Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Intentional, structured encounters between Muslims and Christians are generally termed “Muslim-Christian dialogue.” Interfaith dialogue is a conversation in which two or more parties seek to express their views accurately and to listen respectfully to their counterparts. Since the second half of the twentieth century, organized dialogue meetings have proliferated at the local, regional, and international levels. The meetings vary significantly in their organization, focus, and venue, as well as in the composition of participants.

Several motives have propelled the contemporary dialogue movement. These include desires to foster understanding, to stimulate communication, to correct stereotypes, to work on specific problems of mutual concern, to explore similarities and differences, and to facilitate means of witness and cooperation. The pragmatic need for better understanding and cooperation among adherents in the world’s two largest communities of faith—Christianity and Islam—is particularly acute. Together Christians and Muslims comprise almost half the world’s population, so the way in which they relate is bound to have profound consequences for both communities and for the world.

The dynamics of interfaith encounter between Muslims and Hindus, Muslims and Jews, and Muslims and Christians differ. Their historic relationships as well as their major theological, social, and political concerns vary markedly. Contemporary initiatives in Muslim-Christian dialogue can be understood best in the larger context which can be established by a brief overview of dominant themes in Muslim-Christian encounter.

**Historical Background.**

Christianity and Islam are the world’s two largest communities of faith. Rooted as both traditions are in the monotheism of the patriarch Abraham, Muslims and Christians share a common heritage. For more than fourteen centuries these communities of faith have been linked by their theological understandings and by geographical proximity. The history of Muslim-Christian interaction includes periods of great tension, hostility, and open war as well as times of uneasy toleration, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation.

Islamic self-understanding incorporates an awareness of and direct link with the biblical tradition. Muhammad, his companions, and subsequent generations of Muslims have been guided by the Qur’an, which they have understood as a continuation and completion of God’s revelations to humankind. The Qur’an speaks of many prophets (ārhibiyā’, singular nabi) and messengers (rusul, sg. rasūl) who functioned as agents of God’s revelation. Particular emphasis is laid on the revelations through Moses (the Torah) and Jesus (the Gospel) and their respective communities of faith or “People of the Book” (ahl al-kitāb). See PEOPLE OF THE BOOK.

The Qur’an includes positive affirmations for the People of the Book, including the promise that Jews and Christians who have faith, trust in God and the Last Day, and do what is righteous “shall have their reward” (2:62 and 5:69). The different religious communities are explained as a part of God’s plan; if God had so willed, the Qur’an asserts, humankind would be one community. Diversity among the communities provides a test for people of faith: “Compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you (the truth) about that which you have been disputing” (5:48).

The Qur’an states that “there shall be no compulsion in religious matters” (6:256). Peaceful coexistence is affirmed (106:1–6). At the same time, the People of the Book are urged to “come to a common word” on the understanding of the unity of God (tawḥīd) and proper worship (e.g., 3:64, 4:171, 5:62, and 29:46). Christians, in particular, are chided for having distorted the revelation of God. Traditional Christian doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity are depicted as compromising the unity and transcendence of God (e.g., 5:72–75, 5:117, and 112:3). There are also verses urging Muslims to fight, under certain circumstances, those who have been given a book but “practiced not the religion of truth” (9:29).

While the Qur’an provides a framework for Muslims’ understanding of Christians and Christianity, particular political, economic, and social considerations have shaped the encounter in each setting. Circumstances and relationships between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, for example, cannot be equated casually with those in Lebanon over the same centuries. Relationships in Egypt, a religious
and intellectual center of the Islamic world, were subject to distinctive dynamics not found elsewhere. Cairo, known as the "city of a thousand minarets," is home to al-Azhar, the mosque and university, which has been a bastion of Sunni orthodoxy through much of Islamic history. The Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt comprise the largest Christian community in the Arabic speaking world. As an Oriental Orthodox church, the Copts have been completely independent of both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern (Greek, Russian, and Serbian) Orthodox churches since the middle of the fifth century.

By contrast, the mountains of Lebanon provided safe haven for a wide range of religious groups—numerous Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, various Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, and the Druze—for more than a thousand years. As minority communities threatened by Christian crusaders or Muslim conquerors or more recent colonial powers, inhabitants of Lebanon have coexisted, cooperated and clashed, in many ways. An examination of Muslim-Christian relations in Spain or the former Yugoslavia or contemporary Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, further illustrates the need for careful, contextual analysis.

Historically, Christians living under Islamic rule were usually treated as "protected dhimmi peoples"; the practical implications of dhimmi status fluctuated from time to time and from place to place. Even in the best of circumstances, however, it was difficult for Christians and Muslims to engage one another as equals in dialogue. See DHIMMI.

With few exceptions, Islamic literature that is focused on Christianity has been polemical. The writings of the celebrated fourteenth-century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) illustrate the point. In his book Al-jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ il-maṣāḥid dīn al-ḥadīṣ (The Correct Answer to Those Who Changed the Religion of Christ), Ibn Taymiyyah catalogs the major Islamic theological and philosophical criticisms of Christianity: altering the divine revelation, propagating errant doctrine, and grievous mistakes in religious practices.

On the Christian side, the advent of Islam in the seventh century presented major challenges. In the short space of a century, Islam transformed the character and culture of many lands from northern India to Spain, disrupted the unity of the Mediterranean world, and displaced the axis of Christendom to the north. Islam challenged Christian assumptions. Not only were the Muslims successful in their military and political expansion, but their religion presented a puzzling and threatening new intellectual position.

John of Damascus in the eighth century was the first coherent treatment of Islam. His encounter with Muslims in the Umayyad administrative and military center of Damascus led him to regard Islam not as an alien tradition but as a Christian heresy. Subsequent Christian writers, particularly those not living among Muslims, were even harsher. Most tended to focus on malicious and absurd distortions of the basic tenets of Islam and the character of Muhammad. This trend is especially evident in Europe following the Crusades.

The Crusades, launched in 1096, cast a long shadow over many centuries. In the midst of their stories of chivalry and fighting for holy causes, medieval writers painted a picture of Islam as a vile religion inspired by the devil or Antichrist. The prevailing sentiment in Europe is illustrated in Dante's Inferno, where a mutilated Muḥammad is depicted as languishing in the depths of Hell because he was "a fomenter of discord and schism."

There were a few more positive voices among medieval Christians. St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), who visited the sultan of Egypt in the midst of the Crusades, instructed his brothers to live among Muslims in peace, avoiding quarrels and disputes. Deep animosity toward Islam was pervasive, however. Martin Luther (d. 1546) wrote several treatises attacking Islam, the Qurʾān, and Muḥammad, motivated in part by the threat of Ottoman Turks advancing on Europe. Luther held the long-standing view that Islam as a post-Christian religion was false by definition.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

Several developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries set the stage for contemporary Muslim-Christian dialogue. First, constantly improving transportation and communication facilitated international commerce and unprecedented levels of migration. Second, scholars gathered a wealth of information on diverse religious practices and belief systems. Although Western studies of Islam were often far from objective, significant chan-ges have occurred. With more accurate information in hand, many non-Muslim scholars concluded that Muḥammad was sincere and devout, challenging the prevailing Western view that he was a shrewd and sinister charlatan. Similarly, the scope and reliability of information on Christianity has broadened the horizons of many Muslim scholars during the past century. See ISLAMIC STUDIES, subentry on HISTORY OF THE FIELD; and ORIENTALISM.

A third major factor contributing to the new context arose from the modern missionary movement among Western Christians. The experience of personal contact with Muslims and other people of faith led many missionaries to reassess their presuppositions. Participants in the three twentieth-century world missionary conferences (Edinburgh in 1910, Jerusalem in 1928, and Tambaram [India] in 1938) wrestled with questions of witness and service in the midst of religious diversity. These conferences stimulated debate and paved the way for ecumenical efforts at interfaith understanding under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC), founded in 1948.
Organized Dialogue Movement.

The dialogue movement began during the 1950s when the WCC and the Vatican organized a number of meetings between Christian leaders and representatives of other religious traditions. These initial efforts resulted in the formation of new institutions. In 1964, toward the end of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II), Pope Paul VI established a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions to study religious traditions, provide resources, and promote interreligious dialogue through education and by facilitating local efforts by Catholics. Several major documents adopted at Vatican II (1962–1965) focused on interfaith relations.

The most visible Christian leader during the last quarter of the twentieth century, Pope John Paul II, was a strong advocate for the new approach to interfaith relations. During his papacy (1978–2005), John Paul II traveled to 117 countries. He often met with leaders from various religions, on his travels and in Rome. He was the first pope to visit a mosque (in Damascus in 2001). The spirit of his approach to Islam is evident in a 1985 speech delivered to over 80,000 Muslims at a soccer stadium in Casablanca:

“We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world … In a world which desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers come together? Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever. It flows from fidelity to God. Too often in the past, we have opposed each other in polemics and wars. I believe that today God invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path to righteousness.”

In 1989, John Paul II reorganized the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions and renamed it the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The WCC established its program for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) in 1971: Muslim-Christian relations were a primary focus from the outset. In cooperation with more than three hundred WCC member churches, the DFI concentrated on organizing large international and smaller regional meetings and on providing educational materials. The WCC and Vatican publish books, articles, reports, working papers, and reviews by both Christians and Muslims.

By the 1980s and 1990s, other international organizations developed formal and informal programs for Muslim-Christian dialogue. The Muslim World League, the World Muslim Congress, and the Middle East Council of Churches are notable examples.

At the local level, hundreds of interfaith organizations have facilitated dialogue programs. These programs are difficult to characterize because they vary substantially. Detailed information and analyses of activities in specific countries and organizations is accessible through the periodicals listed in the bibliography; the following examples illustrate the breadth of activity.

In India and the Philippines, Christian institutions have studied Islam and pursued dialogue programs for decades. These academic programs stimulated particular initiatives by churches and Muslim organizations. Muslim-Christian dialogue programs can also be found in Nigeria, Indonesia, Tunisia, France, Tanzania, and elsewhere.

The Muslim community in Great Britain numbers well over two million. The large influx of Muslims since 1950 has spawned numerous local and national Islamic organizations, many of which are engaged with Christian counterparts in local churches or through programs of the British Council of Churches. Their concerns range from education and health care to the resolution of Middle East conflicts.

In addition to numerous dialogue programs organized by local interfaith organizations or state councils of churches, two major academic centers in the U.S. provide leadership and programs centered on Muslim-Christian relations. For over fifty years, Hartford Seminary in Connecticut has specialized in the study of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations through degree programs, continuing education, and publications.

The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU) was founded at Georgetown University in 1993. Through research, publications, academic and community programs, the center seeks to improve relations between the Muslim world and the West as well as enhance understanding of Muslims in the West. In 2005, the CMCU received a $20 million gift from Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia in order to strengthen and expand its many programs; its full name is now Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Modes of Dialogue.

While the nature of the encounter differs from place to place and over time, most organized efforts adhere to a particular type of dialogue. As the interfaith dialogue movement emerged, organizers and participants developed several distinctive, yet interrelated modes.

“Parliamentary dialogue” is carried on by the large assemblies convened for interfaith discussion. The earliest example was the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Such gatherings became more frequent in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries under the auspices of multifaith organizations such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the World Congress of Faiths. These sessions tend to focus on better cooperation among religious groups and
“Institutional dialogue” is the organized effort to initiate and facilitate various kinds of dialogue meetings. In addition to the immediate focus, this approach also seeks to establish and nurture communication between institutional representatives of religious organizations. Institutional dialogue encompasses much of the work carried out through the Vatican and the WCC, with numerous variations at the local level.

“Theological dialogue” includes structured meetings in which theological and philosophical issues are the primary focus. Muslims and Christians, for example, may concentrate on understandings of God, Jesus, revelation, human responsibility in society, and so forth. Theological dialogue also refers to discussion of the meaning of one’s religious tradition in the context of religious pluralism. Here, as with most other types of dialogue involving several participants, the dialogue occurs both between Muslims and Christians and within those groups.

“Dialogue in community” and “the dialogue of life” are inclusive categories concentrating on practical issues of common concern—for example, the proper relationship between religion and the state, the rights of religious minorities, issues arising from interreligious marriage, appropriate approaches to mission and witness, and religious values and public education. This type of dialogue is often designed to encourage common action. Another important function of dialogue in community is difficult to measure: organizers often express the hope that it will stimulate more intentional and informal daily interaction between Muslim and Christian neighbors.

“Spiritual dialogue” is concerned with developing, nourishing, and deepening spiritual life through interfaith encounter. Here too there is considerable latitude for exploration. The least threatening approach might include observing the worship of others or sharing perspectives on the meaning of fasting or prayer. A more ambitious initiative might include participation in joint worship experiences.

Obstacles.

The organized dialogue movement represents a new chapter in the long history between Muslims and Christians. Intentional efforts to understand and cooperate are hopeful signs, particularly for religious communities with a history of mutual antipathy. Muslims and Christians who advocate and engage in dialogue still face many obstacles.

Many Muslims are wary of the entire enterprise because of the long history of enmity and the more recent experiences of colonialism. Contemporary political machinations involving the United States or other major Western powers also create problems for many would-be Muslim participants. Still other Muslims suspect that dialogue is a new guise for Christian missionary activity.

Although the primary impetus for organized dialogue originated largely with Christians and church-related bodies, many conceptual and theological obstacles remain. Some Christians argue that dialogue weakens or undermines Christian mission and witness. For many, the perception of Islam as inherently threatening is deeply ingrained; they are unwilling or unable to move beyond stereotypes or to distinguish between sympathetic and hostile counterparts in the other community.

The horrific September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington marked a major turning point in Muslim-Christian relations. These and many subsequent developments in the U.S., Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine created both obstacles and opportunities for Muslim-Christian dialogue. In the U.S., thousands of churches focused study programs on Islam; many initiated dialogue programs and constructive projects (e.g., churches, mosques and synagogues together building houses for low-income neighbors). Courses on Islam and interfaith relations increased dramatically in colleges and universities throughout North America. The concerted efforts to facilitate constructive dialogue during the previous half century provided an invaluable foundation for many.

At the same time, the voices of some highly audible Christian and Muslim leaders became more polemical. Those overtly rejecting the other religion as “false,” “demonic,” or “evil” found followings in their respective communities. The long history of misunderstanding, mistrust, and animosity continues to inform the attitudes of many people in both communities of faith.

Muslim-Christian dialogue represents a new and major effort to understand and cooperate with others in increasingly interdependent and religiously diverse countries. The newness of dialogue and the absence of conceptual clarity have required experimentation. Questions about planning, organization, representation, and topics need thoughtful consideration and careful collaboration. Through trial and error, advocates of interfaith dialogue in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America continue to refine the process. Many local, regional, and international dialogue groups have developed guidelines to address common concerns and avoid pitfalls. Many of these resources are readily available on the Internet.

See also CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM and MUSLIM-JEWISH DIALOGUE.

Bibliography

Muslim Christian Dialogue also makes clear the Islamic view and shows how the Qur’an, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad some six hundred years after Jesus, peace be upon both of them, corrects the errors that crept (knowingly or unknowingly) into the message that Jesus brought. This booklet should prove to be a very valuable asset to Muslims and Christians, particularly given the interest in dialogues between the two faiths. God willing, it will be an effective tool for Muslims in our efforts to invite Christians to Islam. 

Christian-Muslim Dialogue. 3,244 Followers. Papers. People. Western Christian Dhimmitude versus Islamic Intransigence April. Over the years, I have been following the course of Christian-Muslim relations. One of the trends I noticed among several Western scholars, is their willingness to downplay the differences between the two faiths. The following article more