Islam probably began as a protest against Meccan polytheism and idolatry, with an early expression of its message being the statement contained in Sūra 112 of the Qurʾān that God is One, that He does not beget nor has been begotten, and that none is comparable to Him. There is thus a horror of polytheism and the idea of multiplicity in God on the one hand and on the other of the worship of anything other than God, either personal or physical.

It is for this reason that Muḥammad’s initial expectation seems to have been that the message which he was proclaiming was in essential continuity with that of earlier monotheistic religious communities such as the Jews and the Christians, so that until the year 624 of the Common Era the earliest Muslims prayed in the direction of Jerusalem.

This expectation was not necessarily fulfilled, however, particularly after the hijra/migration of the Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in 622 and the much greater contact between Muslims and Jews there. It was as a result of the deteriorating relations between these two communities, therefore, that the qibla/direction of prayer for Muslims was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca in 624. An article by Jacques Waardenburg, ‘Towards a periodisation of earliest Islam according to its relations with other religions’, traces the development of Muslim attitudes on this question through an examination of the Muslim community’s relations with, respectively, the Meccan polytheists, the Jews in Medina, and then the Christians in Arabia, leading to an analysis of the concepts of millat Ibrāhīm (community of Abraham) and dīn (religion) as they develop in the Qurʾān (Waardenburg 1981).

The Christian communities of Arabia were small and much more heavily concentrated on the boundaries of Arabia than in the Hijāz, which was obviously the crucial area for the establishment of the Muslim community. There were some Christians, however, in Mecca, with the Islamic tradition asserting that one, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, was one of the people in the city who reassured Muḥammad of the genuineness of his prophetic call, and also in Medina, where Muḥammad had within his own household a Coptic Christian concubine, Mariya, the mother of his only son, who, very significantly, was given the name Ibrāhīm (Osman 2005).

Larger Christian communities, however, existed in other parts of Arabia such as the town of Najrān to the south of Mecca and Medina. A delegation came to visit Muḥammad in Medina, probably around 628, and were permitted to pray in the mosque. In Muḥammad’s own lifetime the Muslim community also had significant contact with the Christian community of Axum,
modern Ethiopia, to which in 615 a group of Muslims travelled as refugees from persecution in Mecca (Goddard 2000: 19–24).

The extent of Muslim encounter with Christians became much greater in the period after the death of Muḥammad and the expansion of the Muslim community into the wider Middle East, particularly the Christian-majority provinces of Egypt and Syria, as well as Iraq and Iran; these latter provinces, even if majority Zoroastrian in religious make-up, also contained substantial Christian minorities. The Christian communities of the conquered area were not united, however, any more than they had been within the borders of Arabia, so a further complication in the development of Muslim thinking about Christianity was the very considerable internal diversity of the Christian communities which Muslims encountered, focused particularly on differences over the definition of Jesus’ nature as contained in the statements of the Council of Chalcedon, which had been formulated in 451 CE. Christian division on this question proved a source of ample ammunition for Muslim thinkers as they developed their theological arguments against Christianity.

The statements made in the Qurʾān about Jesus, Christians and the Injīl (Gospel) became elaborated in this new context of a relatively small Arab Muslim elite ruling over either a Christian majority, in Egypt and Syria, or a substantial Christian minority, in Iraq or Iran, sometimes more irenically and positively but sometimes much more negatively and polemically. The extent of specifically theological interaction between the Christian and Muslim populations is not always clear, but, as the work of Abdelmajid Charfi has shown, the social context of whatever interaction there was should definitely be kept in mind because, on the one hand, Christians were sometimes useful as bearers of knowledge who brought very practical benefits in such fields as philosophy and medicine, yet on the other the innate Muslim suspicion, not to say horror, of polytheism and idolatry continued to animate considerably more antagonistic attitudes towards Christian belief (Charfi 1994). Jewish influence on these points should not be forgotten, given that Iraq was one of the leading centres of Judaism at this time, and Jewish suspicion of such ideas as Incarnation and Trinity, for very much the same kind of reasons as Muslim attitudes, may have been brought over into the developing intellectual tradition of Islamic thought either through the medium of Jewish converts to Islam, of whom there were many, or through discussion and debate between Jewish and Muslim thinkers (Lazarus-Yafeh 1996).

A very large number of texts were therefore produced by Muslim writers in the classical period of Islam arguing against core Christian beliefs, including the conviction that Jesus had been crucified. This belief was problematic, on the one hand, because it seemed to suggest prophetic weakness and failure, and on the other because any idea of redemption, suffering on behalf of another, was seen as a contradiction of individual responsibility before God. Alongside this tradition, however, was another which continued to respect and even in some sense venerate (though still not ‘worship’) the human figure of Jesus, and this was particularly influential among Sufi Muslims, whose mystical traditions had, in some ways and to some extent, been formed by Christian influences, including monastic ones. A very wide variety of Muslim attitudes towards Christian beliefs was therefore evident in this period, and the different attitudes were formed not only by theological perspectives but also by the practical relationship with Christian communities, with all the messy realities of identity and power which this inevitably involved.

Internal theological disputes within the Muslim community, on such themes as free will and predestination and the relationship between revelation and reason, sometimes drew on earlier Christian (and Jewish) reflection on these same questions, with the ideas of an important figure such as John of Damascus (d. c. 750), who lived under the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century, possibly exerting influence on some of the different schools of thought which evolved
on these questions in ʿAbbasid Baghdad during the ninth century. The influence of Christian churches in various provinces of the Islamic Empire seems also to have been a factor in the development of the different schools of Islamic thought, and this was, in turn, a factor in the differing speeds of conversion to Islam in parts of the empire. This thus explains how Christians probably remained a numerical majority in some provinces for many centuries but in others for a considerably shorter amount of time. On a very practical level the different schools of law, both Sunnī and Shīʿī, evolved their own particular set of prescriptions for everyday dealings with Christians, including such matters as intermarriage and conversion, and these were again significantly different on some of these questions.

One prominent theme of internal Muslim theological discussion focused on the questions of the names and attributes of God. The Qurʾān itself listed 112 of the former, and different theological thinkers devoted great efforts to drawing up lists of the latter. Christian thinkers, in turn, often tried to argue that the three Persons of the Trinity could perhaps be thought of, or be analogous to, some of the attributes of God, but the Muslim response tended to be that to speak of three Persons was, on the one hand, two too many, involving necessarily a compromise of true and authentic monotheism, and yet on the other hand was perhaps too few, since if a list of the attributes of God was being compiled, why stop at three (Wolfson 1976: 304–54; Burrell and Daher 1992: 149–62)?

In all of these discussions the influence of Judaism should also not be forgotten, since while Christianity drew heavily on Jewish practice, in both temple and synagogue, for its patterns of worship, Islam drew on Judaism rather for some of its theology, particularly the suspicion of Incarnation and Trinity, as well as for its emphasis on the centrality of law and on its style of religious leadership, with the scholars of law (as opposed to priestly figures) occupying the central role in this area. For its worship, by contrast, with prostration as its central feature, Islam probably drew on Christian, particularly monastic, precedents.

The two works of the ninth-century thinker Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq on the Trinity and Incarnation serve as good exemplars of Muslim polemical writing on these themes in the classical period and may be taken as broadly representative of this tradition despite the author's somewhat idiosyncratic views on some other aspects of Islamic thought. From a slightly later period, the writings of Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) serve as an outstanding example of a rather different polemical tradition which focuses on the historical corruption of Christian belief (including about the crucifixion) and practice over the course of the centuries. Towards the end of the medieval period the works of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) provide another powerful summary of Muslim arguments against Christian beliefs. All of these works are now available in excellent critical editions and translations, respectively by David Thomas, Gabriel Said Reynolds and Thomas Michel (Thomas 1992, 2002; Reynolds 2004; Reynolds and Samir 2010; Michel 1984).

More irenical accounts of Christianity can be found, for example, in the collection of Muslim texts about Jesus brought together in David Ford and Michael Higton's anthology of texts about Jesus across the centuries, which include texts from the Qurʾān, the Ḥadīth, al-Hujwīrī and al-Ghazālī (pp. 151–4), Saʿdī (pp. 162–3) and al-Bayḍāwī (pp. 171–172), a selection of texts made with the assistance of Tarīf Khalidi (Ford and Higton 2002). Far more sympathetic overall accounts of Christianity can be found in the writings of thinkers such as al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 897 or after), al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), the tenth-century group of thinkers known as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (Brethren of Purity), whose 44th letter in particular is a remarkable account of Jesus’ life and work, and al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) (Goddard 1996: 17–26).

Antagonism towards Christian beliefs did not necessarily mean that Muslim thinkers argued that Christians and others would be excluded from the presence of God in the afterlife, however, with two very interesting recent works by Mohammad Hassan Khalil arguing very powerfully
that such important and influential thinkers as al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya and Rashīd Riḍā are all, to use a modern Christian-originated term, ‘inclusivists’; in other words, they all hold that God’s mercy will ultimately triumph over his desire to punish unbelievers, so that if not all, then at least most, will be spared eternal damnation (Khalil 2012). The slightly later volume edited by Khalil contains discussions by a number of contemporary scholars on the same question, ranging over the whole history and geography of the Islamic tradition from the Qur’ān to present-day Iran and Indonesia. It is made very clear that even if the overwhelming consensus of Islamic thought is that while Christians and others are in a very significant sense wrong in what they believe, this does not necessarily exclude them eternally from God’s presence (Khalil 2013).

There is thus an ebb and flow in Muslim thinking about Christian beliefs, with regional and linguistic diversity important factors in explaining the survival of Christian communities in some parts of the Islamic world, for example the Assyrians in northern Iraq, at least until the establishment of so-called Islamic State in the twenty-first century. There are also significant differences between Greek and Syriac-speaking Christians and Latin-speaking communities; the latter disappeared relatively quickly from North Africa for a very specific set of reasons but have a significantly different history in Muslim Spain. Two eras of relatively positive Christian–Muslim interaction were ninth-century Baghdad under Muslim rule, the age of the Dār al-ḥikma (House of wisdom) with its programme of translation of ancient texts from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, and then twelfth-century Toledo under Christian rule, with in turn its programme of translation from Arabic into Latin. Scholars travelled to Spain in that period from all parts of Europe, including Scotland, in order to get the benefit of the ‘Arabic learning’, which was then disseminated throughout Europe through the new institution of the university.

The period between roughly 1000 and 1500 was a period of considerable upheaval within the world of Islam, both internally in the sense of the rise and fall of many different dynasties (Seljuks, Ayyūbids and Mamluks) and also externally in the form of irruptions by external powers, whether from the West (the Crusaders) or from the East (Mongols and Timurids). The reaction of local Christian communities to these developments varied hugely, with some, such as the Maronites, seeming to welcome and collaborate with the Crusaders, and others to the East seeming to welcome the invaders from Central Asia as deliverers. These attitudes had obvious risks and relate much more to political than to specifically theological attitudes, though the latter could be utilised in the political arena.

From around the year 1500 the political situation in the World of Islam stabilised, with the three great states of the Early Modern period, the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal, becoming firmly established at around that date. In the Sunnī Ottoman Empire, the situation for at least some Christians was relatively stable and good, with the percentage of Jews and Christians within the population as a whole growing significantly, as has been shown by the French demographers Courbage and Fargues. In particular parts of the empire, however, significantly in south-eastern Europe on the military frontier with European powers, the situation was rather different, with a greater measure of mutual suspicion and antagonism between the religious communities. It should not be forgotten, however, that alongside this inter-religious confrontation, the extent of tension and conflict within each of the two religious communities, for example between Austria and Russia among the European powers, was also considerable.

Within the Shiʿī Safavid Empire there was perhaps a more hostile attitude towards Christianity, based to a large extent on the traditionally more antagonistic attitude of Shiʿīs towards, for example, intermarriage with Christians. Some Christian communities such as the Armenians were useful for their skills in silk-weaving, so they were encouraged to move from Julfa in Armenia to the Safavid capital Isfahan, but otherwise there was strong suspicion of Christianity. Further to the east in South Asia Christianity had never been numerically strong in the Mughal Empire,
with the most significant Christian communities in India in the south, beyond the boundaries of Mughal rule, but in the age of European commercial and political expansion Christianity became a pawn in the game of diplomacy for gain in business and trade. It was as an element in this process that Portuguese Jesuit missionaries were invited to the court of the Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) and, as part of the discussions there, that at one stage the possibility was seriously entertained of the emperor’s son Jahāṅgīr being baptised (Goddard 2000: 113–23).

Attitudes towards Christian beliefs therefore sometimes varied depending on the state of relations with the different Christian powers of Europe, and beginning in the eighteenth century the balance of power between the three major Muslim empires and the various European powers began to change significantly. The latter in this period sometimes appeared to draw a very thin line between their economic and political ambitions on the one hand and their religious and cultural missions on the other. Among Protestant thinkers the Scot Sir William Muir is significant, though of course never fully representative, and among Roman Catholics the French Cardinal Charles Lavigerie certainly identified very closely the civilising mission of France and the religious mission of the Missionaries of Africa (the White Fathers), an order which he founded (Goddard 2000: 123–7).

Among nineteenth-century Muslim thinkers, two, Sayyid Ahmad Khan in British India and Muḥammad ʿAbduh in Egypt, devoted a significant amount of time and energy to thinking and writing about Christianity, the former trying to make positive use of some of the new insights of biblical criticism to help Muslims understand better not only the Bible but also the Qurʾān, and the latter displaying a deeper knowledge of Christian history than many other Muslim writers. One of ʿAbduh’s leading intellectual followers, however, Rashīd Riḍā, appeared to move Muslim thinking back towards a significantly more antagonistic approach (Troll 1978; Baljon 1964; Ayoub 1974; Wood 2008; Ryad 2008).

The second half of the twentieth century saw a further degree of rethinking among Muslims about Christian belief, perhaps corresponding once again to the changing balance of power between the Western and Islamic worlds. As has already been seen, Muslim attitudes towards Christianity are not necessarily the same as Muslim attitudes towards Jesus, and just as Jewish attitudes towards the historical figure of Jesus have been subjected in some cases to quite radical rethinking and revision (for example, through the writings of Pinchas Lapide), so too Muslim attitudes have not necessarily stood still, as can be seen in the writings of the Egyptian Muhammad Kamel Hussein and the Indian Sayyid Vahidduddin. Hussein’s historical novel City of wrong, which centres on the crucifixion of Jesus, is justly regarded as breaking significant new ground not only as an imaginative work but also as an attempt, through the study of human motivation, to show that the idea of a fundamentally good person proving so provocative in some of his pronouncements that his hearers may wish to do away with him is not necessarily so extraordinary, while Vahidduddin’s short article entitled ‘What Christ means to me’ serves as a fine twentieth-century example of the very positive significance and meaning which the person of Christ can bear for a Muslim thinker (Kamel Hussein 1994; Vahidduddin 1986; Goddard 1998: 215–22). Later in the twentieth century, the writings of the Lebanese Shiʿī Mahmoud Ayoub, the Algerian ‘Ali Merad, the Iranian Shiʿī Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the Indian–Pakistani Fazlur Rahman all break significantly new ground with regard to Muslim thinking about different aspects of Christian belief (Omar 2007; Merad 1968; Nasr 1986; Rahman 1980; Goddard 1998: 222–52).

This trend has continued into the twenty-first century, with further remarkable examples of radical rethinking of traditional Muslim attitudes. Some of the work of Mona Siddiqui breaks new ground in its readiness actually to ask Christian friends what the idea of crucifixion and the symbol of the cross mean to them, with some striking comments on their responses (Siddiqui 2013: 224–38, esp. 234–40).
Some Muslim attitudes towards Christianity in general, and Christian beliefs in particular, thus do seem to be changing, and this change is encapsulated perhaps most powerfully in the *Common Word* initiative, the open letter written by Muslim intellectuals to Christian leaders. While this does not focus primarily on Christian beliefs, it does enshrine within its structure the two core commands of Christianity, to love God and to love your neighbour. There is, of course, a doctrinal aspect to this, particularly in the first affirmation, so the document does include a certain amount of discussion of Christian beliefs and does so in a relatively irenical manner (*A Common Word* 2007).

This is not a completely new development, however, since there have in the past been comparatively irenical trends of thinking alongside the more polemical and antagonistic trends in many periods of Islamic history. As in past centuries, therefore, a crucial factor affecting, or even determining, the relative influence of these two traditions is almost certainly the wider context of the state of the relationship between what can be called the Christian and the Islamic worlds. This is becoming more complex in the twenty-first century as a result of the increasing growth of secular thought in the West, to the extent that there is a vigorous debate about the accuracy of calling this geopolitical unit Christian any longer. There is considerable diversity in the West, though this is also the case in the world of Islam. In at least some parts of the West, perhaps notably the United States, Christianity remains a vigorous and active political force, if not always on the basis of a deep understanding of the principles of the Christian faith (this is well illustrated by the Religious Literacy movement, which highlights the extent of religious ignorance even among active practitioners of religion in the US; see Prothero 2007: 34–42, 293–8). On the other side of the Atlantic, the Vatican, even though a small state, is an explicitly Christian one, with a power and influence that far exceeds its size.

Muslim attitudes towards Christian beliefs in the twenty-first century are no more immune from the surrounding socio-political and economic context than they have been in previous centuries. It is very important, therefore, to be aware of the significant differences between international, intercultural and interreligious dialogues, depending on whether their activities are being organised by foreign ministries, the cultural agencies of different national organisations such as the British Council or specifically religious institutions such as the Vatican. Dialogues, in other words, can be either more ethical and practical or more doctrinal and belief-oriented, with a centre such as the King Abdullah International Centre for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue (www.kaiciid.org/) having both the intercultural and interreligious dimensions explicitly included in its title, and also the intergovernmental dimension acknowledged in the various texts which elaborate its philosophy and programmes.

One interesting attempt to establish a clear connection between the two domains of the ethical and doctrinal came in the work of Isma’il al-Faruqi, particularly his study *Christian ethics*, in which he argues that it is in this particular domain that Christianity has manifested its historical corruption most clearly, through the introduction of the concept of ‘peccatism’, a kind of unhealthy obsession with ‘original sin’ which, he argues, cannot be found in the teachings of Jesus himself. The well-established Muslim argument about the historical corruption of Christianity over the course of the centuries is thus applied in a slightly different domain, since ‘peccatism’ necessitates ‘saviourism’, the idea that human beings need redemption, and this too, in al-Faruqi’s view, is a further Christian error.

Traditional Muslim polemical arguments against Christianity have proved remarkably persistent on a popular level in the pamphlets and video recordings of the South African preacher Ahmed Deedat, still circulating widely years after his death. The title of one of these, ‘Crucifixion or cruci-fiction?’, seems calculated to be particularly offensive to Christians. In a masterpiece of understatement, Deedat’s work as a whole has been described by Kate Zebiri as ‘undeniably
Inauspicious for Muslim–Christian relations’ (Zebiri 1997: 46). It is heavily reliant on some of the polemical literature which came out of British India, also in response to rather aggressive missionary comment on different aspects of Islam, and which is associated with the name of Rahmatallah al-Kairanawi. Other South African Muslims such as Farid Esack have bitterly condemned Deedat’s whole approach, however, and have produced their own very different style of comment on to Christian belief and practice and the Muslim response to it (Deedat n.d.; Powell 1993; Esack 1997).

In summary, therefore, the traditional animus on the part of some Muslims towards core Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation, the Trinity and the crucifixion of Jesus is still very much alive and kicking. Alongside this, however, there is also a significant new trend which displays the readiness to re-examine and rethink these traditions, with a particularly interesting forthcoming example of this likely to be Shabbir Akhtar’s study of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, which is advertised as drawing significant lessons from the epistle for Muslims as well as for Christians and Jews.

Muslim attitudes towards Christian beliefs vary hugely today, as they have in the past, with a particularly demoralising example of the more negative kind provided by a report in The Week for 23 April 2015, which stated that 15 Muslim migrants had been arrested in Sicily for allegedly throwing 12 Christian passengers overboard during a sea crossing from Libya to seek refuge in Europe. This was after their rubber dinghy sprang a leak and a Nigerian Christian started to pray. The Muslims allegedly warned him to stop, saying ‘Here, we only pray to Allah’, and when he refused the 12 Christians were thrown overboard and drowned. This attitude, however, is in part a reaction to some very polemical Christian literature, particularly the infamous Who is this Allah, published under a pseudonym in Nigeria 25 years ago (Moshay 1990; see Hock 2003: 50–1). Everyone, both Christian and Muslim, needs to do better than this.

References

Muslims and Christian beliefs


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Further reading


