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The Eastern Churches and Islam

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Four things can be said about historic relations between Muslims and Christians: Eastern Christians were the first to encounter Islam as the Arabs expanded their sphere of influence into previously Christian territories; Muslims and Christians have generally (with some exceptions) lived side by side for centuries in relatively peaceful coexistence in the traditional lands of many of the Eastern Churches; the treatment of religious minorities in territories under Muslim rule and those under Christian control, as well as attitudes toward the religious other, have varied considerably by location and time period; and western Christians, with the exception of those who lived in Muslim Spain, had little direct and personal contact with Muslims or their religion prior to the Crusades and, in many places, for a number of centuries thereafter. These historical realities are not always fully acknowledged or appreciated in discussions about Muslim–Christian relations today, nor within the various dialogues that are increasingly taking place between Muslims and Christians in many locations around the globe. Eastern Christians and Muslims, in a general sense, have arguably experienced and responded in similar ways to the historical, political and sociological developments that have resulted from the rise of Western powers and the spread of Western ideas in the modern and late modern periods (Sharp 2012: 127–78). These experiences and perspectives can be compared and contrasted in useful ways with those of western Christians, as well as other non-Christian and nonreligious groups in modern western societies (Sharp 2014: 126–50). For all of these reasons, it is important to reflect upon the topic of the Eastern Churches and Islam, not only to have a better understanding of how Islam is an essential aspect of Eastern Christians’ historical past, present identity and future aspirations but also to open the possibility of discovering a more favourable paradigm for relations between western Christians (or even ‘the West’) and Islam than the negative and antagonistic one that has been so prevalent since the time of the Crusades.

Before going further, it is important to define the scope of this discussion and the way the terms ‘Eastern Churches’ and ‘Eastern Christians’ will be used. There are two primary groupings of Eastern Christians: the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Together they number approximately 300 million people scattered around the globe and are typically identified by their national groupings. Though the differences between the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches stem from disputes at the time of the Ecumenical Councils, in recent years at least their leading theologians have agreed that many of these matters were misunderstandings. Also, in general terms the Orthodox or Oriental Orthodox feel closer to each
The Eastern Churches and Islam

The Eastern Churches include the Greek Orthodox (in Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and the ancient patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem), the Russian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox and Georgian Orthodox, along with several smaller churches, particularly in Eastern Europe. Virtually all these churches have notable diaspora communities (from Greek διασπορά, ‘scattering’, ‘dispersion’) in the Americas, Europe and Australasia. The Oriental Orthodox Churches include the Armenian Orthodox (in Armenia and Lebanon), Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox (in Egypt) and Syrian Orthodox (in Syria and India), along with a number of diaspora communities around the world. This chapter will discuss relations between the Eastern Churches and Islam primarily in the region that was once part of the Ottoman Empire but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries formed into independent states with autocephalous (self-governing) Orthodox Churches, as well as Russia, which has by far Europe’s largest Muslim population (Hackett 2015). In many of these lands, the relationship between Christians and Muslims is long and deep, complicated by a number of internal and external factors and contextual variations from one country to the next. That said, there are certain generalisations that can be made specific to the modern period that came about as a result of the Great Western Transmutation (the rise of European power and subsequent world hegemony in international politics and commerce), which had ramifications for both Muslims and Christians in the region and around the globe (Hodgson 1993: 44–71).

Background

The first two decades of the twentieth century were quite significant for Eastern Christians and Muslims in this part of the world. The Balkan Wars and World War I brought the demise and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian genocides (Jones 2006: 149–65). Muslim irregulars, ethnic Kurds and Turkish militants were the primary perpetrators of these massacres, causing many Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians to associate Islam with violence, despite the fact that their ancestors had for centuries lived in relatively peaceful coexistence with Muslims under the Ottomans (Sharp 2012: 32). The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent great expansion of the Soviet Union also led to significant changes for Eastern Christians and Muslims. In Russia, the atheist regime destroyed many churches and mosques, imprisoned and killed thousands of religious leaders and imposed extreme limitations on worship and religious education during its various anti-religious campaigns. Though Christians and Muslims in the Balkans were not under control of the Soviets for the first few decades following World War II, the newly formed Communist regimes in the region conducted similar and sometimes even more aggressive campaigns against Christians and Muslims, particularly in places such as Albania and Yugoslavia (Ro’i 2000).

The impressive growth of European power and imperialism had important and similar consequences for both Muslims and Eastern Christians in Russia, the Balkans and the Mediterranean. The demise of empires, kingdoms and sultanates – which had relied on religion as a unifying culture and political force – and the rise of the Western model of ‘nation-state’ reframed the way people thought about themselves, their neighbours and even the very land on which they had lived for generations. For many Muslims – whose territory was under the control of European colonial powers between World War I and World War II (the only exceptions being Afghanistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) – it was a humiliation to see the balance of global power shift into the hands of Europeans and to observe the advances of the West in knowledge, production, technology and international trade. Eastern Christians struggled as well in finding a path through much of the twentieth century. In addition to the persecution many endured from atheist Communist
regimes there was a powerful resistance to modernization for several reasons. Through the Byzantine age, as well as throughout the Ottoman period, Orthodoxy cultivated a consciousness of universalism, multinational political formations and anti-imperialist sentiments (Kalaitzidis 2012: 205). As the full consequences of colonialism and modernization took effect, both Muslims and Eastern Christians found their religious identities, cultural traditions and relations with each other and within their own communities to be quite complicated and confusing. They increasingly discovered that they were in competition with each other as they scrambled to find their place in the modern world. As the Western model of the nation-state was applied throughout the region there was a greater push towards cultural homogeneity (Apostolov 2004: 146). Eastern Christians and Muslims began to focus less frequently on religion as their primary source of identity, choosing rather to define themselves by language, culture and adherence to modern secular values. This trend both opened new opportunities for mutual respect and understanding between them and presented new barriers to their ability to live together in peace (Sharp 2012: 30).

From the last quarter of the twentieth century, when newly formed states in traditionally Muslim lands continued to define themselves, there are many examples of both peaceful encounters and civil strife, even violence, between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The most striking examples of the latter, which have had negative consequences for relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, are the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974) and the resulting ‘Cyprus dispute’, the civil war in Lebanon (1975–90) and the ethno-religious conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (the ‘Yugoslav Wars’, 1991–2001). Religious leaders among Orthodox Christians and Muslims were in many ways enmeshed in these conflicts but were also often the voice of reason and sanity in the face of the senseless violence and brutality pervading their societies. It was during such times of trial that there were many peaceful encounters as well. A number of religious leaders established important relationships and availed themselves of opportunities for positive interreligious dialogue.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in England at the beginning of the twenty-first century added a new dimension to the encounter in that it brought Islam into view in a more prominent and direct way. These events created fear and concern among many Eastern Christians, to be sure, especially those living in Muslim-majority countries, as well as episodes of discrimination and violence towards Muslims as a result of Islamophobia. At the same time, they inspired among some theologians and leaders a greater emphasis on and awareness of the dangers of religious fundamentalism, not only outside their own tradition but also among their co-religionists.

**Contextual considerations**

Nearly 87% of the world’s Eastern Christians live in just 10 nations. In seven of these there are considerable Muslim-minority populations, while in Egypt Islam is the religion of the majority. Of particular interest in this chapter (with Ethiopia and Egypt being covered in other chapters of this volume) are Bulgaria, Georgia, Serbia, Russia and Greece. These all have large Orthodox Christian populations with sizeable Muslim populations, which according to the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com) are currently at: Bulgaria 13%, Georgia 11%, Greece 4%, Serbia 7% and Russia 10%. There have also been significant interactions in recent years between Eastern Christians and Muslims in Albania, where Christians make up 32% of the population and Muslims 63%; in Cyprus, where Muslims compose 22% in an otherwise Orthodox majority population; and in Turkey, which is home to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and, despite the fact that the number of Christians in Turkey has now fallen below 1%, the significance of the Eastern Christian presence and the quality of its interactions with Muslims and the Turkish state remain important. Of course, the ancient Eastern Christian communities in the Middle
East continue, despite numerous challenges, and there have been positive interactions between Christians and Muslims there in recent years, particularly in places such as Lebanon. That story, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

**Bulgaria**

There are two important considerations with regard to Muslim–Christian relations in Bulgaria. The first is the significant role that religions played in its nation building. The religious symbolism of the previous age was reworked so that it could become a central part of the national myth in service of the new Bulgaria. Since there were sizeable populations of Turks, both Sunnī and some Shi‘a, and Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) – with the total Muslim population well over 10% – the redeployment of religious symbolism in the country was significant for Muslim–Christian relations. For example, Roudometof has demonstrated that ‘the political cleavage between Christians and Muslims was reinterpreted as a national cleavage between “oppressed” Balkan peoples and Ottoman “oppressors”’ (2005: 97). The second key feature about Bulgaria is the way that Muslim communities have developed in the years following the end of socialism in the region in 1989. There are particular cultural, political, historical and economic factors that have left at least some Bulgarian Muslim communities unaffected by globalisation, Saudi export of a more puritanical and revivalist form of Islam, and Islamophobia, which have significantly influenced Islam in other parts of Europe and beyond (Ghodsee 2010: 5). These two factors have contributed to the potential for positive engagement between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria and have minimised, in comparison with other Balkan neighbours, the episodes of aggression and violence between the two communities.

**Georgia**

There is a long history of Islam in Georgia, and relations between Muslims and Christians have been close for centuries. They have lived side by side as neighbours, and intermarriage between them over generations has connected many families together in a concrete way. Georgia’s national narrative celebrates this diversity and tolerance, and recent scholarship has shown that in modern times, especially as traditional religious communities have survived the Soviet anti-religious campaigns, there have been numerous instances of the intermingling of religious practices of Muslims and Christians. Examples include some veneration of icons, sharing of holy sites, and observance of the other’s major religious holidays, particularly Christmas and Easter (Sanikidze and Walker 2004: 5, 15, 20). Despite a long tradition of religious tolerance and eclecticism in Georgia, however, there has been a concern in recent years that a particular sort of Islamist ideology, the kind that has informed the nearby conflict in Chechnya, could spark something similar in the country, leading to political destabilisation and internal violence (31).

**Serbia and the territories of the former Yugoslavia**

In some ways, the tragic history of what was Yugoslavia shows the degree to which the imposition of the nation-state model in regions shared by Eastern Christians and Muslims has the potential to lead to disastrous ends. John Binns asserts, for example, that the religious-coloured wars in Yugoslavia show ‘the problems faced by Orthodox countries finding ways of living in an unfamiliar political order dominated by the deals of the West, and sharing the creation of stable peaceful states and economically dysfunctional nations’ (2002: 199). The Serbs’ crimes against Bosnian Muslims and Muslim Albanians in Kosovo, culminating in brutality and massacres in 1999, are well documented and have left a wedge between Muslims and Christians in the region.
Despite these tragedies, and perhaps in part because of the legacy of leaders such as Patriarch Pavle of Serbia – who was a voice of reason and peace in the midst of the inhumanity of the civil war – Muslims and Christians are finding new ways to work together in the face of common foes. For example, Klaus Buchenau has noted a mutual fear among some Muslim and Orthodox leaders of the ‘global religious market’ and the dangers it could pose to their society. He points out that ‘in the debate about religious legislation in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina . . . the Orthodox Church agrees with the Islamic community, as well as with the Catholic Church, that only “traditional” religions should be guaranteed a special status by law’ (2005: 71). Perhaps another reason Eastern Christians and Muslims in Serbia and neighbouring territories have been able to move beyond the Yugoslav wars is the intermixing of religious practices. In a recent collection of studies in several countries with mixed Muslim–Christian populations in Eastern Christian lands, anthropologists have noted this trend. For example, field research in Macedonia, which like Serbia was a former Yugoslav republic, showed that ‘Muslims came to Orthodox sites . . . Orthodox Christians worshipped in a disused mosque . . . Muslims and Christians alike engage in rituals that appear to be markedly Christian, and . . . both Christians and Muslims seek to expropriate [a Muslim place of worship], ritually and physically, as their own’ (Bowman 2010: 199–200).

**Russia**

Similar to the way religious leaders in Serbia have pushed back against the ‘global religious market’, Orthodox and Muslim leaders in Russia have banded together against perceived threats from the West and in support of efforts to preserve ‘traditional value systems’. For example, Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has been known to make statements about shared values between the Eastern Orthodox and other religions traditionally found in Russia. Alexander Agadjanian and Kathy Rousselet have provided some examples of this, such as Kirill’s statement that ‘Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist worlds have their own traditional value systems that have much in common with the values of Eastern Orthodoxy’ (2005: 38). Kirill was even more emphatic about this in a 2014 address to a group of Muslim leaders in Turkey. He contrasted the shared values of Eastern Christians and Muslims with those of the West, saying ‘it is perfectly obvious that the Western civilization, the modern Western culture, has lost its ties with religion and that the Western world cannot be called Christian any more’. He then said that ‘religious values are no longer present in the social sphere. Such laws are being adopted that contradict God’s commandments and traditional morality’ (OCN, 15 December 2014). There are signs, though, that as the Russian Orthodox Church continues to re-establish Christianity and its own role in post-Soviet Russian society, there is some measure of concern about the Islamic revival in recent years. Basil Cousins has argued that Islam in Russia is ‘poised to make significant conversions among ethnic Russians and others’, in part because of its ‘well-articulated system of education which far outclasses the Orthodox system’ (2008: 51). Others have noted the resilience of Sufi orders – which even through the Soviet period were socio-cultural systems ‘capable of self-preservation’ – and the distinction between Tartars and Russians in relation to religion. According to Ravil Baltanov and Goulnara Baltanova, nearly ‘90 per cent of Tartars identified themselves as Muslims and the majority of them are new converts – those who some years before were non-believers’ (1998: 95).

**Greece and Cyprus**

Greece is the only member of the European Union that officially identifies itself as an Orthodox Christian country, and religion has been a key element of Greek identity for hundreds of years. Influenced by the Western conception of a ‘nation-state’, the founders of modern Greece in
the nineteenth century began to define Greek nationalism not only in terms of religion (which remained important) but also by specific cultural and political elements that made it unique from its neighbours (Apostolov 2004: 52). Because the nation-state of Greece was based on the new model of Greek nationalism, in the minds of the vast majority of Greeks today Greek citizenship is synonymous with Greek Orthodox Christianity, regardless of whether one is a believing and/or practising Christian. Also, in the minds of most Greeks – and this was legally the case until the end of the twentieth century (Apostolov 52) – there is only one official minority: the Muslims of western Thrace. This goes back to the agreements made between Turkey and Greece to protect religious minorities (Christian and Muslim respectively) remaining in each nation after World War I. The tension between nationalist, homogenous and monoreligious sentiment on one hand, and universalist, multiethnic and interreligious sentiment (still espoused by the Ecumenical Patriarchate) on the other has always been present in Greece but has grown in intensity in the twenty-first century (Sharp 2012: 213–19). These two poles – one for a fundamentalist and nationalist attitude towards religion in Greece and the other for a more open society that embraces difference in religion – can be seen in the Athens mosque controversy of recent years, which has sparked heated political debate and has revealed to the world a fissure in Greek society (in August 2016, the Greek Parliament approved a plan to build a state-funded mosque, the first since the fall of the Ottoman Empire). Dia Anagnostou and Ruby Gropas (2010: 91) have argued, though, that the mosque controversy has actually revealed a significant shift in society. They say there has been a transition by Greek politicians and citizens towards a more open society that embraces religious pluralism. This trend in Greece seems due in part to the recent immigration of non-Greek Orthodox Christians, non-Orthodox Christians and Muslims, who form the highest percentage of immigrants and tend to come from across the Greater Middle East, primarily to Athens, and no longer just to Thrace, where the Muslim minority has typically been confined in Greece (92).

Though many of the things mentioned here with regard to Greek nationalism and religion can be applied to Greek Cypriots, the circumstances that relate to Muslim–Christian relations today in Cyprus are more complex. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the resulting ‘Cyprus dispute’ has been coloured not only by tensions between Turks and Greeks on the island but also by the interests of outside powers, particularly Greece and Turkey. Though full resolution may not be in sight for some years to come, Cypriots themselves have taken steps to reconcile matters of political and religious difference. A study has shown that ‘the most intense forms of intolerance [these days] do not occur between majority and minority [religious] groups, but rather between the minority groups themselves’ and that ‘the most important reactions seem to derive from non-Cypriot factors such as the dogmatic differences between the Sunni and Shia and the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict’ (Emilianides et al. 2011: 119). Another indication that relations between Muslim and Christian communities may be improving made international headlines in 2014, when a Turkish Cypriot Muslim leader returned the keys of a fourteenth-century church in disputed territory to the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Famagusta (Hadjicostis 2014). This was just one of several strategic and symbolic moves by Christian and Muslim leaders, which began in 2009 when Greek Orthodox Archbishop Chrysostomos II and Turkish Cypriot Muslim Grand Mufti Talip Atalay initiated a series of dialogues to show the positive role that religion can play in resolving political issues and other problems in the Middle East.

The Eastern Churches and Islam in dialogue

Though there has been a centuries-long tradition of cultural and theological exchange between Eastern Christians and Muslims in many regions of the world, the modern notion of ‘dialogue’ between religions can be traced back only to about the 1960s in the West, when one began to
first see an opening among Roman Catholic and some Protestant Christians towards Muslims and a shift in the understanding of mission (Moyaert 2013: 199). The pronouncements of Vatican II marked this change officially within the Roman Catholic Church, which has continued a programme to the present day to engage Muslims in peaceful dialogue. Among the various Protestant denominations, along with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the most significant work in this area has come from the World Council of Churches (WCC). Key figures among Eastern Christians – who have also pioneered the WCC’s interfaith work and dialogue with Muslims generally throughout the years – include Metropolitan Georges of Lebanon, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia (of the Armenians), and Dr Tarek Mitri. Drawing upon biblical tradition, patristic literature and Orthodox Trinitarian theology – as well as modern disciplines of history and sociology and their involvement in international diplomacy – they have developed a platform for interreligious dialogue and active engagement with those of other religions, especially Islam (Sharp 2014: 122–37).

In addition to the contributions of Eastern Christians to the interfaith effort of the WCC, there are several examples of sustained dialogue between Eastern Christians and Muslims on the local, regional and international level. One was a series of dialogues sponsored jointly by the Orthodox Center for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, which lasted for two decades and started in large part because of a friendship between the late Metropolitan Damaskinos Papandreou of Switzerland and His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan (the dialogues would probably have continued to the present day had Metropolitan Damaskinos not suffered a brain haemorrhage in 1999 and, after a long struggle, passed away in 2011). Taking place every year or two in various locations – including Switzerland, Jordan, Turkey and Greece – the dialogues brought together Muslim and Orthodox scholars and leaders to discuss diverse topics. There was a particular emphasis on engaging young people in order to instil in the next generation the values of understanding and cooperation between the two religions (Sharp 2014: 142–3).

Another sustained dialogue effort has been sponsored by high-ranking representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and counterparts in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s religious establishment. These meetings, called the ‘Joint Russian-Iranian Theological Commission on Islam-Orthodox Dialogue’, have taken place on a regular basis since 1997, with the tenth meeting occurring in Moscow in the autumn of 2016 (ROCDEC 2016). These meetings have typically focused on matters of ethical, cultural and religious significance to the parties involved, though also with implications for Eastern Christians and Muslims across the globe.

An example on the international level of Eastern Christians and Muslims coming together, alongside leaders of other religious traditions, in a sustained way for a common purpose would be symposia held in recent years on Religion, Science, and the Environment (Chryssavgis 2012: 10–15). While these are sponsored by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and have included numerous Orthodox theologians, as well as scientists and humanitarians from various backgrounds, many high-ranking Muslims have also participated. For example, His Highness Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan; Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, Grand Mufti of the Arab Syrian Republic; Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of al-Azhar; and His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan have all presented speeches and/or been involved in the movement in some capacity. Patriarch Bartholomew himself is well known for his statement in 1995 declaring that ‘crime against the natural world is a sin’, echoing the sentiments of both noted Orthodox theologians (such as Metropolitan John of Pergamon, Philip Sherrard and Elizabeth Theokritoff) and Muslim scholars (such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Fazlun Khalid) on nature and the environment.

Finally, an example of efforts among Eastern Christians and Muslims to foster peace and political cooperation on a national or regional level is the ‘Statement of shared moral commitment’
of the Muslim community in Albania, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the Catholic Church and the Bektashi community in Albania, signed in 2005. It is quite astonishing that, just a few years after the almost 50-year period of total prohibition on religious faith, practice and assembly under the oppressive Communist regime (arguably the most openly hostile to religion of any in the world in the twentieth century), religious life in Albania could be so strong. The cosignatories proclaimed in the statement that ‘the period of repression is behind us and religious life can once again blossom in Albania in its various forms and retake its hereditary place in a democratic society’ (Albanian Orthodox Church 2005). They also committed themselves to promoting ‘a climate of peace . . . [educating on their] different faith traditions . . . [carrying] out common [civil and social] activities . . . [and promoting] inter-religious understanding in Albania and in the region’. The Orthodox signatory in particular, Archbishop Anastasios, has been praised in the international media for his church’s educational, health and social services programmes, which have been a living example of interfaith cooperation for the benefit of all in Albania and beyond (Gage 2003).

Conclusion

Eastern Christians have lived side by side with Muslims for centuries, and, for this reason, the encounters between many of them in the modern and late modern periods have been organic and personal. A number of them are discovering that the past history, present reality and future hopes of their respective communities are bound up with each other, and for this reason they have been pursuing opportunities for dialogue and common work. In this process, they have endeavoured to apply their traditions authentically in the modern world and find their place within it. One of the great challenges has been the partitioning of their communities into Muslim-majority and Orthodox Christian-majority nation states, which has also brought about the ‘modern’ conflation of religion, culture, language, ethnicity and politics. Global developments, the introduction of capitalism and communism, and the interference of European powers have caused further turmoil for Eastern Christians and Muslims, both in their interreligious and intrareligious relations. This means that to appreciate fully the state of Eastern Christian–Muslim relations today, it is essential to consider the local context within these wider regional and global trends.

References


Further reading

