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THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Chapter 31

Muslims and Christian Beliefs

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Islam probably began as a protest against Meccan polytheism and idolatry, with an early expression of its message being the statement contained in Sura 112 of the Qur'an 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, on the one hand, polytheism and the idea of multiplicity in God, and, on the other, of the worship of anything other than God, either personal or physical.

It is for this reason that Muhammad'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 the direction towards which the earliest Muslims prayed, until the year 624 of the Common Era, was that 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, in the light of the not inconsiderable Jewish population of the latter city. 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, and a very interesting 1981 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 Qur'an. (Waardenburg 1981).

The Christian communities of Arabia were small, and much more heavily concentrated on the boundaries of Arabia than in the Hijaz, 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 Muhammad of the genuineness of his prophetic call, and also in Medina, where Muhammad had within his own

household a Coptic Christian concubine, Mariya, the mother of his only son, who, very significantly, was given the name Ibrahim. (Osman 2005).

Larger Christian communities, however, existed in other parts of Arabia such as the town of Najran in South Arabia, now very close to the border of the modern states of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and a delegation from that city came to visit Muhammad in Medina, probably around 628, and were permitted to pray in the city's mosque. In Muhammad's own lifetime the Muslim community also had significant contact with the Christian community of Axum, modern Ethiopia, to which a group of Muslims travelled in 615, as refugees from persecution in Mecca. (Goddard 2000: 19-24).

The extent of Muslim encounter with Christians then became much greater in the period after the death of Muhammad 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 Zoroastrian-majority, 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 Qur'anic statements about Jesus, Christians, and the *Injil* (Gospel) therefore become elaborated in this new context of a relatively small Arab Muslim élite ruling over either a Christian-majority (in Egypt and Syria) or a substantial Christian-minority (in Iraq or Iran) population, 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 made very clear, the social context of whatever interaction there was should definitely be kept in mind, since, on the one hand Christians were sometimes useful, as bearers of knowledge which brought very practical benefits in such fields as philosophy and medicine, yet on the other the innate 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, in other words seeking to avoid polytheism and idolatry, 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 was 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 an infringement 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. 750), who lived under Islamic rule, seeming to have some influence on some of the different schools of thought which evolved on these questions in 'Abbasid Baghdad. The influence of different Christian churches in different 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 different speeds of conversion to Islam in different provinces. 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 Sunni and Shi'i, evolved their own particular set of prescriptions for everyday dealings with Christians, including on such questions 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 Qur'an itself listed 112 of the former, and different theological thinkers devoted great efforts to drawing up lists of the latter, even if a significantly greater amount of work needed to be done to draw up these lists from the text of the scripture itself, which did not necessarily make use of this kind of language. 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 perhaps too few, since if a list of the attributes of God was being compiled, why stop at three? (Wolfson 1976: 304-54; Burrell 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 9th century thinker Abu 'Isa al-Warraq on Incarnation and Trinity 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-Jabbar (d. 1025) then 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 Taimiyya (d. 1328) then 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 Tom Michel. (Thomas 1992 and 2002; Reynolds 2004 and 2010; Michel 1984).

More irenic accounts of Christianity can then 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 Qur'an, the Hadith, al-Hujwiri, and al-Ghazali (pp. 151-54), Sa'di (pp. 162-63), and al-Baydawi (pp. 171-172), a selection of texts made with the assistance of Tarif Khalidi. (Ford and Higton 2002). Far more sympathetic overall accounts of Christianity can then be found in the writings of thinkers such as al-Ya 'qubi (d. 897), al-Mas'udi (d. 956), the tenth-century group of thinkers known as the Ikhwan al-Safa (Brethren of Purity), whose forty-fourth letter in particular is a remarkable account of Jesus' life and work, and al-Biruni (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 classical thinkers as al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Taymiyya and Rashid Rida are all, to use a modern Christian-originated term, 'inclusivists'; they all, in other words, 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 then allows a number of contemporary scholars to discuss the same question, ranging over the whole history and geography of the Islamic tradition, from the Qur'an to today's Iran and Indonesia, and 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 in error 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 too, and these factors are important in explaining the survival of Christian communities in some parts of the World of Islam, for example the Assyrians in Northern Iraq, at least until the establishment of the 'Islamic State' organisation in the 21st century. There are also significant differences between the Eastern part of the Christian World, with its Greek and Syriac speaking Christians, and the Western, with its Latin-speaking communities, which disappeared completely relatively quickly from North Africa, for a very specific set of reasons, but which have a very significantly different history in Spain/Andalucia. Two eras of relatively positive Christian-Muslim interaction were thus 9th century Baghdad, under Muslim rule, the age of the 'Dar al-hikma' (House of Wisdom) with its programme of translation from Greek and Syrian into Arabic, and then 12th 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 by 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, Ayyubids, and Mamluks), and also externally in the form of irruptions into the World of Islam from different 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 in some sense deliverers. These attitudes had obvious risks, and relate much more specifically to political than to specifically theological attitudes, but the latter could of course 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 Moghul, becoming firmly

established at around that date. In the first of these states, the situation for at least some Christians was relatively stable and good, with the percentage of Jews and Christians within the population of the empire as a whole, as has been shown by the French demographers Courbage and Fargues, growing significantly during the heyday of the empire; in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, however, particularly in south-eastern Europe, significantly on the military frontier with different European powers, the situation was rather different, with a greater measure of mutual suspicion and antagonism between the different 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 very considerable.

Within the Shi'ī Safavid Empire there was perhaps a more hostile attitude towards Christianity, based to a large extent on the traditionally more antagonistic attitude of Shi'īs 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 to Isfahan, but otherwise there was some strong suspicion of Christianity. Further to the east, in the Moghul Empire, Christianity had never been numerically strong, with the most significant presence in India being in the south, beyond the frontiers of the Moghul Empire, but in the age of European commercial and political expansion Christianity became in a sense a pawn in the game of diplomacy for gain in business and trade. It was as part of this process that Portuguese Jesuit missionaries came to be present at the court of the Moghul Emperor Akbar, and as part of the discussions there that at one stage the possibility was seriously entertained of the Emperor's son Jahangir, 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 18th century the balance of power between the three major Muslim empires and the different European powers began to change very 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 Scottish figure of Sir William Muir is a significant one, though of course never fully representative, and among Roman Catholics the French Cardinal Lavignerie certainly identified the civilising mission of France and the religious mission of the White Fathers, an order which he founded, very closely. (Goddard 2000: 123-27).

Among 19th century Muslim thinkers, two, Sayyid Ahmad Khan in British India and Muhammad 'Abduh 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 not only the Bible but also the Qur'an better, and the latter displaying a deeper knowledge

than many other Muslim writers of Christian history. One of 'Abduh's leading intellectual followers, however, Rashid Rida, seems to move Muslim thinking back towards a significantly more antagonistic approach. (Troll 1978, Baljon 1964, Ayyub 1974, Wood 2008, and Ryad 2008).

The second half of the 20th century then saw a further degree of rethinking in Muslim thinking about different aspects of Christian belief, perhaps corresponding once again to the changing balance of power between the Western/Christian and Islamic Worlds. As we have already 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 to in some cases 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 writer Muhammad Kamil Husain and the Indian Sayyid Vahiduddin. The former's historical novel *City of Wrong* 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 indicate 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, and the latter's short article entitled 'What Christ means to me' serving as a fine 20th century example of the very positive significance and meaning which the person of Christ can bear for a Muslim thinker. (Hussein 1994, Vahiduddin 1986, and Goddard 1998: 215-22). Later in the twentieth century, the writings of Lebanese Shi'ī Mahmoud Ayoub, Algerian 'Ali Merad, Iranian Shi'ī philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Indian-Pakistani Fazlur Rahman all also break significantly new ground with regard to different aspects of Muslim thinking about different aspects of Christian belief. (Omar 2007, Merad 1968, Nasr 1986, Rahman 1980, and Goddard 1998: 222-52).

This trend has continued into the 21st century, with in some cases further quite radical rethinking of traditional Muslim attitudes being evident. Some of the work of Prof Mona Siddiqui, for example Chapter 6 of her book on Jesus, breaks new ground in its readiness actually to ask Christian friends what exactly the idea crucifixion and the symbol of the cross *mean* to them, with in turn some very interesting commentary on their responses. (Siddiqui 2013: 224-238, 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, which does not necessarily focus primarily on Christian belief but does home in within its central structure on what are traditionally the two core commands of Christianity, namely 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 belief, and does so in a relatively irenical manner. (A Common Word 2007).

This is not a completely new development, however, since as we have seen there is in the past a more irenic school of thought which has co-existed with the more polemical and antagonistic one in many periods of Islamic history. As in past centuries, therefore, a crucial factor in influencing, or even determining, the relative influence of these two traditions is almost certainly the wider context of the state of the relationship between the Christian and the Islamic Worlds. This is becoming more complex in the 21st century as a result of the growth of the influence of secular thought within the West, to the extent that whether this geopolitical unit should be described as in any sense actively Christian is a focus of a very vigorous debate. There is thus very considerable diversity within 'the West', as there is within the World of Islam. In at least some parts of the West, perhaps particularly in the United States, Christianity remains a vigorous and active political force, even if not always on the basis of a very deep understanding of the principles of the Christian faith (which is well illustrated by the research of 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, and 293-98). On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Vatican, even if only geographically a very small state, is then of course also an explicitly Christian one with a power and influence all of its own.

Muslim attitudes towards Christian beliefs, in the 21st 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 inter-national, inter-cultural, and inter-religious 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 (<http://www.kaiciid.org/>) having both the intercultural and interreligious dimensions explicitly included in its title, and 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 the doctrinal came in the work of Isma'il Al-Faruqi, particularly his study *Christian Ethics*, in which he argued that it was in this ethical 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 argued, could not be found in the teaching of Jesus himself. The well-established argument about the historical corruption of Christianity over the course of the centuries was thus applied in a slightly different domain, since 'peccatism' necessitated 'saviourism', the idea that human beings needed redemption, and this too was, in al-Faruqi's view, a further Christian error.

Traditional Muslim polemical arguments against Christianity have thus proved remarkably persistent with, on a popular level, the pamphlets and video recordings of the South African preacher Ahmed Deedat, still circulating widely. The title of one of these, 'Crucifixion or cruci-fiction?' seems calculated to be particularly offensive to Christians, with Deedat's work as a whole being memorably 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 and response to Christian belief and practice. (Deedat n.d.; Powell 1993; Esack 1997).

In summary, therefore, the traditional animus on the part of some Muslims towards core Christian convictions such as the Incarnation, the Trinity and the crucifixion of Jesus is still very much alive and kicking. Alongside that, 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 therefore vary hugely today, as they have in the past, with a particularly demoralising example of the more negative ones being provided by a report in 'The Week' for 23 April 2015, which stated that fifteen 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, after the rubber dinghy on which they were travelling 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 twenty-five years ago. (Moshay 1990; see Hock 2003: 50-51). We all, Christians and Muslims, need to do better than this.

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