Christianity and Islam both view sub-Saharan Africa as an area of potential numerical growth and expansion and so, inevitably, the faiths are in competition with each other. Both faith groups actively proselytise, and their rivalry includes seeking political and economic dominance.

This chapter begins with an overview of the historical interactions between Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, from the first encounters in Ethiopia in the seventh century to the present. It then goes on to examine current issues that affect relations, with examples of how particular groups of Christians and Muslims are relating to each other.

First encounters

When Muhammad’s followers faced persecution in Mecca in the early years of his prophetic ministry, he told them to go to Abyssinia (Ethiopia), where the ruler was a Christian and would protect them. The meeting that is recorded in Muslim sources between these refugees and the king was the first encounter between Christians and Muslims in Africa.

At that time, Christianity was established in both the Sudan and in Ethiopia in a number of kingdoms. From an early point in the Islamic era, these kingdoms had trade relations along the Nile with Muslims in Egypt, and in the tenth century the trading partners made an agreement that they would not encroach on one another’s territory. This treaty held until the fourteenth century, when the Sudanese kingdoms were subsumed under Muslim Arab rule. Ethiopia continued as a Christian kingdom, entering European legend as the ‘Land of Prester John’ and competing for power with its Muslim neighbours.

From the eighth century onwards Islam spread into West Africa along trade routes across the Sahara and became established in the inland areas. It also spread along rivers, including the Niger and the Senegal. In East Africa, trade routes across the sea from the Yemen and the Persian Gulf led to a Muslim presence along the coast from Djibouti to Sofala in present-day Mozambique.

Apart from Ethiopia, Christians and Muslims did not begin to meet until the fifteenth century, when Portugal sent ships along the West African coast. By the end of the fifteenth century a fleet led by Vasco da Gama had reached East Africa on its way to India. During the sixteenth century the Portuguese established trading posts along the coast in both West Africa and East Africa, and Catholic missionaries were present amongst the settlers. Records of the interactions between the Portuguese and Muslim traders show examples of mutual respect as well as of misunderstanding.
and distrust. It was only during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the French and Brit-
ish began to colonise West Africa, that there began a sustained Christian presence. Initially, this
was mainly on the coast and, in general, Muslims and Christians only met when trading. As this
included slaving, neither faith appeared in its best light under these circumstances.

With the abolition of the slave trade during the nineteenth century, Sierra Leone and Liberia
provided a home for largely ‘Christianised’ returnees from North America, where they met with
indigenous peoples, many of whom were Muslims. This interaction was not always positive and
led to discrimination against the indigenous population by the returnees and the development of
outreach strategies by Christian missions (Cole 2013: 61–5).

**The arrival of Christian missions**

In the mid-nineteenth century, Christian missions arrived in East Africa, ahead of the British
and German colonisers. They found Muslims on the coast and, in general, chose to work inland
rather than evangelise the coastal areas. There were exceptions, with both Catholic and Protestant
missions being involved in establishing settlements on the coast for freed slaves, most of whom
had been released from slavers by British naval vessels patrolling the Indian Ocean. These missions
also looked for ways to evangelise Muslims. For example, William Taylor in Mombasa started
giving out tracts in his medical dispensary as he treated patients. He chose to live in the old town,
rather than in the mission compound, and spent time with local Muslim elders, learning Swahili
and discussing his and their faith. He wrote evangelistic literature, preached in the marketplace
and composed songs using local tunes. Some respected him, but from others he was met with
ridicule (Chesworth 2006: 161–2).

There were different opinions as to who was best equipped to educate and inform Africans.
This is exemplified by Edward Blyden (1832–1912), a West Indian who, denied opportunities for
higher education in America, emigrated to Liberia, where he was ordained and then taught at
Liberia College, Monrovia. His attitude to Christianity and Islam changed over time. Initially, he
argued that European missionaries were the best for pioneering work and for supervising African
missionaries, though he later went on to promote the ideal of an African church. He also showed
sympathy for Islam being propagated by Africans, who ‘enjoyed the hospitality of their converts
and adapted their faith to African society and customs’ (Baur 1994: 132–3).

**Colonisation**

Africa was ‘carved up’ by the European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885; this meant
that different policies were applied by each colonial power. The British espoused both direct
rule and indirect rule through already existing rulers, notably in northern Nigeria, where the
Sokoto Caliphate continued throughout British rule. On the other hand, the French developed
an educated urban elite to rule their colonies (Harrison 1988), which were mainly in West Africa
but also included Madagascar and smaller islands in the Indian Ocean. Direct rule was used in
the German colonies in east, west and south-west Africa, and uprisings were harshly suppressed.
These contrasting approaches in turn led to different attitudes towards religion and to the role
of Christian missions in education and propagating faith, as well as to the acceptance, or not, of
Muslim influence on society.

In the late nineteenth century, British, French and German colonial authorities tended to
employ Muslims as clerks, as they were literate. However, this led to tensions between the Christ-
tian missions and the colonial authorities, as the missions wanted jobs for the newly literate
Christians. The desire of the missions that Christians should be able to read the Bible and the
involvement of the missions in education meant that within a few years many Christians were also literate, and so they too were employed as government clerks and also by traders. Muslims were suspicious of both mission and government schools, as they were perceived as teaching a Christian curriculum and as a tool of proselytization. In East Africa both the British and the Germans established schools with a non-Western curriculum to encourage the Muslim elite to send their children to school.

The first Muslims in South Africa arrived in the seventeenth century when, in 1658, the Dutch East India Company began to bring slaves from India, Ceylon and Malaya. They also exiled political opponents from what is now Indonesia to Cape Town. These were originally known as Malays and later, during the Apartheid era, as Cape Coloureds. Initially they were not allowed to practise their religion, and it was only after 1804, when they were given religious freedom, that a thriving Muslim community developed. In 1860, the British brought indentured labourers from India to Natal with offers of land on completion of 10 years’ labour (An-Na’im 2002: 190). The British also settled freed slaves known as ‘Zanzibaris’ in Durban. Together, these incomers formed the basis of the Muslim community in South Africa.

The various ways in which the colonial governments treated Muslims became important when, during the twentieth century, the European powers involved their colonies in their wars. The French used local Sufi leaders to encourage Muslims to fight for the French cause, whilst the Germans flew the Ottoman flag together with their own and encouraged local troops to defend the Sultanate.

During the colonial era the attitudes of the European powers towards faith and mission shaped relations between Christians and Muslims. The leaders of the churches were often of the same nationality as the colonial powers and were seen by the local communities as being a part of the colonial structures. However, the colonialists related to the Muslim leaders because of their political leadership role and influence on the community as much as for any religious functionality. As a result, Muslims, or at least their leaders, were seen to be favoured by the colonialists, whereas the Christians were resentful of the colonialists and the lack of transfer to local leadership by the missionaries, who were seen to be in much the same role as the colonialists.

The struggle for independence

Throughout Africa, from the 1950s onwards both Christians and Muslims were equally involved in the struggle for independence from their colonial rulers. In several instances this led to their working together to achieve their aims. In East Africa, in what is now Tanzania, where there are similar numbers of Muslims and Christians, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), with a mainly Muslim leadership from Dar es Salaam, worked closely with the Christian Julius Nyerere, a trained teacher who had studied in Britain, to negotiate independence from Britain. Nyerere became the first president of Tanzania, and he was later regarded by some Muslims as having ‘robbed’ Muslims of their right to rule the nation. In French West Africa, Leopold Senghor, a Christian, won the first presidential election of independent Senegal. With his political skills and the support of some Muslim leaders he was able to win over rural Muslims, whilst his Muslim opponent with his westernised upbringing and manner failed to convince them (Harrison 1988: 199–200).

Postcolonial era

In the postcolonial era religious affiliation has had an impact on the development of various African states.
Both Christianity and Islam have been successful in attracting new believers from amongst followers of traditional religions. In some instances this has meant that both faith groups are found in the same community and that families include both Christians and Muslims. The Yoruba of south-western Nigeria are one example of this relaxed attitude. However, in other places, while relations may be generally cordial, those who convert, especially from Islam to Christianity, may be disowned and rejected by their family and community and will become entirely dependent on their new faith ‘family’ (observed in Tanzania and Ghana). In many communities interfaith marriages are virtually unknown, partly because of the continued practice of arranged marriages. However, in an increasingly urbanised society marriage partners are the choice of the couple rather than of their families, and interfaith marriages do occur. Following Qurʾān-based practice, Muslims will allow a Christian woman to marry a Muslim man without converting, though a Christian man is expected to convert to Islam if he marries a Muslim woman.

In nations where one community is in a clear majority and the other is a small minority, in general both communities have been able to coexist amicably. By comparison, in nations where the number of Christians and Muslims is roughly similar, tensions have arisen as to who has the right to rule. But this is too simple a generalisation, and examples of good and bad relations can be found in both types of nation.

**Some contemporary issues that affect relations**

### The numbers game

In Africa overall the number of Christians and Muslims is almost the same, and this gives rise to increasing competition for religious space in an attempt by both Christians and Muslims to ‘win Africa’ through missionary outreach: evangelism and daʿwa.

From the nineteenth century Christians have used various forms of literature to evangelise, initially using material printed by religious tract societies in Europe and then writing and producing material locally. Muslims began to produce outreach literature in the early twentieth century. Such material continues to be sold or distributed at meetings in many parts of Africa. With the increasing availability of electronic media, audio cassettes and videos were initially used by both Christians and Muslims to disseminate the message, though now radio and television tend to be favoured. Many countries allow religious groups to operate radio and television stations which broadcast for their own faith followers as well as having outreach programmes aimed at the other. Governments are able to exercise some control over these channels and will usually act if the terms of the licence are broken (Ng’atigwa 2013: 4, 145). However, satellite broadcasting and internet sites are often based remotely, meaning that there is no effective control on content if they are used for polemical attacks. Examples are GOD.TV, which provides specialised Gospel and Christian messaging to the sub-Saharan region via View-Sat (Béletre 2014), and Peace TV.com, which operates from Mumbai, India, led by Zakir Naik.

Another popular method of outreach is public rallies and meetings. These range from a local gathering with a simple stage and sound system in a public space and a few listeners to huge rallies with an internationally known speaker and several hundred thousand people attending.

The use of the Bible by Muslims and the Qurʾān by Christians is a contentious means of outreach that has become popular in parts of Africa. Influenced by the methods used by the South African Ahmed Deedat (1919–2005), the Muslim Preachers of the Bible in East Africa organise regular meetings where they use Christian scripture to demonstrate the truth of Islam. Christian groups have responded by using the Qurʾān to challenge Muslim beliefs. In general, this does little more than confirm each group in their own views of the other (Chesworth 2006: 168–75; 2012).
Both Christians and Muslims have pan-Africa groups with an interest in propagating the faith. An example is *Christ for all Nations* (CfAN) led by Reinhard Bonnke. Founded in South Africa in 1976 but now based in Germany, it continues to hold huge rallies around Africa. Whilst no longer specifically anti-Islamic, its rhetoric is persistently polemical, thereby raising tensions between the two faiths (Chesworth 2011: 359, 362–4). Other groups such as *Call of Hope*, *Life Challenge Africa* and *People of God* produce material in a variety of African languages, as well as in Arabic, English and French, which is aimed at informing Christians about Islam and how to evangelise effectively.

*The World Islamic Call Society* (WICS) was founded in 1970 and at one time had 18 offices in Africa, with ‘cultural courses to better educate recent converts’. WICS was funded by Libya, but since the fall of Mu’ammar al-Qaddafi in 2011 it has become moribund (Chesworth 2013: 224–7). *The Islam in Africa Organisation*, founded in 1991 following a meeting held in Abuja, Nigeria, in November 1989, has as one of its prime objectives ‘to support, enhance and coordinate Da’wah work in all parts of Africa and propagate the knowledge of Islam throughout the continent’ (Alkali et al. 1993: 435–6; Chesworth 2013: 223–4).

**Who has the right to be a butcher?**

Hospitality is important in African culture, and meat is a staple considered by many communities as an essential part of meals. This has given rise to tensions as to who should slaughter the meat. In many countries Muslims have taken on the role of butchers in the community. Even in areas where there are few Muslims, the practice has developed that Muslims are the ones who slaughter animals. An obvious advantage is that the meat can then be consumed by both Muslims and Christians, whereas meat slaughtered by a Christian is, in practice, regarded as not being halal.

In the New Testament, various passages allow for a relaxation of the restrictions of Jewish food laws (notably Acts 10:10–16; I Corinthians 8:1–13). These can be, and often are understood as allowing Christians the freedom to eat meat slaughtered by non-Christians, with the proviso that the weaker brethren should not be offended. Although the Qur’ān states that the food of the People of the Book is lawful for Muslims (Q 5:5), it also declares: ‘I find nothing forbidden for people to eat, except for carrion, flowing blood, pig’s meat – it is loathsome – or a sinful offering over which any name other than God’s has been invoked’ (Q 6:145). The former teaching tends to be overlooked by Muslims in favour of the latter, though in reality the local context has shaped what is and what is not acceptable. The following examples, drawn from eastern Africa, serve to illustrate the issue.

Éloi Ficquet in his study on animal slaughter in Ethiopia (2006: 44–7) explains that Muslims and Christians do not eat meat together, but rather that each faith group will deal with the slaughter and preparation of meat for themselves. Since both Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia invoke God in their own ways when an animal is killed, eating meat becomes a divisive factor within the community. There is a definite consequence to eating meat slaughtered by the other:

> Whatever the degree of kinship or friendship and whatever the reason for the gathering, the interdiction of eating meat from animals that were not killed in the name of the faith (the Trinity or Allah) is respected. . . . In cities, restaurants and butchers’ shops are distinguishable by graphic signs showing the cross or the crescent. . . . When it comes to ordinary daily food such as pancakes, bread, vegetables and dairy products, Muslims and Christians have no trouble sharing and eating from the same plate.

_Ficquet 2006: 44–5_
Ficquet explains that in Ethiopia eating meat slaughtered by the other has at times been used as a method of enforcing conversion. During the nineteenth century, as various rulers consolidated their hold on newly won territory, they would invite the defeated side to a meal which included meat. Both sides accepted the symbolic consequences, for by sharing the meat slaughtered by the victorious side not only were the defeated conceding the outcome of the battle but were also acknowledging they were converting to the other faith (Ficquet 2006: 47–52).

In East Africa the situation is different from this. Ficquet discusses Uganda, though the history and context is analogous to Kenya and Tanzania as well.

The butchers’ trade has been dominated by Muslims since the colonial era. The religious configuration of the meat market also results from a modus vivendi logic whereby Christians – Catholics and Protestants – indifferent towards the issue of ritual preparation of meat, left such activity to Muslims. By doing so they could ensure that Muslim religious requirements were not infringed upon. (Ficquet 2006: 43)

In both Tanzania and Uganda the slaughter of meat has led to political debate and to violence. In 1993 several pork butchers’ shops in Dar es Salaam were attacked on the grounds that they were operating in contravention to bylaws and were too close to mosques. In reality, this was the start of a planned insurrection to which the leaders expected the then-president, Ali Hasan Mwinyi, to turn a blind eye in order to allow Muslims to reclaim authority. In Uganda, Solomon Mugyenyi reports that in 2002 the Tabligh Youth Movement demanded that the government should give them the sole right to slaughter chickens, though this was refused outright. Initially the request may appear strange, though economically it made a lot of sense, for even if the group charged only a few shillings per chicken they would have had a large guaranteed income, which they could use to further their own aims (Mugyenyi 2002). At the same time as this was happening, a number of Christian butchers’ shops were destroyed in the eastern part of the country. In parliamentary debate following the rioting it was proposed that the Ministry of Agriculture should give an official status to the Muslim prerogative in the meat market. This sheds light on the demand of the Muslim youth to have sole rights to slaughter chickens, something that any householders would do for themselves.

In Tanzania in early 2013 there was an outbreak of violence when a Pentecostal pastor was killed for encouraging Christians not to take meat to Muslims for slaughter. This was after senior church leaders had declared that their church members should stop using Muslim butchers because, they claimed, 75 per cent of the total income from the charges for slaughter was going to fund Muslim religious projects. Some of the local Christian radio stations became actively involved in encouraging Christians to refuse to eat meat slaughtered by Muslims. The pastor involved in the incident, who was from the Tanzania Assemblies of God Church in Buseresere, Geita, near Lake Victoria, had been standing with a group supervising the slaughter of cows for Christians when he was attacked and killed. The communal violence that then erupted left 10 people seriously injured, and unrest spread further. Some members of parliament argued that Muslims had the sole right to slaughter all animals, leading to further protests in other parts of the country, while the Christian radio station Kwa Neema FM had its licence to operate suspended for six months for airing programmes aimed at encouraging Christians not to eat meat slaughtered by Muslims, which was cited as ‘worsening the nascent hostility between Christians and Muslims in Buseresere ward’ (Ng’atigwa 2013: 145).

In Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, differences between Muslims and Christians over animal slaughter have become a political issue and have shaped debates on constitutional reform. During
the colonial period, the British allowed Muslims to take on the work of animal slaughter, and this continued and expanded after independence. But as radicalising influences came to bear on the Muslim community, the economic value of ‘controlling’ the butchers’ sector became an additional factor in relations between Muslims and Christians. Likewise, as fundamentalist ideas were introduced into the Christian community, particularly from the Pentecostal movement, questioning why Christians should eat meat slaughtered by Muslims, they in turn influenced other church leaders, who were aware of the growth of the Pentecostal Church compared with the established Catholic and Protestant denominations. Underlying the disagreements is the question as to whether this is simply part of the competition for religious space or whether religious differences are being used to fight for economic and political power.

**Secular states**

Most independent African states have secular constitutions that guarantee freedom of choice as regards religious affiliation (An-Na’im 2002). However, in several countries, such as Zambia in the 1990s, both Christian and Muslim groups have called for their nation to be declared a religious state, or for favoured treatment of one or the other faith. Disagreements led some nations to opt for a federal model, allowing for differences within the one state.

The place of the Islamic legal system has been contentious. During the colonial period, a triple court system operated, allowing for traditional law, Islamic law and a European code to operate in parallel. Many of the newly independent states changed this and removed traditional and Islamic courts, though in recent years there has been a call for the reintroduction of Islamic legal codes. This was seen in Nigeria when, between 2000 and 2003, most of the northern states reintroduced forms of Islamic law to operate in parallel with Nigerian state law. In Kenya, when the constitution was being revised, the place of Kadhi courts in the new draft was questioned, and this issue was a factor in the rejection of the first draft in the 2005 referendum. In Tanzania, with similar numbers of Christians and Muslims, Kadhi courts were closed after independence, though there is currently a sustained call for their reintroduction (Chesworth and Kogelmann 2014: 1–10).

**Religious difference as an excuse for violence**

Africa has seen several instances of outbreaks of violence between Christians and Muslims, including attacks on particular communities and destruction of churches and mosques. Such attacks have occurred in many states, including Ivory Coast, Kenya, Chad and Nigeria.

More sustained violence between communities has persisted in some areas, for instance in Nigeria, where such attacks have broken out sporadically since the 1980s. There are cases when road blocks have been set up and travellers have been required to recite the Lord’s Prayer or the Shahāda to identify themselves as belonging to the ‘right’ group, and those who cannot comply have been killed. When the causes of the violence are examined more closely it can be seen that often religious difference is merely the excuse for violence, and the underlying reasons are actually ethnicity, economic disempowerment, land issues and/or the rights of pastoralists and farmers.

In Ethiopia religious difference led to civil war and to the separation of Eritrea, with a Muslim majority, while in Sudan it led to the separation of South Sudan, with a Christian majority. Islamist groups in Nigeria (Boko Haram) and Somalia (Al-Shabab) have rejected the state’s authority and are using violence against communities that oppose them. Boko Haram is seeking to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria, for the main reason that it rejects the Nigerian education system and its state model as Western and therefore Christian, though it also rejects
the leadership of the Sokoto Caliphate. Al-Shabab has been organising violent attacks in Kenya, targeting Christians, claiming these are in retaliation for the Kenyan army’s active involvement in Somalia and its support for the government there.

Both Christianity and Islam have a variety of expressions in Africa. Within Christianity there are denominations that reflect closely those in the West from where the founding missions came. There are also African instituted churches with a wide range of origins (some of them could be seen as syncretistic) and new Christian movements, with Pentecostal and Prosperity Gospel origins. Likewise, among Muslims can be found traditional Sunnī communities with roots going back a thousand years and following the traditional school of law of the region (Shāfi‘ī in East Africa and Mālikī in West Africa), a variety of Sufī orders (including Qādiriyyya, Tijāniyya and Shādhiliyya) and in more recent years Deobandis from South Asia (especially Tablīghī Jamā‘at) and groups of Salafī Muslims with a desire to return to the ideals of the first generation of believers. This wide variety means that relations between the two faiths are also varied: some groups are open and friendly, wanting to build good relations and to understand more of the other faith, whilst others show no interest in any contact.

Current approaches to Christian–Muslim relations in Africa

Interfaith councils exist in many parts of Africa, working at a grassroots level to mediate and to help develop peaceful coexistence, as well as being actively involved in peace and reconciliation at a national level. With the increase in intercommunal tensions in many countries, local Councils of Churches and Islamic Councils work together to defuse tensions.

There are many cases of local initiatives working to build community relations. For instance, in Kaduna, Nigeria, Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, after both being involved in violence, saw that a peaceful way was essential and jointly founded the Interfaith Mediation Centre. Their work is documented in the film The Imam and the Pastor (2006).

There are also pan-African organisations that help to mediate. One such organisation is the Programme for Christian–Muslim Relations in Africa (Procmura), which has its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, and works in both Francophone and Anglophone regions. In the last few years, it has been closely involved in mediation and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims in many countries, including Chad, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, working with local faith leaders and communities to bring about peaceful, stable situations (von Sicard et al. 2009).

Africa continues to be a contested space between Islam and Christianity, with groups actively reaching out in an effort to win the other. Despite the wishes of many on both sides to work towards better understanding, faith identity continues to be used to divide communities by those with their own political agendas.

References


**Further reading**