeting organised by the WCC (Samartha and Taylor 1973). The aims of this event included the initiating of better informed relations; the application of spiritual resources to common problems; suggesting ways of practical cooperation; and raising basic questions of human life and existence for long-range reflection. Although there was recognition of local specificity of dialogical contexts and agendas, nevertheless certain ‘irreducible principles’ were advanced, namely a clear and frank witness of self-identity; mutuality of respect and avoidance of invidious comparisons; and, in particular, the upholding of religious freedom – meaning that missionary activity ought not to be identified with exploitative proselytism. Christian–Muslim dialogue was regarded as a process that holds out the prospect of advancing world community, deepening the understanding of revelation, strengthening the relation of religion and society, and broadening devotional practice. One of this meeting’s Vatican participants, Michael Fitzgerald, noted that underlying theological questions are in the end unavoidable: Can Islam accept Christians theologically and not merely as protected persons (dhimmīs) in the Islamic state? Can Christian theology find a place for Islam? What is the relationship between universal mission and its particular realisation? (Fitzgerald 1972).

An important dialogical consultation on Christian and Muslim mission was held in 1976, organised by the Council for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC together with the journal International Review of Mission, the Islamic Foundation (Leicester, UK) and the then-Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations (CSIC) at Selly Oak, Birmingham, England. This turned out to be ‘a dialogue in which profound theological differences could not be bridged pragmatically. Therefore the aggression and accusations were stronger than in earlier dialogues, particularly from the Muslims against the Christians’ (Sperber 2000: 32). Yet the occasion ended by calling for more – and more widely representative – conferences of a similar ilk. A subsequent planning meeting for Christian–Muslim dialogical endeavours, also in 1976, noted the growing significance and success of the major dialogues undertaken thus far, especially with regard to ‘improved mutual relationships’ (Sperber 2000: 32). However, the meeting also recorded that ‘despite an increasing range of initiatives from both Muslim and Christian sides at international, regional and local levels, there was still a major problem in that many Muslims and Christians still distrusted the idea of dialogue’ (WCC 1976). It was also noted that dialogues were being sponsored by other bodies, and the sphere of interest and ownership was widening: ‘good links between the regional and international levels as a result of the choice of themes, participants and sites’ were recorded (Sperber 2000: 32).

In March 1979 a meeting was called to evaluate dialogues and plan for the future. This involved a widely representative group of people from the WCC, the Vatican and some key Muslim organisations, together with a number of scholars and other leaders. The resultant report laid out the foundations for Christian–Muslim relations. Dialogue per se was affirmed as a useful activity – provided it was not a front for proselytism. At the end of 1979 a reflective conference
on Christian–Muslim encounters with the theme of ‘Christian presence and witness in relation to Muslim neighbours’ was held. A variety of WCC sponsoring organisations were involved, a fact that spoke ‘of the wide interest and engagement in interreligious dialogue, in particular Christian–Muslim dialogue, across WCC structures’ (Pratt 2009). Subsequently, by the early ’90s, the focus of WCC engagement with Islam shifted from ‘dialogue’ to ‘relationships’. This was reflected in the disestablishment of the Dialogue Sub-Unit and its replacement with an Office for Interreligious Relations (OIRR). As a consequence, the quest to develop new relationships and to diversify further Islamic dialogue partners emerged as a principal concern of the Christian–Muslim desk within the OIRR. This dimension of OIRR activities also contributed to other WCC programmes, especially those having to do with peace-making and education, and it was involved in a range of collaborations with ecumenical partners at the regional level.

By the time of the 1991 WCC Assembly it was noted that many Christians in different parts of the world had come to feel ‘threatened by Islamisation and the introduction of the Sharia law’, and the WCC was urged to ‘take this issue very seriously in its dialogue with people of other faiths’ (Kinnamon 1991: 92). Relevant WCC meetings were notable for a recurring predominance of concerns about Islamic hegemony on the one hand and the freedom for Christian life and witness on the other. An advisory group was established to examine guidelines for Christian–Muslim dialogue, undertake a measure of review, and lay plans for further dialogue events. This was aided by the production of an exploratory document, Issues in Christian–Muslim relations: Ecumenical considerations, which ‘was meant to stimulate a reflection on the future orientation of Christian–Muslim relations as it identified progress achieved in dialogue, problems faced and questions inviting a concentrated effort of exchange and cooperation’ (Mitri 1997: 8). The document noted two dimensions to the relationship between Islam and Christianity: the practical matter of communal coexistence and a range of theological challenges. Caution was expressed for the medium-term future due to political and other developments threatening to build up new attitudes of distrust and hostility. Furthermore, on the Islamic side reservations about dialogue – seeing it as a covert form of Christian neo-imperialism or as intellectual colonialism – were acknowledged, and it was noted that there were many Christians who considered dialogue with Muslims as marked by a naive romanticism that fails to confront the threat of Islamic fanaticism.

Christian–Muslim relations, as fostered by the work of the WCC over the closing decades of the twentieth century, saw advances made with respect to dialogue, education and scholarship. Changing social and demographic circumstances and geopolitical relations contributed to the possibility – even need – for a new modality of dialogical engagement. But this was not without difficulty and controversy. Muslim–Christian dialogue has ever faced both resistance and hesitation. And still does. The intention of dialogical relationship is mutual empowerment in the process of collaborative engagement, implying recognition of, and respect for, difference whilst yet seeking to discover and appreciate common values. The missionary imperative of each faith does not need to result in a competitive praxis: there is a clear distinction to be made between proselytism and witness. The latter is the basis for the recognition that people of faith can enjoy the liberty to convince and be convinced and, at the same time, respect each other’s religious integrity, faithfulness to tradition and loyalty to community. The work of the WCC with regard to Christian–Muslim relations continues.

Continuities

In the twenty-first century, some of the churches’ attitudes to Islam can be seen to embody continuity, both with the approaches of Vatican II and the WCC described earlier and with elements further back in Christian history. In other respects, new responses are emerging to new challenges
in new situations. While *Nostra Aetate* notably did not speak of Islam as a religion, it did affirm Muslims in that ‘they worship God . . . the Creator of heaven and earth’. An affirmation that the God of Islam is *not* ‘other than’ the God worshipped by Christians underlies most twenty-first century church statements in this area. This is highly significant insofar as it goes some way to providing a common grammar for dialogue between the two faiths. Two qualifications, however, must immediately be made. Some Christians, particularly in conservative evangelical circles (e.g. Back 1999: 29), do not accept that the God of the Qurʾān is the true God, claiming that ‘Allāh’ is the lying spirit of the Antichrist. This is a restatement of defamatory tropes reaching back into the Middle Ages (Daniel 1966: 210). On the other hand, a significant controversy for Christians in this century has been the Malaysian churches’ freedom – under threat of legal prohibition – precisely to use the term ‘Allāh’ for God, which is the normal term in the Malaysian language but is now reserved for Muslim reference only. This finds echo in the experience of Arabic-speaking Christians and of converts. Mediating between outright distancing and unqualified identification, Bishop Kenneth Cragg probably expressed an ecumenical consensus when he wrote: ‘Those who say that Allah is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” are right if they mean that God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of Christian faith’ (Cragg 1985: 30).

Cragg’s words are particularly significant, since the question of the Trinitarian identity of God has played an increasingly prominent role in the churches’ response to Islam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While some theologians have tended towards a reductionist account in relation to Islam, or even adopted an effectively unitarian position, in general the ecumenical response to Islam has been marked by a renewed emphasis on the Trinity as generative of a distinctively Christian approach (Vanhoozer 1997: 70). This is very apparent in the statement issued by the 2008 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. Entitled *Generous Love: An Anglican theology of inter faith relations*, it affirms that ‘Our pressing need to renew our relationships with people of different faiths must be grounded theologically in our understanding of the reality of the God who is Trinity’ (ACC 2008: 15).

An interesting example of a major Christian leader and scholar developing this approach in dialogue with Muslims is provided by a lecture delivered by Dr Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, at al-Azhar in Cairo on 11 September 2004, the third anniversary of the al-Qaeda attacks on the US. Williams’ purpose was to explain how, for Christians, Trinitarianism is an explication, not a denial, of monotheism: ‘We do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power’ (*Lecture at al-Azhar al-Sharif*, www.rowanwilliams. archbishopofcanterbury.org, para 7). In pursuing this argument, he appeals to categories of unity, life and self-sufficiency accepted by Muslims as much as by Christians as applying to God. This in some ways represents the retrieval of a medieval line of argument among Arabic-speaking Christians, who used the language of divine attributes to open up conversations about an inward differentiation within the life of the one God (cf. Ipgrave 2003).

A different example of a major church leader reviving earlier Christian motifs in response to Islam can be found in the lecture *Faith, Reason and the University* given exactly two years later by Pope Benedict XVI at Regensburg. The pope cited a text from the fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus which generated considerable hostility, some of it expressed violently, across the Islamic world. While this was focused on the emperor’s rather polemical remarks about Islam, the more significant argument the pope was trying to make concerned what he saw as contrasting accounts of the relation between faith and reason in Christianity and Islam – and, linked to that, differing views of the meaning of divine transcendence (Benedict XVI 2006: para 4). A vigorous but considered response emerged a month later in an ‘Open Letter’ to the pope from a range of leading Muslim clerics; this in turn led in the following year to the publication of
the influential document *A Common Word*, addressed by Muslim scholars to the pope and other Christian leaders (Horsfjord, in this volume).

While *Nostra Aetate* spoke in affirmative terms of Muslims’ worship of God, it mentioned neither the Qurʾān nor the figure of Muḥammad. In relation to these two key loci, there is a long and frequently acerbic history of disputation and polemic in both faiths. A related area of argumentation has been focused on the question of the status of Jesus as seen by Christians and Muslims respectively. On one level, this has continued unabated into the twenty-first century; apologists on both sides have relished the opportunity to engage in debates which effectively rehearse well-worn arguments and appeal to well-known proof texts. Indeed, the advent of the worldwide web and of social media have extended, sharpened and in some cases personalised the intensity of these disputes. Engagement in them has led some conservative Christians into an extensive knowledge of Islam – as seen, for example, in the website ‘Answering Islam’ (www.answering-islam.org), which, with the purpose of providing a historical and biblical response both to Islamic doctrines and to Muslim criticisms of Christianity, includes a vast range of material of a high degree of accuracy and reliability.

However, following the lead of Vatican II, official church statements on Islam in this century have generally steered clear of saying anything substantive about Muḥammad or the Qurʾān in terms of a Christian appraisal of either. On the one hand, there has been an understandable reluctance to reinvigorate the motifs of more or less criticism and disputation given both the combustible nature of Christian–Muslim relations in many places and the desire to build bridges to cooperation and friendship. On the other hand, it is not apparent, in terms of Christian theology, what appraisal can be offered in overall terms of claims to a revelatory event which postdates, and is at least to some extent aware of, the revelation in Jesus Christ, which Christians regard as final. Attempts have indeed been made to recognise Muḥammad within the categories of Christian prophecy, but these have not in general won a consensus of acceptance within the churches, and in any case they would not correspond to the category of ‘prophethood’ as understood in Islam. Likewise, efforts to define some kind of scriptural status for the Qurʾān in relation to the Christian canon have failed to convince and also would need to recognise the very different roles that the Bible and Qurʾān play in Christianity and Islam respectively. In terms of global appraisals of either the person or the book, then, the churches in the twenty-first century have generally maintained a continuity of silence with the insights of the twentieth century.

**Some new approaches**

Silence on an overall theological assessment of the Qurʾān does not imply a lack of engagement on the part of Christians with the scriptural and traditional sources of Islam. In fact, one of the striking developments recently between Christians and Muslims has been the growth in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning and related activities. Originating in the setting of Jewish–Christian relations, the ambit of Scriptural Reasoning was later extended to include Islamic sources and participants – and sometimes other faith traditions too. Comprising the studying together of scriptural texts by informed and committed readers, the aim of Scriptural Reasoning is to build a sense of collegiality rather than to secure a result of consensus; the exploration of difference is as much part of its rationale as the establishment of common ground. At the same time, the recognition of one another as addressed deeply and imperatively through scripture in itself subverts disparagement or distrust of one another – ‘In contrast to the reasoning underpinning the “clash of civilisations” thesis, SR endeavours to demonstrate that there is an intimate philosophical, cultural, and religious affinity between “Islam” and the Judeo-Christian “West”’ (Kepnes 2006: 35).
This dynamic was dramatically enacted in Doha, Qatar, in April 2003, where the second Building Bridges seminar was convened at the height of the American-led invasion of Iraq – Doha was also the base of the US Central Command for that operation. While fighting went on in Iraq, the Archbishop of Canterbury and his colleagues resisted pressure to use the seminar as an opportunity to issue statements about the conflict, stressing rather the importance of digging deep to lay long-term foundations for Christian–Muslim friendship. While the initial Lambeth seminar that launched the Building Bridges series (see http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/the-building-bridges-seminar) had adopted a thematic approach covering a number of issues, at Doha and in subsequent gatherings the emphasis has been placed rather on reading together and reflecting on passages from the Bible and the Qurʾān. The 2003 seminar was entitled ‘Scriptures in Dialogue’, and Building Bridges has gathered virtually every year since. A high degree of continuity of membership has fostered a strong sense of collegiality among participants. The approach taken owes much to Scriptural Reasoning, though at times the range of material read together has also been extended to include postscriptual writings from both Christian and Muslim traditions. Certainly, the scriptural underpinning of the seminars has meant that it has been difficult to avoid contentious issues insofar as these are raised or implied by the canonical deposits of either faith; in the presence of their respective scriptures, believers cannot attempt to limit their exchanges to generalities in ways that evade underlying challenges. Because of this robustness, the Building Bridges series can serve as a good paradigm for serious Christian–Muslim engagement at different levels, though it has proved in practice difficult to find ways of practically adapting its content for use in other settings.

Scriptural Reasoning and similar practices operate within a dialogical context, but of course dialogue is not the only mode of Christian engagement with Islam in the twenty-first century. Through much of the churches’ history, Islam has featured in the Christian consciousness primarily against the horizon of mission, and missiology and related themes too have seen some significant new developments in the Christian–Muslim arena. When dialogue between Christians and Muslims came to prominence in the later twentieth century, it was often perceived as an alternative to mission, and welcomed or decried as such. However, a growing body of both practice and reflection has sought to highlight the connections between the two while recognising also their distinctiveness. In Anglican documents, the beginning of this process can be seen in the 1988 Lambeth Conference document Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue. As the title implies, this commends dialogical engagement, yet the third section, ‘The Way of Sharing’, speaks of the importance of mutual witness and goes so far as to declare that: ‘Jews, Muslims and Christians have a common mission, they share a mission to the world that God’s name may be honoured: “Hallowed be your name”’ (ACC 1988: 305). Twenty years later, the 2008 Lambeth document on inter faith relations, Generous Love, is entirely cast in mission terms.

However, this recognition of a shared mission is not universal, of course, and endeavours by Christians to commend the Gospel to Muslims or by Muslims to invite Christians to Islam (daʿwa) have not infrequently generated friction between the communities. One concern in recent years has been for Christians and Muslims to work together, where possible, to find ways of limiting such damage through agreeing on a practical etiquette for commending their faith to one another – in 2009, for example, the Christian–Muslim Forum of England produced ‘Ethical guidelines for Christian and Muslim witness in Britain’, declaring: ‘As Christians and Muslims we are committed to working together for the common good. We recognise that both communities actively invite others to share their faith and acknowledge that all faiths have the same right to share their faith with others’ (Christian Muslim Forum, para 1). Such collegial approaches to mission issues are by no means possible everywhere, and in many cases acute issues of freedom of religion arise in relation to freedom to proselytise, the right to convert from Islam, the churches’
ability to withstand harassment or discrimination, and even the very survival of the Christian community. The churches’ thinking about and attitudes to Islam are increasingly taking on these concerns as central, particularly in relation to the ancient but endangered Christian presence in the Middle East.

In this growing work of advocacy, it is evident both that equal protection needs to be sought for all communities, rather than special pleading for co-religionists, and that globally it is Christians who are most widely affected by these issues. In seeking to address them, the churches are recognising that they need to make common cause with Muslims and people in other communities who share a concern for fairness and freedom. Beyond experiences of discrimination and persecution, for the witness of faithful Christians there always remains a possible vocation to martyrdom, a possibility actualised in our time for some in encounter with brutalising forces acting in the name of Islam. Such a martyrdom, in 1996, was of Christian de Chergé, prior of the monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria. Even in anticipation of possible martyrdom, he expressed his own appreciation of Islam in words which speak to the churches of our time: ‘I have always known that the God of Islam and the God of Jesus Christ do not make two’ (Salenson 2012: 203).

References


WCC (1976), ‘Planning meeting Aide-mémoire’, October, unpublished paper [WCC Archive File Box: 4612.029/1].

**Further reading**


