HUGH GODDARD

A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN–MUSLIM RELATIONS

Second Edition

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A History of Christian–Muslim Relations

Second edition

Hugh Goddard

EDINBURGH University Press
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Preface to the second edition

The first two decades of the twenty-first century CE / third and fourth decades of the fifteenth century AH have witnessed a very significant number of developments in the field of Christian–Muslim relations, some more positive and some more challenging, so the time seems ripe to produce a second edition of this work. I am grateful to two colleagues, Andrew Marsham, formerly of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Edinburgh and now of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies in the University of Cambridge, and David Grafton of the Duncan Black Macdonald Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, who – quite independently but within a few months of each other – encouraged me to think of doing this, and it has been very stimulating to have the opportunity to review all the developments in the field over the past twenty years.

The text of the Introduction and the first eight chapters of the book remains unchanged from the first edition, though reformatted and therefore with revised pagination. The main change in this edition is therefore the addition of a new Chapter 9, on the first two decades of the new century, but the chance has also been taken to update the Chronology at the start of the book and the Bibliography at the end, as well as the Index of course.

I am grateful to colleagues at the Oxford Centre for Muslim–Christian Studies, the Manchester Centre for the Study of Christianity and Islam, and the Christian–Muslim Studies Network in the University of Edinburgh, for the opportunity to try out the ideas that are elaborated in the final chapter of this new edition; to Carole Hillenbrand, who continues to serve as the editor of this remarkable, and invaluable, New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys series, for her encouragement for the project; and to Nicola Ramsey, Eddie Clark and Rebecca Mackenzie at Edinburgh University Press for all their technical assistance with the production of the new edition. I alone, however, am responsible for any errors.

31 July 2019 / 27 Dhu‘l qa‘da 1440
Note on transliteration and dates

I have transliterated Arabic names and terms in accordance with the system of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, with the exception of the Arabic letter ħīm, for which I have used ‘j’ rather than ‘dj’, and the Arabic letter qāf, for which I have used ‘q’ rather than ‘k’ with a dot underneath it. I have not used the full transliteration system for names and terms from other Islamic languages such as Persian, Turkish, or Urdu – or for contemporary names in Chapter 9, when common spellings in English do not normally include diacritic points (thus Usama bin Ladin, rather than the somewhat pedantic Usāma bin Lādin).

In order to provide a sense of where the individuals and movements discussed in this book fit into the historical development of the Christian and Muslim traditions, I have usually provided dates according to both the Christian (i.e. Common Era) and Islamic calendars. (In the early chapters, where only one date is given, it refers to the Christian Common Era calendar, since the Islamic calendar had not yet commenced.) This may appear somewhat complicated since the former is a solar calendar and the latter a lunar calendar, with the result that an Islamic year is ten or eleven days shorter than a Christian/Common Era one, and an Islamic century is thus some three years shorter than a Christian/Common Era one. However, full conversion tables can be found in G. S. P. Freeman-Granville, *The Muslim and Christian Calendars*, 2nd edn, London: Collings, 1977 (which only goes up to 2000 CE), and a convenient summary is as follows:

The start of the Islamic calendar [AH1] = 622 CE.

AH 700 began on 20 September 1300 CE.

2000 CE began in 1420 AH.

A full web-based date converter, at least for the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries AH (i.e. 1883–2173 CE) is available at https://www.islamicfinder.org/islamic-date-converter.
# Chronology

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‘Richard I leaving England for the Crusades’ by Philpot and ‘Sir Thomas Roe at the Court of Ajmir’ by Rothenstein. Reproduced with the permission of the Palace of Westminster.

Full colour versions are available at www.parliament.uk/works of art/collection-highlights/british-history/building-of-britain.
Introduction

On 22 October 1997, in the House of Commons in London, a report by a Commission of the Runnymede Trust, an independent London-based trust which sponsors research in the field of social policy, was launched. The title of the report was *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*, and in the report the members of the Commission, who included eight Muslims and two Jews, investigated the nature of anti-Muslim prejudice (Islamophobia), the situation of Muslim communities in Britain, media coverage of issues involving Muslims, and how areas such as the law, education and community projects might address some of the difficulties which Muslims encounter in the United Kingdom, not least violent attacks on their persons.¹

Some of the comments which were made at the launch, and some of the media comment about the report, suggested that concern with Islam in Britain was a relatively new phenomenon, arising from the growth of a significant Muslim community in the country since 1945/1364. There was a certain irony, therefore, in the fact that those who attended the launch, in the Members' Dining Room of the House of Commons, had, on their way in, passed two pictures which, had they noticed them, would have made it very clear that this is not the case. Involvement with Islam, in different ways, goes back a considerable way in British history.

The two pictures hang in St Stephen’s Hall, the main access route for the public to the Central Lobby, which links the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and they are part of a series of eight paintings which together depict “The Building of Britain.”² The subjects of the paintings are as follows: King Alfred’s longships defeat the Danes (877/263); King John assents to Magna Carta (1215/612); The English people reading Wycliffe’s Bible (fourteenth/eighth century); Sir Thomas More refusing to grant Wolsey a subsidy (1523/929); Queen Elizabeth commissions Raleigh to sail for America (1584/992); the Parliamentary Union of England and Scotland (1707/1119); and then the two paintings which involve Islam in different ways, namely Richard I leaving England for the Crusades (1189/585), and Sir Thomas Roe at the Court of Ajmir (1614/1023).³

Taken together these two paintings, which are reproduced opposite in miniature, point firstly to the length of time during which one small part of the Christian world, England, has had some contact with the world of Islam, and secondly to the different forms which that relationship has taken over the course
of the centuries. Richard I’s departure for the Third Crusade is an instance of Christians taking up the sword for the purpose of recovering the city of Jerusalem from its Muslim rulers – of Christians as aggressors against Muslims, in other words – whereas Sir Thomas Roe’s visit to the Moghul Emperor Jahangir is an example of Christians as supplicants to Muslims, seeking in this case trading privileges on behalf of King James I. The two pictures therefore portray Christian–Muslim relationships of a very different kind.

In the context of the history of the world as a whole, the relationship between the Christian and Muslim worlds is thus a long and tortuous one. Both communities have their geographical and historical origins in the Middle East, but during the course of their subsequent histories they have expanded in different directions and become influential in different regions of the world – Christianity in Europe and the Americas, Islam in Africa and Asia. During the past two centuries, however, as a result of trade, the growth of empires, and migration, both communities have become truly universal; there are now very few regions of the world in which Christians and Muslims are not found, even if in hugely different proportions.

In addition, over the course of the centuries, what might be called the balance of power between the two communities has swung backwards and forwards. Sometimes the initiative seems to have lain with the Muslim community, with the Christian world simply being compelled to react to developments outside itself, and sometimes the situation seems to have been reversed, with the initiative lying with the Christian world and the Muslim world finding itself in the position of responding. Broadly speaking these descriptions could be seen as fitting the medieval era and the modern era respectively, but today in some respects the situation may be seen as demonstrating a greater degree of balance between Christians and Muslims. Military and technological power may thus be seen as residing more in the Christian world, but religious conviction and motivation may be discerned as being more powerful in Islamic societies. Increasing globalisation in the fields of commerce and information also does much to facilitate interchange and encounter between Christians and Muslims.

In many situations, however, encounter and interchange lead not to the growth of mutual understanding and sympathy but to conflict. The 1990s/1410s have witnessed this most dramatically in Europe, in different regions of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia and Kosovo. But in other continents too, from the Philippines to the Sudan to Nigeria, conflicts have also arisen and continue to cause suspicion and mistrust. The legacy of past conflicts, from the Muslim Age of Expansion in the early centuries to the Crusades and European imperialism, thus continues to wield a powerful influence, and some of the mutual misunderstandings which have arisen in the past seem to persist with great vigour despite the efforts of some in both communities to foster a
more accurate understanding of the other and a more positive attitude towards members of the other community.

In this situation, then, it is important for material to be available which may help both Christians and Muslims to understand how the two communities have reached the situation in which they find themselves today. A book which attempts to survey the relationship between Christians and Muslims over the centuries and across the whole geographical range of their encounter may therefore be timely.

The main structure of the book will be historical, surveying the development of the relationship between Christians and Muslims as it has unfolded across the centuries. Given the thesis outlined above, namely that at certain stages one community has been compelled to react to developments in the other while at other stages that situation has been reversed, it is important to make clear that Christian–Muslim relations over the centuries have developed on a kind of layer by layer basis: what happened in one community in one generation produced a reaction in the other community which in turn contributed to the development of formulations and attitudes in the first community in later generations. In Christian–Muslim relations, memories are long and thus the Crusades, for example, still exercise a powerful influence, many centuries later, in some parts of both the Christian and Muslim worlds.

Attention will also be given to the diversity of opinion which has usually existed in each community at any one time. For all their insistence on unity and unanimity neither Christians nor Muslims have managed to achieve these things for very long except with respect to a very few essential or core teachings and practices. There has thus usually been a spectrum of opinion in each community with reference to the other too. This is as true in the medieval Islamic world, with the divergent opinions of, for example, the ninth/third-century thinker al-Jahiz and the tenth/fourth-century group of philosophers known as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā (Brethren of Purity) concerning Christianity, as it is in the modern Christian world with the contrasting views of two Christian thinkers from the Reformed tradition, the Dutchman Hendrik Kraemer and the Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith, concerning Islam. The book will thus attempt to make clear the diversity which has existed and still exists within each community on the subject of the relationship with the other.

My hope is that a better understanding of the past, of the history of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, may help to promote deeper mutual comprehension in the present and a greater measure of collaboration rather than conflict in the future. There should be no illusions, however, about the extent of the obstacles which militate against the realisation of these hopes. Some Christians and some Muslims, perhaps even an increasing proportion of the membership of both communities, see the relationship as being intrinsically and essentially an adversarial one, but history itself points to the existence of
a more positive irenical way of thinking among both Muslims and Christians at certain stages of their history. My hope is that this book may be a small contribution towards the promotion and expansion in influence of this latter perspective.4

Notes

1. The full report was published by the Runnymede Trust in October 1997.
3. A certain amount of political and constitutional sensitivity is, of course, necessary at this point, since although the series as a whole is entitled ‘The Building of Britain’, with only two exceptions all of the events portrayed are actually significant moments in the building of England. (The two exceptions are the Parliamentary Union of England and Scotland, and Sir Thomas Roe’s trip to Ajmir, since it was undertaken at the instigation of the first king to unite the crowns of England and Scotland, James I, who had previously been James VI of Scotland.)
4. One example of a book which seems to posit an essentially adversarial relationship between the West and the world of Islam (which is not quite the same as the relationship between Christians and Muslims), is S. P. Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. The author suggests that of the nine major civilizations in the world today, the Western, the Confucian/Sinic, the Japanese, the Islamic, the Hindu, the Orthodox, the Latin American, the African, and the Buddhist, it is the relationship between the Western and the Islamic which poses the main threat to future world peace. See especially pp. 109–20, 174–9, 209–18, and 246–98.
CHAPTER 1

The Christian background to the coming of Islam

Early Christian thinking about other religions

When the Islamic community was established in the seventh/first century and the Christian community found itself having to respond to this new phenomenon, it did so on the basis of an already well-established tradition of thought about other religions. This was based partly on the scriptures which it had inherited from the Jewish community, the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, partly on developments found within its own distinctive scriptures, the New Testament, and partly on the tradition of Christian thought and practice as it developed in the Patristic period, the period of the Fathers (patres) of the Christian church.

Thus in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible there was a well-established tension between what might be called exclusivism or antagonism on the one hand, and inclusivism or universalism on the other. In some places the dominant theme is the chosenness of the Children of Israel, with the emphasis on their being set apart and enjoying a special relationship with God, expressed in the concept of covenant. This sometimes resulted in confrontation between them and the surrounding nations and religions, as expressed most memorably in 1 Kings 18, the challenge of the prophet Elijah to the prophets of Baal and Asherah, but in many of these confrontations the extent to which the main cause of conflict was religious and the extent to which it was political or territorial is not always clear. On the other hand the Hebrew scriptures often point to individuals outside the community of the Children of Israel who are recognised as knowing something of God and who may either be accepted into the community, as was the case with Ruth the Moabitess, or be explicitly recognised as being agents of God, as was the case with Cyrus the King of Persia, who in Isaiah 45:1 was described as having been anointed by God.

The long series of battles between Israelites and Amalekites, Canaanites, Philistines, Syrians and others, and between their gods, suggest that the dominant motif in the relationship between the communities was that of confrontation, even enmity. But the more inclusive tradition was always there, and the universalist dimension is perhaps most clearly expressed at the start of what in the Christian arrangement of the Hebrew scriptures is the last book, Malachi, of the Old Testament:
For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 1:11)

The two contrasting attitudes are also well illustrated in the messages of two short prophetic books from the latter part of the Old Testament, both of which focus on the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The book of Nahum celebrates the fall of the city, and glories in it, celebrating and indeed exulting in its destruction. The book of Jonah, by contrast, tells a story of the population of the city responding positively to the call to repentance which is proclaimed by the prophet, thereby escaping divine judgement and leading to Jonah’s recognition of an important truth about God. This seems in a way to foreshadow certain parts of the teaching of the Qur’an, namely that God is gracious and merciful (Jonah 4:2).

The Inter-testamental period too, roughly the four centuries before the time of Jesus, saw a similar spectrum of attitude developing among the Jewish people. On the one hand was an attitude of militant separatism and exclusivism, as represented by the Maccabees who revolted against Greek rule over Palestine in the second century BCE. They displayed an attitude of hostility both to foreign rule and to foreign religion and culture, an attitude which was continued in the time of Jesus by the Zealots, who were quite prepared to use violence in pursuit of their religious and political ambitions. In contrast to this, particularly among the Jews of the Diaspora, those living outside Palestine, an attitude of much greater openness was evident. This is best seen in the first-century CE figure of Philo, a Jew from Alexandria, who sought to expound Judaism in terms of Hellenistic philosophy and who was willing to draw on philosophical language and terminology in order to do so. The translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, which was undertaken in the same city in the second or third century BCE, and which came to be known as the Septuagint because of the seventy scholars who were thought to have done the translation, is also evidence of a greater openness towards religious ideas emanating from outside the Jewish community.

For the early Christian community there were two main aspects to its thinking about other religious traditions. Firstly its relationship to the Jewish community from which it had grown, and secondly its attitude towards the prevailing patterns of Graeco-Roman religion and philosophy by which it was surrounded.

Over the course of the past fifty years much research and reflection has been undertaken about what is commonly called ‘The Parting of the Ways’, the process by which the Christian church became established as a community separate and distinct from the Judaism within which it had its roots. One important theme which has been pushed into renewed prominence, thanks to the work of Geza Vermes in particular, is the Jewishness of Jesus: contrary to much later Christian
thinking which developed after the separation of the Christian church from Judaism, Jesus in much of his teaching and practice was a very Jewish figure, in the prophetic tradition of Jewish religion. All of his most intimate disciples were Jewish, he prayed and worshipped in synagogue and temple, and the earliest records of his teaching seem to make it clear that he regarded his message as being targeted primarily at his own Jewish community. Some aspects of his teaching, however, caused considerable resentment and controversy within the Jewish community, and it was these which led to Jesus’s crucifixion at the hands of the Romans.

Even after this, Jesus’s early disciples continued at first to regard themselves as Jews and to pray in the Temple and the synagogue. They were not always welcomed, however, and efforts on the part of some Jewish leaders to purge the followers of Jesus from Jewish congregations led to the beginnings of a separate Christian community. This was accelerated by the conversion of Saul, according to the Book of Acts a leader in the campaign against the followers of Jesus. After Saul’s change of heart he began to argue for the abandonment of some Jewish practices by Christians and thus contributed towards the establishment of separate Christian congregations. The Council of Jerusalem, referred to in Acts 15, discussed the question of whether or not non-Jewish converts should be required to undergo circumcision, and by seeming to suggest that they need not it accelerated the process.

What began as a parting, or separation, gradually became a focus of more antagonism and even vitriol. After the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, following a Jewish revolt against Roman authority, the two communities began to define themselves more explicitly as separate and distinct from each other. At first both communities were suspect in the eyes of the Roman authorities, and both on occasion suffered persecution, but the level of polemic between the two began to increase. Even within the New Testament some of the animus which some Christians evidently felt towards Judaism is clear, especially in the writings of John.

In the early Christian centuries New Testament texts such as Matthew 27: 25 (in which in his account of the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate Matthew writes that, in response to the Roman governor’s protest that he could find no evil in Jesus, the crowd, most of whose members were Jews, shouted ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’) and Acts 2: 23 (where in his first major public sermon after the death of Jesus his disciple Peter says to his mainly Jewish audience ‘This Jesus whom you crucified’) began to be used to justify violence and persecution of members of the Jewish community. Later, when at the start of the fourth century Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the power of the state also began to be used against Jews, so that the burning of synagogues was sanctioned and the forced conversion of Jews to Christianity was legitimised. Christian–Jewish relations therefore deteriorated dramatically, and despite their common ancestry the two traditions increasingly adopted mutually hostile attitudes.
A particularly graphic example of this comes in a series of eight sermons delivered by John Chrysostom (literally ‘the golden-tongued’) in the Syrian city of Antioch in 387 CE, where he describes the Jews as dogs who have descended to gluttony, drunkenness and sensuality, whose synagogues are no better than theatres, brothels or dens of thieves, whose souls have become the seats of demons and places of idolatry, and who are to be shunned as a filthy plague threatening the whole world. There is even a suggestion that they are no longer fit for anything but slaughter. Recent research has suggested that these remarks need to be located in the context of a Christian community in Antioch which still found aspects of Judaism attractive, and that their vitriolic tone should be seen as rhetoric intended to remind Christians of their separate and distinct identity. But it must be acknowledged that their negative tone was a major contributory factor to the emergence of the ghetto in medieval and modern Christian societies.

On the other hand, alongside the diatribes of Chrysostom and others, more positive attitudes towards the Jews were sometimes evident, with individual friendships between Christians and Jews not unheard of, and the overall picture of Christian–Jewish relationships after the conversion of Constantine is not one of unremitting darkness.

Christian attitudes towards Hellenism and Graeco-Roman philosophy were more varied. Within the New Testament itself, even if Jesus’s message seems to have been directed primarily at the Jews, there are nevertheless, as in the Old Testament/Hebrew scriptures, a number of encounters and stories which present individuals outside the Jewish community in a favourable light: there are positive encounters with a Roman centurion and a Samaritan woman, and one of Jesus’s most famous parables has at its heart a Samaritan as the model who is commended for his compassion and charity.

Partly as a result of the deterioration in the relationship between many Jews and the followers of Jesus, the early Christians began to demonstrate their conviction that the message of Jesus was not only for Jews but also for non-Jews. This is reflected in the New Testament by the story of the Three Wise Men (Matthew 2: 1–12), who came from the East in order to give gifts to Jesus, and in the Book of Acts in the vision of Peter concerning the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). It is once again Paul, though, who drives the process forward, and the Book of Acts, as it tells of his travels around the Mediterranean seeking to make Jesus more widely known, provides several accounts of his attitude towards the Greek religion of his day. Firstly, in Athens, as recorded in Acts 17, Paul seems to adopt a remarkably positive and open attitude towards Greek philosophy, suggesting that what the Athenians worship as the ‘unknown god’ is the God whom he proclaims; his message, he suggests, is perhaps therefore the fulfillment rather than the antithesis of what they believe. But later, in Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 19 and 20, there seems to have been a greater element of confrontation and rejection in his message, with the suggestion that the worship of Diana/Artemis of the Ephesians was of no value.
In the Patristic period too, different attitudes towards Greek philosophy grew up in different parts of the Christian church. One stream of Christian thought, more influential in the Western, Latin-speaking half of the Roman Empire, emphasised the distinctiveness of the Christian message and the need for the Christian community to separate itself from surrounding intellectual influences. This view is most succinctly represented in the famous statement of the North African Christian Tertullian (c. 170–220 CE): ‘What has Athens [the home of philosophy] to do with Jerusalem [the home of revelation]?’ In the Eastern part of the Empire, however, where most Christians were Greek-speaking, a more inclusive/universalist tradition grew up, as represented by such figures as Justin Martyr (c. 100–65 CE), who proclaimed Christianity as the true philosophy, and Clement of Alexandria (c. 155–c. 220 CE), who suggested that the salvation brought by Jesus would be universal in scope. Thus Justin wrote:

> It is our belief that those . . . who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God, . . . [and] will by God's grace share his dwelling . . . in principle this holds good for all . . .

and Clement argued that:

> By reflection and direct vision those among the Greeks who have philosophized accurately see God.6

In this tradition the giants of the Greek philosophical tradition such as Plato and Aristotle were in a sense baptised as honorary Christians. Passages such as the one in Plato’s *Republic*, which refers to the Just Man being crucified, were seen as in some way prophetic, and the emphasis seems to have lain much more on synthesis and compatibility than on antagonism or separation.7

Some parts of the New Testament and the writings of some of the Church Fathers do on some occasions, however, use extremely strong language concerning those with whom their authors disagree. The first letter of John speaks of the Antichrist:

> Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?8 This is the antichrist . . . (1 John 2: 22)

and

> Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist . . . (1 John 4: 2–3)
This is strong language indeed, but it is very important to note that its original
target was those within the Christian community who seemed to the writer to be
developing opinions about Jesus which were extremely suspect. The most plau-
sible suggestions concerning the nature of these threatening beliefs is that they
involved some kind of combination of Ebionism and Gnosticism, as represented
by the opinions of a figure such as Cerinthus around the end of the first century
CE. He argued that Jesus was an ordinary man who was chosen by God at his
baptism for a special ministry; he received special wisdom for this at his baptism,
which disappeared before his crucifixion. This strongly negative judgement, in
other words, was not made upon people outside the community altogether, but
rather on those inside who were perceived to be threatening its identity in some
way. In the same way many of the most polemical statements from the mouth
of Jesus in the New Testament were originally directed towards members of his
own (Jewish) community with whom he disagreed (e.g. Matthew 3: 7).

Context also needs to be kept in mind when considering some of the state-
ments in the New Testament which have often been interpreted exclusively by
Christians, in other words as meaning that only Christians will be saved. The
two verses most commonly referred to in this context are John 14: 6 (Jesus said:
‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the father, but by me’),
and Acts 4: 12 (Peter said: ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other
name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved’). It has been suggested by
modern scholars that the Johannine saying in particular must be understood
in the context of a vigorously sectarian Johannine community, whose exclusive
social identity was therefore reinforced by such exclusive statements. Peter’s say-
ing in Acts needs to be seen against its immediate background, which is that of
a spirited defence by Peter of the healing of a lame man in the Temple.9

Other parts of the New Testament also use extremely strong language
concerning the Roman state, which as it began to persecute Christians from
the time of Nero (54–68 CE) came to be referred to in apocalyptic terms as
‘the beast’, especially in the Book of Revelation. Earlier attitudes, whereby
Christians attempted to establish their position as loyal citizens of the Empire,
therefore came to be substantially revised by changing circumstances, and not
surprisingly a far greater measure of antagonism becomes evident and persists
through the early centuries.

When the Islamic community came onto the scene, therefore, in the seventh/
first century, these were some of the traditions which the Christian community
was able to draw on and develop in seeking to formulate its response to and inter-
pretation of Islam. We shall see later that a considerable variety of Christian
response emerged at that time, with no single universally accepted Christian view
ever gaining complete acceptance. Given the spectrum of opinion which we have
seen existing within both the Christian scriptures and early Christian thought, this
is not really surprising.
The Christian background to the coming of Islam

The history of the Christian church in the Middle East

One of the aspects of its history which the Christian church shares with the Islamic community is that it has its historical origins in the Middle East. It is therefore important that some account is given of the history and development of the Christian church after its origins as described in the New Testament, with which most modern Christians are broadly familiar; the 600 or so years of further development are less familiar, at least to many modern Western Christians, and it is important to outline the main features of evolution in the centuries prior to the establishment of the Islamic umma (community).

Probably the most important change in this period was a result of the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the second decade of the fourth century. From being a minority community with little or no political influence and power, the Christian church suddenly became the established religion of the most powerful state of the Mediterranean world. Close links were thus established between church and state, with Christian bishops sometimes becoming powerful players in the political arena, and with the power of the state sometimes being used to further the influence of particular groups within the Christian community.

Part of the reason for Constantine’s decision to accept Christianity himself was his hope that the Christian religion might serve as a focus for unity and thus bring about renewed strength within the Empire. Developments in the next few centuries, however, quickly made it clear that this was to be a vain hope, as more and more division took place within the Christian church, leading to the emergence and establishment of a number of different Christian communities. Argument and division were not new, of course, with many fierce debates being waged in the first three centuries, but somehow the minority status of the Christians, together with the persecution which they had intermittently suffered, meant that these early divisions did not become institutionalised in the way that was the case with those which came after the time of Constantine.

By the seventh/first century, therefore, the Christian church was deeply divided, and this was one of the charges which the Qur’an quite explicitly made against Christians as it sought to challenge their claim to possess the truth:

> And with those who say: ‘Lo! We are Christians,’ We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished. Therefore We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork. (5: 14)

In part these divisions simply bore some correspondence to the split which the Roman Empire itself underwent in the fourth century when it was divided into an Eastern and a Western half. The Christian church in the Western,
Latin-speaking, half of the Empire, began to develop its own understanding of the Christian faith, with an emphasis on law, which gave rise to redemption becoming the central focus of Western theology, expressed in worship through sacrifice being at the heart of the Mass. The church in the Eastern half of the Empire, by contrast, mainly Greek-speaking, was more at home with the language of philosophy, and thus Eastern Christian theology came to focus more on the idea of deification, with the emphasis in worship lying much more on Eucharist (Thanksgiving). To some extent East and West therefore quite simply drifted apart, a process which accelerated when the Western half of the Empire collapsed in 476, while the Eastern half lived on for almost another millennium, and although a split between the Eastern and Western churches was not formalised until 1054/446, the year of the so-called Great Schism, the real separation had taken place centuries earlier, even before the establishment of the Islamic community.

One difference, which was not an original cause of the division between East and West but which grew up somewhat later, concerned what was known as the *filioque* clause, that part of the Christian creed as it evolved in the early centuries which elaborated on what Christians were to believe about the Holy Spirit. In the East it was affirmed that the Spirit ‘proceeded from the Father’, but in the West, beginning probably in Spain towards the end of the eighth/second century, it began to be affirmed that the Spirit ‘proceeded from the Father and the Son’ (*filioque* being simply the Latin for ‘and the Son’). As well as being one of the most serious and bitterly contested differences between the Eastern and Western churches until today, this difference also, as we shall see, gave rise to some significant differences between the Eastern and the Western churches in their reactions and attitudes towards Islam.

A further difference between East and West in the early centuries centred on differing concepts of leadership and authority. Of the leading centres of the early Christian community only one, Rome, lay in the West, while Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria lay in the East. When the new city of Constantinople (today’s Istanbul), founded by Constantine in 324, was also recognised as a patriarchate, this meant that four important ecclesiastical centres lay in the East. One consequence of this was that it was harder for any one centre in the East to claim pre-eminence, so Eastern views of authority tended to be more conciliar, whereas the existence of only one centre in the West resulted in a greater degree of concentration of power, with the papacy sometimes claiming supreme authority for itself.

If the division between West and East was the most serious division in the Christian church before the coming of the Islamic community, other differences soon followed, especially within the Eastern church. In the West it was perhaps Donatism in north Africa, beginning in the fourth century, which created the deepest split, even, on some accounts, providing part of the explanation for the virtually complete disappearance of the Christian church from north Africa.
under Islamic rule. But it was in the East that the deepest splits occurred, with their focus on Christology, the Christian teaching concerning the nature of the Person of Christ.

These splits have their roots in the emergence of schools of thought within the church in the early centuries which had different emphases concerning Christology. On the one hand the Antiochene school, based on Antioch in Syria, the place at which the term ‘Christian’ had first been used for the followers of Jesus (Acts 11:26), tended to emphasise the full humanity of Jesus, as well as displaying some admiration for Aristotelian empiricism in its philosophical inclination; the Alexandrian school, by contrast, leaned more in the direction of a Logos Christology, emphasising Jesus’s role as Word of God, a concept developed by the Jewish Alexandrian thinker Philo, as we have seen above. It also displayed a preference for Platonic mysticism in its drawing upon the Greek philosophical tradition.

For several centuries these schools remained trends or emphases, often interacting fruitfully with each other even when they differed, but in the fifth century extra animus became apparent in their disagreements, and as a result separate communities and hierarchies were established. This happened first in the fifth century when Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was accused of drawing too rigid a separation between the human and the divine natures of Christ, which led to his being declared a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431. He was deposed and exiled, but his views were sufficiently attractive to a significant number of Christians, particularly in Syria and further to the east, in Iraq and Iran, for a separate Nestorian church to be established. In the next few years, partly as a reaction to the views of Nestorius, a view emerged which laid particular stress on the divine nature of Christ, at the expense of his humanity, and twenty years after the Council of Ephesus a further Council, this time held at Chalcedon, not far from Constantinople, rejected this view, as put forward by Eutyches, a monk in Constantinople. The opinions of Eutyches, which came to be widely known as Monophysitism (mono/one physis/nature), were declared heretical, but again they proved popular in some provinces of the Byzantine Empire, particularly in Syria and Egypt, and the result was the establishment of distinct Monophysite churches in these regions.

By the end of the fifth century, therefore, the Eastern church was no longer united, and even if all of these churches continue to be described as ‘Orthodox’ churches, meaning that they are all Eastern churches and they all share a common philosophy and style of worship, bitter opposition grew up between the Greek church, based in Constantinople, which accepted the decisions of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, and the Nestorian and Monophysite churches, which did not. It is important to note, too, that it was not only theology which was at issue here since political factors also played a part. On the one hand, the spread of the Christian church outside the frontiers of the Roman Empire was significant here, since the views of Nestorius were popular among the Christian subjects of the Persian Empire, and this made the loyalty
of Nestorians inside the Roman Empire somewhat suspect. On the other hand, resentment against the central powers of the Byzantine Empire in its more distant provinces such as Egypt and Syria was also a factor behind theological separatism. The result, whatever the causes, was further deep division within the Christian church, along both theological and geographical lines, and the significance of this as part of the background to the coming of the Islamic community cannot be emphasised enough.

This is most obvious if we turn now to investigate the position of the Christian church in Arabia, the historical and geographical heartland of the Islamic community. In the sixth century Arabia was in a sense a world of its own, independent and not a part of either of the major states of the day, the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanian Persian Empire. Its landward boundaries, however, were surrounded by those two empires, and, indeed, in one sense it straddled the frontier between them. One consequence of this is that it was not immune from their influence, and prior to the time of the prophet Muḥammad both of these states were endeavouring to expand their control over certain regions of Arabia.

If we look, therefore, at Arabia around the year 600, just before Muhammad’s call to prophethood, we find that different elements of the Christian church were well-established on the frontiers of Arabia. To the north-west, in the direction of Jerusalem and the Mediterranean, some Arab tribes on the Byzantine frontier had accepted Christianity, beginning in the fourth century; one Roman Emperor, Marcus Julius Philippus, indeed, commonly known as Philip the Arab, who ruled between 244 and 249, was a Christian, though in his official role as emperor he did not seem to make this explicit, restricting his Christian faith to his private capacity. Later, an important Arab tribe, the Banū Ghassān, was among several tribes which possibly accepted Christianity in the fourth century, and in the sixth century the Ghassānids acquired a position of political dominance in the region as a result of the designation of their leader Ḥārith ibn Jabala by the Byzantines as ‘phylarch’ or tribal leader.

It should be made clear at this point that the acceptance of Christianity by several Arab tribes in this period was not simply a matter of religious or theological conviction. It was also a statement of cultural affinity and a marker of political allegiance, so that in a sense the spread of Christianity sometimes served as an extension of Byzantine foreign policy. But this did not mean that it was Orthodox (in the sense of accepting the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon) Christianity which spread on the frontier, rather it was Monophysite Christianity which became dominant, including the Ghassānids among its adherents, and this was to be significant for the future. The whole character of the Christian church in the region, indeed, was somewhat removed from the mainstream of Christian thought and practice, not least because of the emergence of monasticism in the Syrian desert in the fourth century as a kind of protest against developments within the church at large.
On the north-eastern frontier of Arabia, the area bordering on Iraq, which was then a province of the Sassanian Empire, a similar process of the diffusion of the Christian message among some of the Arab tribes took place, but it was a different branch of the church which took root here. Politically an important tribe in this region was the tribe of Lakhm, which was the main rival of the Ghassânids during the sixth century, and enjoyed a similar kind of relationship of patronage to the Sassanian Empire as the Ghassânids did to Byzantium. Its ruler between 583 and 602, Nu’mân ibn Mundhir, was a convert to Christianity, but it was the Nestorian church to which he became affiliated, and this reflected the influence of Nestorianism within the Persian empire: the Lakhmid capital, al-H̱ira, had been a centre of Nestorianism since the fourth century, and further south, on the eastern shores of the Gulf, Nestorianism had also taken root, again partly in connection with the diffusion of Persian cultural and political influence, so that Bahrain (a term then used to describe the eastern shores of Arabia rather than the island off them as it is today) had Nestorian bishops.

The third area on the fringes of Arabia which is important for our examination is the south-western corner of the Arabian peninsula, the area today known as Yemen. Here too Christianity had become established in the centuries prior to the establishment of the Islamic community, and the agent of its diffusion here was the Christian kingdom of Axum on the opposite shore of the Red Sea, in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Once again it was Monophysite Christianity which was involved here, and although the Christian church does not seem to have had a great impact on South Arabia it did enjoy considerable influence at least in one place, the town of Najrān.

All of the instances of some kind of Christian influence in Arabia which we have looked at so far have involved the fringes of the region. Evidence for the spread of Christianity is therefore relatively easy to obtain, given the references to the process in the records of the states surrounding Arabia, which as we have seen were often intimately involved in the process anyway. What is much more difficult to chronicle and to assess is the influence of the Christian church in the more central regions of Arabia, including those where the Islamic community first became established. With respect to Najd, the central area of the peninsula, there is evidence of the tribe of Taghlib accepting Christianity, of the Monophysite variety, towards the end of the sixth century, and of the ruling clan of the more important tribe of Kinda also adopting Christianity at roughly the same time. In the latter case it is not clear either which form of Christianity was involved or the extent to which the tribe as a whole was affected. The evidence is then even less clear with reference to the Hijaz, on the western side of the peninsula, where Muḥammad was born. It seems that there was some Christian presence, but not necessarily an indigenous one and not one which enjoyed very much influence among the ruling elements of the region.

In summary, then, it is fair to suggest that the Christian church was present in and enjoyed considerable influence on the areas on the borders of Arabia,
especially in the north-west and the north-east. It was also established on the east coast and in South Arabia, especially at Najrān, but even taking all this together, for all its influence on the frontiers of Arabia, Christianity had not become a major player in developments in the heartlands of Arabia. There it was to be another religious force which was to become pre-eminent.

Notes

8. ‘Christ’ is the Greek word meaning ‘the one anointed by God’.
15. Ibid., p. 260.