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David Thomas

Major Concepts in Muslim–Christian Encounters

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Sandra Toenies Keating
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In recent years, political events have catapulted the relationship between Islam and Christianity into the spotlight, raising questions about the dynamics that have led to the variety of interactions that exist between the two religious communities today. There is a great desire to find resources in both religions to overcome current tensions, and in consequence scholars have begun to examine with new eyes the ways in which various ideas and concepts present at the origins of Islam developed through the subsequent 14 centuries. The past shapes the world in which we live, and historical events and ideas lie at the foundations of contemporary communal identities. Without a clearer understanding of the seeds of longstanding conflict and their attendant events and ideas, little progress will be made in resolving tensions or in cultivating communities that can thrive.

It is impossible to summarise the diverse and complex nature of Muslim–Christian encounters in any way that does justice fully to the unique relationships that have evolved between these two communities in nearly every part of the globe. Nonetheless, one can identify some perennial theological questions at play, sometimes explicitly, often implicitly, in Muslim–Christian encounters: Who is God? What is God’s relationship to creation? How can human beings know God and God’s will? How should human beings respond to this knowledge? These questions convey concern for both the theoretical and the practical, the first being the foundation for the second. They are also persistent, having their roots in the universal contemplation of the human condition and the place of the individual in society. At the time of the rise of Islam, Jewish and Christian communities already had deep traditions exploring these themes, even forming distinct and often competing sects. The original movement that becomes established as the religion of Islam builds on the religious traditions from which it emerges, simultaneously contributing its own unique cosmological and theological perspective that ultimately puts it in tension with those original traditions. With such complexity, it is difficult to identify concepts and their doctrinal formulation found in every instance of encounter between Muslims and Christians. Even so, certain recurring themes surface as one takes the long view of relations between the two communities. This brief article will outline some general concepts that have influenced and come to characterise encounters between the two religious groups. Most significantly, one can identify an ongoing search to understand the nature of continuity and difference between Islam and Christianity that has produced concepts defining this relationship, such as heresy, dhimma, taḥríf, and coexistence. These have not been present everywhere and at all times but have had an undeniable impact on the historical development of the relationships that have evolved worldwide.

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MAJOR CONCEPTS IN MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTERS

Sandra Toenies Keating
Continuity and critique

The traditional account of the origins of the Islamic community as a band of faithful followers of Allāh’s Messenger Muḥammad has been relatively unquestioned because of its supposed nearness to the events it records. Recent scholarship, however, has raised some significant doubts about the accuracy of its description of the intentions of the early community and the origins and codification of the Qurʾān. Current readings of the tradition are more (e.g. Ohlig and Puin 2010) or less (Donner 2012) controversial, but there is no doubting that new evidence and the reinterpretation of past accounts have radically changed our understanding of the history of relations between Muslims and Christians, and continuing scholarship will most likely reshape the ways we think of Islamic origins and their relationship to Christianity.

Nonetheless, one can say with some confidence that the history of Muslim–Christian encounters is characterised by the desire to establish the nature of the theological commonality and difference between the two communities and to understand their implications. Most significantly for our interests here is how the person known as Muḥammad perceived the relationship between his own religious experiences and the teachings of the other monotheistic communities of the Ḥijāz. What led him and his followers to initiate a new religious movement that eventually became the second largest religious community in the world?

Taken as a whole, one can identify two trajectories in the earliest evidence surrounding the aim of Muḥammad and his followers. These are intertwined but contradictory, resulting in many paradoxical consequences. First, it is almost certain that Muḥammad initially saw that his mission from God was to bring to the Arabic-speaking polytheists of his world the same message that had been given to other religious communities. The Qurʾān repeatedly emphasises that he is a rasūl, a messenger (Q 33:40, 3:144), who brings the same message that previous prophets have received (Q 42:13). At the heart of this mission is the belief that God’s justice requires that all human beings receive a ‘copy’ of the clear book by which all will be judged on the Last Day (Q 3:7, 5:15). Only if all human beings have the possibility of knowing what will be expected at the time of judgment can God judge justly. Thus, out of mercy and compassion God has sent a copy of the book containing His commands to all peoples, beginning with Adam, through many prophets and messengers (some of whom are listed in the Qurʾān), with the command to submit to Him alone and not worship any beside Him (Q 4:36, 48). The Qurʾān draws attention to the examples of Abraham (Q 2:131), Moses (Q 19:51–3) and Jesus (Q 4:171), among others, who submitted themselves wholly to God, just as Muḥammad calls his contemporaries to do now (Q 2:136).

It may be, as Donner suggests, that Muḥammad’s original motivation was to create a kind of ecumenical community of ‘believers’ (muʾminūn) based on a common belief in one God that included Jews, Christians and other monotheistic groups to which now the polytheistic Arabs were called to return. The claim to descent from Abraham through his first son, Ishmael (the Qurʾān does not assert a physical relationship but implies a spiritual one through common prophethood, Q 2:136; 3:84; 4:163; 6:84), as well as to God’s extension of the Covenant to Muḥammad’s followers (e.g. Q 6:162) was clearly understood by the first Muslims as incorporating Arabic speakers into a wider community of peoples who had received a revelation each in their own language from God through His messengers. Indeed, other monotheists are commonly referred to in the Qurʾān as ‘People of the Book (Scriptures)’, (Aḥl al-Kitāb), as a way of underscoring the relationship between Muḥammad and his followers and Jews and Christians. Among the commonalities of the People of the Book the Qurʾān identifies are belief in the one God, the Day of Judgment, angels and revelation, and the requirement to practise charity, regular prayer and patience (Q 2:177 and others). The Qurʾān consistently reminds its hearers that these beliefs and practices will be required of every individual person on the Last Day, regardless of
one's familial or communal associations (e.g. Q 3:55; 99:6–8), and emphasises that this is the same message that was heard at the origins of the human race.

As time progressed, Muḥammad's conflicts with members of other established monotheistic communities and rising awareness of differences in beliefs and teachings among them apparently led to his critique of them. His call comes to be one of absolute submission to the one God who is unlike anything known to creatures (Q 42:11) and has now been revealed through himself, the Seal of the Prophets (Q 33:40). The qurʾānic critique of those monotheists who do not accept Muhammad's message is not systematic, but it is consistent, ultimately establishing lines of delineation between those who submit to the message (muslimūn) and those who do not. It is at least two centuries before the full implications of these boundaries begin to have legal consequences; nonetheless, the seeds of separation are clearly present in Muḥammad's message.

The Qurʾān itself focuses primarily on the nature of the deviations of Jewish and Christian doctrine and practice from the true message, but it also offers some explanations of how these aberrations have occurred. Regarding Christianity (the qurʾānic critique of Judaism is necessarily different, and we will not address it here), the primary concern is the teachings that identify Jesus as God incarnate and one of the Trinity. According to the Qurʾān, God does not have a son or become incarnated, nor can he be described in any real way using human concepts and words. Christians, of course, based their beliefs on the account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in fulfilment of the messianic prophecies found in the Bible. In the centuries preceding the rise of Islam, community-dividing controversies over how best to express these beliefs had resulted in complex (and for the average person, quite confusing!) schisms in the church. These ruptures between Christians and Jews, and among Christians themselves, are the background against which the Qurʾān, as well as subsequent interactions among these communities, must be understood (Griffith 2012; Levy-Rubin 2011). To account for deviations between the messages to Muḥammad and what was preserved in Jewish and Christian scriptures, the Qurʾān speaks of different forms of alteration to these scriptures, a concept later defined as tahriʿ (corruption). This comes to be understood by Muslim scholars as both intentional and unintentional misunderstanding, misinterpretation, forgetting, or actual substitution of words or concepts in the original revelation. Although a systematic understanding of the teaching does not appear until later, as early as the mid-eighth century Christians such as John of Damascus (d. 749) were already responding to the accusation in the late Umayyad period (Keating 2005, 2010).

A problem that remains controversial is whether references to Christian and Jewish teachings in the Qurʾān are directed at heterodox groups and thus are not critiques of mainstream communities. The complication is that often the qurʾānic references do not describe the beliefs of known communities, either orthodox or heterodox. For example, the Qurʾān refers to Jesus asserting on the Last Day that he did not tell anyone to worship himself and his mother as gods beside Allāh (Q 5:116), yet no religious community holding such a doctrine has been satisfactorily identified to date. This has led both Muslims and Christians, especially in the modern era, to dismiss the critique as applying to groups no longer in existence. Among scholars today, however, there is a growing consensus that the qurʾānic censure of Christians and Jews should be regarded as a polemical admonition and not as an attempt to reproduce actual beliefs of these communities (Griffith 2012, 2013) The People of the Book are enjoined not to exceed the limits of their religion or commit other excesses that deviate from revealed truth (Q 4:171; 5:77), whether they are explicitly described in the Qurʾān or not.

Thus, the Qurʾān is understood by Muslims to have been sent down as a sign of God's mercy and a warning to all who have strayed from the Straight Path, including monotheists who follow corrupted teachings. There is clear evidence that Muḥammad and his followers expected that his message calling for a return to strict monotheistic belief would be compelling not only to
the polytheists of the Arabian Peninsula but also to Christians and Jews (Donner 2012), though neither of these communities recognised him as ‘one of their own’, and over time the differences between their scriptures and his message became more and more apparent. The result was that the Qurʾān and the actions of the early Muslim community exemplify a high degree of ambiguity in their engagement with other monotheists – the recognition of common belief in one God who is Creator of all being, who sent prophets and messengers throughout history and who will judge all human beings according to their actions at the end of time puts Jews and Christians in a place of privilege, while simultaneously, the qurʾanic concern that these communities deviate from Muḥammad’s message demands reform and also submission to the new revelation. A significant expression of this concept is found in the tradition of the laylat al-mirʾāj, which describes Muḥammad’s single Night Journey first to the Far Mosque (isrāʾ) and then his ascension through the seven heavens (miʿrāj). During his ascension, Muḥammad meets Adam, Jesus, John the Baptist, Joseph, Idris, Aaron, Moses and finally Abraham, all of whom acknowledge him as a brother and a prophet. The incident is accepted as being alluded to in Q 17:1 and is recounted in great detail in several Ḥadīths, most extensively in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, vol. 4, book 54:429 and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, book 1:309. The Journey is described as both a physical and spiritual transportation that affirms Muḥammad’s connection to God’s other chosen messengers, his purity and worthiness, and his position as the Seal of the Prophets who is most closely associated with Abraham. The acknowledgement by each of the ‘prophets’ honoured in Judaism and Christianity reasserts the qurʾanic message that it is intended for all monotheists as well as polytheists (Vuckovic 2013).

Law and social order

Within the first two centuries after Muḥammad, the Muslim community grew in power and influence, spreading throughout the Mediterranean world and into southern Europe. The peace that ensued following the conquest resulted in a stabilisation of the empire and allowed the codification of theological, political and legal methods and policies. During this time, a kind of supersessionism evolved based on qurʾanic principles and Muḥammad’s own practice (as expressed in the collections of Ḥadīths that were being gathered in the early ‘Abbasid period) in which Judaism and Christianity were subordinated to the religion of the ruling people. The rise of an Islamic ruling class also brought with it particular demands for putting the principles expressed in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth into practice.

One of the most important themes of the revelation of the Qurʾān, along with worship of the one God and recognition of the long line of messengers who had come before Muḥammad, was the belief in a final judgment of all human beings and an emphasis on divine justice. The Qurʾān teaches that God is merciful and beneficent but demands adherence to the Straight Path. Unlike the polytheistic religions of Arabia before the coming of Islam, which tended to emphasise the arbitrary nature of fate, Muḥammad’s message claimed that God’s clear revelation established the rules by which each individual would be measured on the Last Day (Q 75; 89:21–30; 99:6–8, etc.). What happens to each person is not random, nor is it determined by fate. Rather, the Qurʾān emphasises the ability of individuals to ‘enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allāh’ (Q 3:110). God’s justice and mercy are guaranteed by the revelation, establishing a clear relationship between Creator and creature, Divinity and humanity, whereby God sends down through prophets what is necessary in order to receive reward and avoid punishment on the Last Day.

In light of this concern, Islamic society was structured in a manner that protected the Straight Path, supported by laws and regulations based on the Qurʾān, the ṣunna (practice) of Muḥammad and a limited use of reason and local custom. Šarīʿa (path), as it comes to be called, intends to
create a society in which it is easy to fulfil the requirements set out for Muslims and to avoid what is forbidden. Unlike many other conceptions of religiously based law, shari’a emphasises the capability of human beings to fulfil God’s commands, placing little emphasis on the concepts of pervasive sin, grace, forgiveness and salvation (as one finds especially in Christianity). Instead, more weight is placed on the importance of controlling temptations within the umma (the wider Islamic society) which might lead individuals astray.

This latter point was particularly important with regard to the position of non-Muslims. While polytheists generally faced forced conversion and absorption, the continuity of Islam with the ‘People of the Book’ recognised in the Qurʾān formed the basis for the particular place Jews and Christians were given in Muslim-majority lands. The Qurʾān is understood by the majority of Muslims to state that there can be ‘no compulsion in religion’ (Q 2:256), since the truth has now been clearly revealed. Likewise, Sūra 109 states that the unbelievers will not believe what believers hold and so should be left to their own religions – God will decide their punishment on the Last Day. While Christians and Jews were not identified as unbelievers (kāfirūn), it was clear that they belonged to a third category, having received a ‘book’ but now following religions that were partially in error. This group came to be known as the Ahl al-dhimma. According to the various legal schools that were established in the ninth and tenth centuries, the position of dhimmī (someone having a protected, albeit restricted station in society based on religious adherence) became a widely recognised status wherever shari’a was practised. Dhimmīs were prohibited from encouraging conversions away from Islam, dhimmī males could not marry Muslim females (although Muslim men could marry dhimmī women) and a special tax called the jizya that functioned as a sort of tribute was levied on them in turn for protection as recognised communities. At certain times and places various other rules and regulations concerning open practice of religion, property ownership and general relations between Muslims and dhimmīs were more or less enforced, depending on the inclinations of local rulers. Consequently, the experience of Christians and Jews living under Islamic rule over the centuries was mixed – at times they thrived and grew wealthy, at times they suffered and were driven out of their lands or populations were absorbed through attrition (Emon 2014; Friedmann 2003; Tritton 1930).

For Christians living under Islamic rule, the encounter with Muslims has usually been characterised by subordination and sometimes vulnerability. This was based on the theological assumption that, although the same message was sent to Christians as came to Muhammad, errors that corrupted that message made Christianity in need of the correction brought by the Qurʾān. This remains a topic of contention.

The European encounter with Islam

Whereas the experience of Eastern Christians with Muslims was direct and personal, and therefore complex, until the modern period Europeans generally encountered Islam in either the library or on the battlefield. Muslims were known through their conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century, and the rapid expansion of Muslim control of the Middle East was the stuff of legends. In 1095, when Europeans entered into conflict to aid the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos in his exhausting defence against Muslim incursions, they had little accurate knowledge of the religion or the peoples whom they were fighting. It was around this time that the extremely influential Old French epic The Song of Roland began to circulate. The poem is based on the Battle of Roncesvalls (778), weaving a fictional account of Charlemagne and his armies as they engage a formidable Muslim force. Muslims are represented in the poem in a variety of deceitful and honourable characters, and the portrayal of Islam is highly inaccurate, characterising it as polytheistic and immoral.
It was not until later that European scholars such as Robert of Ketton (d. 1160) began to translate Arabic texts, including the Qurʾān, into Latin, bringing more accurate knowledge of Islam (Burman 2009). But these scholars were not simply interested in understanding Islam – they were concerned for the threat it presented to Christianity, and so they composed many of their writings as polemics aimed at discrediting the religion (Tolan 1998). In the following centuries, numerous theologians addressed the challenge of Islam, including many Dominicans and Franciscans, who were interested in bringing Muslims to Christianity. Among the best known of these are the mission of Francis of Assisi to the Ayyūbid Sultan al-Kāmil in 1219 and Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa contra gentiles* (c. 1270), an apologetic work that was probably intended to provide a defence against Jewish and Muslim challenges to Christianity using the Aristotelian categories that were employed by theologians of those religions.

Two questions that run implicitly through premodern European writings concerning Islam are: What is the relationship of these beliefs to Christianity, and how should Muslims be regarded? Scholars were aware that Muslims believed in the one God of Abraham and Moses and held Jesus and Mary in high esteem, yet they did not accept the existence of original sin or the need for salvation or grace. Further, they waged constant war against Christendom, apparently in the name of their Prophet. Whereas a progressive (with some overlap) development in Christian responses to Islam in the East can be identified, beginning with Saracens portrayed first as invaders acting as a divine scourge though not as a spiritual threat, second as harbingers of the Antichrist with spiritual implications, third as heretics and fourth necessitating a carefully articulated theological response (Tolan 2012), these reactions are less clearly delineated in the European context. This phenomenon is generally the consequence of the way information about Islam arrived in Europe. Even though some direct knowledge was gained by scholars travelling and working in al-Andalus (southern Spain), the availability of such works as the *Apologety of al-Kindī*, which represents a much earlier encounter with Muslims, had long-lasting effects. This text was among those translated from Arabic into Latin as a part of the Toledan collection and used by Peter the Venerable (Tolan, 1998). Probably composed at the beginning of the ninth century near or in Baghdad, the *Apologety* aims both to discredit Islam with questions about its origins and to defend the integrity of Christian doctrine. It is unique in its extensive description of the collection of the Qurʾān and its account of the tensions within the early Muslim community. Scholars such as Peter saw this as confirmation of the threat of the spread of Islam and fought it on every front.

Many of those who treated Islam as a heresy also followed the thought of the late Patristic theologian John of Damascus (d. c. 749). John had had first-hand experience of Islam through his own and his family’s close association with the caliphal court in Damascus. He recognised that Muslims held many beliefs in common with Christians – worship of a single Creator God, veneration of Jesus as a prophet and esteem for his mother Mary, regular prayer and fasting. But he was highly critical of what he considered the sexual licentiousness allowed by Muslim practices, as well as the Qurʾānic rejection of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. John produced several influential writings that defended Christian teachings, including a justification of the veneration of icons as an acknowledgement of God’s incarnational nature, as well as a significant summary of heresies that concluded with a long chapter on Islam (Sahas 1972). His popularity in the West contributed to the characterization of Islam as a heresy and Muhammad as a particularly dangerous heresiarch. Perhaps most importantly, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) cited John extensively throughout his works and was quite interested in the challenge posed by Islam, as evidenced by his *Summa contra Gentiles*, written near the end of his life. Aquinas’ influence on European Christianity was enormous and implicitly informed attitudes towards Islam for centuries.

Although modern society has a certain allergy against the characterization of beliefs as ‘heresy’, the medieval recognition of another of religious group as heretical was an admission of
commonality that called for a specific type of engagement. For Christians such as Peter the Venerable it was inexplicable that Muslims could be aware of the teachings of Christianity but not accept them, and he responded with the harshest invective. Further, heretics were frequently treated much more severely than adherents of other religions out of fear that heresy would spread, causing division within the community and endangering the souls of those who had been entrusted to the Church by Christ (Sullivan 2002). The attractiveness of certain aspects of Islam (especially in the area of morality) was thought to be a threat to the cohesiveness of society and deemed even more dangerous than the Jews already present in many European cities (Daniel 2009).

The conflict between the Muslim East and Christian West persisted almost nonstop until Ottoman armies were finally halted following the siege of Vienna in 1683. After that, European powers reversed the trend, bringing most of the enormous Ottoman Empire under their influence and control in the following centuries. One of the most important consequences of this shift was that Muslims were no longer unified by practice of sharīʿa, as it was replaced in many places by the legal codes of the colonisers. Europeans, especially the British and French, regarded the Muslim societies they now governed as inferior and, although they allowed some religious and social autonomy in their colonies, political and legal equality were generally absent. This changed as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed tremendous upheaval worldwide. While the fault lines of the conflicts between Muslims and Christians altered radically, it was not until later in the twentieth century that relations between the religions began to shift.

Common search for peace and cooperation

In recent times, for a wide variety of reasons the dynamic of relations between Muslims and Christians has been greatly transformed. Not only has travel and communication made contact between the two communities common in a multitude of settings, the human ability for massive destruction has increased the urgency for settling disputes and conflicts when they break out. In the wake of the Second World War, Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) made concerted efforts to promote better relations with Muslims, many of whom lived in areas affected by the war and European colonisation. Among the myriad organisations involved in these activities, two of the most influential have been the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church in 1965 promulgated one of its most significant documents, Declaration on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions (Nostra aetate), which included a separate section addressing Muslims. This document went far in identifying elements that Catholics could regard with esteem in Islam and called Muslims and Catholics to leave past conflict behind and move towards a more fruitful relationship (Nostra aetate §3). Since the publication of this document, the Catholic Church has established numerous dialogues and working groups to examine many of the issues discussed earlier in order to come to deeper understandings of the tensions that have arisen over the centuries.

The World Council of Churches has also given serious attention to improving relations between Muslims and Christians worldwide. In 1992, it released a document entitled Issues in Christian–Muslim relations: ecumenical considerations, which calls for the exploration of issues of sharīʿa, missionary activity, accurate understandings of beliefs of the other, the importance of pluralist societies and a host of other topics. This was followed by a second document titled Striving together in dialogue: a Muslim–Christian call to reflection and action (2000), which takes stock of relations between the two communities, again identifying many of the same tensions examined earlier.

A significant shift in the character of relations between Muslims and Christians occurred in 2007 with the publication of A Common Word between us and you, an open letter from Muslim leaders to the pope and other Christian leaders affirming love of God and love of neighbour as

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common ground on which to establish better relations. The document was composed in the wake of controversial statements made by Pope Benedict XVI in a lecture at the University of Regensburg in 2006, in which he quoted a medieval text that was highly critical of Islam. Although *A Common Word* repeats many apologetic points found in traditional controversial literature, its desire to find shared elements between Muslims and Christians, as well as to articulate the views of Muslims who are engaged in improving relations between the two communities, is groundbreaking.

**Conclusion**

The long and complex history of relations between Muslims and Christians has been expressed in a wide variety of ways. One can certainly identify important concepts and themes that have shaped and influenced the manner in which each community has responded to the other, sometimes positively, often negatively. However, recent movements such as those detailed here exhibit a growing commitment among Muslims and Christians to overcome some of the past conflicts and tensions. This is a difficult task and one that can only be achieved with full knowledge of the obstacles that need to be addressed and the resources available to accomplish it. Only then can the peace that is the goal of both religions be realised.

**References**


Concepts in Muslim–Christian encounters


Further reading


