Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

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Social and Religious Factors Affecting Muslim–Christian Relations

THOMAS MICHEL

ABSTRACT The question of Christian–Muslim relations can be approached in various ways. Historical studies have traced the shifts and changes in the place in society of Christians and other minority groups in the Middle East and Asia in general and in specific countries. Other studies have treated diplomatic relations between the Vatican and predominantly Muslim states or have analyzed, compared, and contrasted the policies of the churches on political issues such as the Palestine question and the state of Israel. Still other works have treated polemical and theological controversies between Muslims and Christians as well as efforts at dialogue and mutual understanding.

In this paper, the focus is on the factors and issues that have affected Christian–Muslim relations in the twentieth century, particularly in the Middle East and in Asia. I intend to approach the subject from the viewpoint of the religious and human relations between the communities of Christians and Muslims, outlining both the factors that favour positive living and working relations between the two communities, those that have raised tensions in the recent and more distant past, and those which present challenges yet to be resolved.

Religion and Confessional Identification

Politics and Religious Relations

Obviously, Christian–Muslim relations do not exist in a vacuum anywhere in the world, and this is also the case in the Middle East and Asia. Political issues as well as national structures and policies impinge on relations between Muslims and Christians. It has become a cliché to say that conflicts that break down along religious lines almost always have causes and underlying motivations which are not religious. Christians and Muslims living in the same region frequently state that normal, day-to-day relations between the two communities are harmonious; the problems arise from ‘politics’.

This reflects the common perception in both groups that, left to themselves, the two communities have historically not found it difficult to live together, nor would there be tensions and conflicts today if intrusive forces, generally denoted by the term politics, did not interfere. This widespread perception demands closer attention to see precisely what is meant by the intrusive factors that complicate and not infrequently damage Christian–Muslim relations.

The term ‘politics’ indicates something broader than governments, politicians, political parties and laws. In any analysis of conflicts and tensions, one quickly discovers that factors of demographic status as majority or minority, access to power and influence, ethnic and cultural differences, group identification, concepts of citizenship, international connections and economic stability usually lie at the heart of the problems. In this century, confessional tension and strife in the Middle East and Asia has rarely been
about theology or religious belief and practice, but has almost invariably arisen from the way that groups perceive the relative status and identity of the other.

**Personal Identity and Confessional Loyalty**

When the parties in a given conflict align themselves along the lines of confessional groups, in the Middle East and Asia as elsewhere, it is because religion denotes not only a system of belief and practice, but also forms the basis of identification with a recognizable group in society who share to a greater or lesser extent, a common history and identity. The individual’s personal status and well-being are seen as tied to that of the group. If the religious group is insulted or maltreated, the individual is personally outraged. If the group is respected and honoured, the personal status of the individual is recognized and enhanced. Studies of ethnicity have shown that religious bonds form a powerful element in the make-up of ethnic identity, even for those who are not particularly ‘religious’ in the usual sense of the term. A person who has little or no interest in God, sacred books, worship, or the moral instruction of any religion will often feel strongly that he or she is a Maronite or Copt, Sunni or Shi‘i Muslim, Druze or Mandaean. When the group perceives itself to be threatened or undervalued, it is easy to see the offending group as the enemy and to vent one’s anger against those members of the community who are nearest at hand, even if they be personally innocent of the offence, or to struggle, usually non-violently, but with recourse to violence in highly polarized situations, to defend the communal cause.

The use of religious symbols and terminology to reinforce a group’s self-identity and solidarity can give an observer the impression that interconfessional conflicts are mainly about religion, whereas in reality they usually have little to do with the content of the professed religions. A quick review of supposedly religious conflicts in the world today, such as Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Azerbaijan–Armenia, show this to be the case.

**The Significance of Confessional Identity**

If I have tended to belabour this point, it is because I believe that in parts of the world where religious profession does not usually carry implications of confessional belonging or ethnic identity, the factor of confessional attachment tends to be underrated and misunderstood. Conflicts between confessional groups are too simply dismissed as signs of primitive fanaticism. In societies that consider religious adherence to be a personal, individual decision implying no communal participation in a distinctive societal group, changing one’s religion or the profession of no religion implies no disloyalty or betrayal of one’s confessional relations. Where the identification with the confessional group is strong, as in most parts of the Middle East and many regions of Asia, leaving the group through conversion, intermarriage, or failure to work for communal goals, can be considered a type of confessional treason punishable, in extreme cases, by death.

Enforcement of social ostracism is left, more often than not, to the network of extended family relations and neighbours, rather than to the state. One can document instances of a Muslim being killed by a distant cousin because he has left Islam to join a Christian church, or of a Christian father who has killed his daughter because she has
entered Islam to marry a Muslim. The state’s role in these affairs is usually secondary, as when it is called upon to judge the accused murderer through legal procedures.

In those societies where the link between religious adherence and confessional identification is relatively weak, as in parts of East and Southeast Asia, West Africa, much of Western Europe, and generally in North America, relations between Christians and Muslims tend to be less marked by conflict, and good relations can more easily be maintained over a long period. This is not, as is so often stated, simply the result of the secularization process, nor is it uniquely a characteristic of secularized societies. It reflects, rather, a different understanding of the link between religious profession and societal belonging.

**Majority–Minority Relations**

With an awareness of the importance of confessional identification, one can appreciate better other factors that influence relations between Christians and Muslims. A factor that complicates Christian–Muslim relations around the world is the fact that almost everywhere the two communities live in relationships characterized by imbalances in their status as majority or minority, access to power, and perceptions of self-sufficiency or vulnerability.

In discussions of interconfessional relations in the Middle East and Asia, the claim that, ‘In this country, there are no minorities; we are all equal citizens,’ is often repeated. This is frequently correct insofar as it describes theoretical equality before the law. However, there is no denying that questions of minority, power, and influence enter into the way confessional groups regard themselves and that they colour the way they regard those of the other religion. This means that in analyzing Christian–Muslim relations one cannot dismiss as irrelevant questions of numbers, power, and self-perception.

**Relationships Marked by Imbalances**

In the Middle East and Asia, either one or the other group is almost everywhere more numerous, powerful, wealthy, or influential, and the community in relative weakness can never forget that their well-being—political, social, or economic—is in some ways dependent upon the good will of the stronger. Moreover, relationships of power and minority are often complex. One group may be more numerous, while another has greater economic or professional influence beyond its numbers, a factor that has both positive and negative repercussions on Muslim–Christian relations in many Arab countries and Iran.

In some cases, factors of ethnicity and social status come into play, where followers of one or the other religion are identified with groups considered to be at the top or bottom of the social scale. These factors influence relations between the Christian majority and Muslim minority in the Philippines and between the Muslim majority and Christian minority in Pakistan. In countries such as Lebanon, Malaysia, and Nigeria, where there is no clearly dominant majority and society is shaped by the competing claims and coalitions between various confessional groups, analysis of Muslim–Christian relations becomes even more complicated.
Sharing Minority Status

Evidence for the importance of imbalances in political, economic and social status that overshadow and affect other aspects of the relationship can be found in those regions or nations where Muslims and Christians are both minorities in societies dominated by a third religious or ideological system. This is particularly evident in Asia, in countries such as Hindu India, Buddhist Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, and in Confucian Singapore and officially atheist China. In the Middle East, a good example can be found in the pattern of relations among Palestinian Christians and Muslims in the Jewish state of Israel. In all these places, where both Christians and Muslims are minorities and outsiders in relation to the centres of power, communal harmony between the two is the norm, conflicts are few, and co-operation is quite easy to establish.

A similar situation applies when one treats of relations between a minority group within the majority and the followers of other religions. The shared experience of being outside the centres of power helps minorities to see common interests, to sympathize with abuses of power directed against any minority, and to view the other minority not as a possible threat but as a prospective ally. One can point to many examples, such as the historical affinity between the Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Lebanon, the good relations of Christians with the Shi'a of Pakistan or Bahrain, with the Alawis of Syria or the Alevi of Turkey, the special relationship obtaining between Muslims and Roman Catholics in Presbyterian Scotland, or between Catholics and Muslims in Orthodox countries such as Greece and all the nations of the former Yugoslavia, not only Bosnia, but also Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro, and Macedonia. One might also cite the consistent leadership taken by the Protestant churches in standing in solidarity with and defending the rights of Muslims in predominantly Catholic Italy, Spain, and the Philippines.

That these generally easy relations between minorities or relative minorities are not limited to strategic alliances, but develop over time into true fellow-feeling and co-operation shows that Muslims and Christians, when issues of power and influence do not separate them, do not find it difficult to live and work together, either as individuals or as social groups.

It is essential for scholars today to focus on the difficulties and challenges faced by Muslims in mainly Christian or post-Christian societies in the West, and how they are striving, together with sympathetic Christians, to achieve their rights, dignity, and religious goals. However, the topic in this paper concerns Muslim–Christian relations in the Middle East and Asia, the majority of whose populations are usually Muslims. Aside from those aforementioned countries where both Christians and Muslims are minorities, in all these states, except Israel, Lebanon, and the Philippines, citizens are governed by Muslim governments in nations which identify themselves either as secular states, or as states whose official religion is Islam, or as Islamic states governed according to the principles and regulations of the Sharī'a. Thus, our focus here must be on Christians in a minority status where Muslims are the dominant force in society and government.

Christians and the Muslim State

The State: the third party in the dialogue

Any discussion of Christian–Muslim relations involves a third party to the dialogue, that is, the state. In some cases, the state consciously intervenes to regulate relations
between confessional groups, to outline their respective obligations and to define their rights and privileges. It must be remembered that those areas which were part of the Ottoman state—which include Turkey, almost the entire Mashriq, and most of the Maghrib—have inherited a 400-year old tradition of the distinctive *millet* system, which regulated the internal government of confessional groups according to their respective legal traditions. In this century, in the modern states of Turkey and Arabic-speaking countries of the Mashriq, elements of the *millet* system have been retained, particularly those which regulate matters of personal law referring to marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The *millet* system reflects a traditionally Islamic concept of *personal law*, applicable to individuals as members of a particular confessional group, rather than a typically Western concept of a common *territorial law* meant to apply indiscriminately to all citizens within a particular area. This distinction, which is not often fully recognized by either Christians or Muslims, is relevant for determining the legal status of majority and minority communities in modern Islamic states characterized by the civil application of the Shari‘a. The implications of the expressly personal nature of Islamic law, the problematic of applying the Shari‘a as an alternative to Western-style territorial legal systems in religiously plural societies, and the possible advantages of a modern reconstructionist approach to the *millet* system are already being studied and discussed by Muslims and Christians.\(^1\)

**Christian Support for Nationalist Movements**

With the emergence of modern independent nations in the region at the end of the Second World War the notion of national citizenship and systems of territorial law based on secular Western models came into force. Christian Arabs, who in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had been active promoters of pan-Arab nationalism, generally welcomed definitions of citizenship and legal systems based on non-religious, secular principles on the grounds that this would remove them from the status of minority outsiders and make them equal partners in modern pluralist nations.

After independence, they supported régimes based on secular, often socialist ideologies, on the grounds that the concepts of nationhood and citizenship professed by those parties and régimes transcended the principle of confessional adherence, thus offering minority groups more genuine opportunities for social and political equality.

On the contrary, they have tended to view with apprehension Muslim movements which they fear would redefine the concept of citizenship or marginalize them within the body politic. This explains Christian opposition to systems of separate electorates in nations such as the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, even though they are thereby guaranteed parliamentary representation which they would probably not have obtained in a system of single-electorate elections. The government of Pakistan is currently considering a laudable proposal of ‘dual vote’ for Muslim and non-Muslim minorities whereby they would vote for the general slate of candidates and also maintain reserved seats in parliament.

Christian concerns about their place in the mainstream of the national polity are expressed in Christian support for and involvement in nationalist-based movements such as the Palestine Liberation Organization or the National Front for the Liberation of Palestine and their corresponding anxieties about Ḥamās. It can be seen in the
support given by Christians generally to the socialist, Arab nationalist ideologies of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser in Egypt and the Ba'ath Parties of Syria and Iraq, along with a corresponding lack of sympathy for the Front Islamique du Salut in Algeria, and in Christian backing for 'secular' political parties in Turkey, Egypt, Sudan, and Jordan. In Asia, one can find Christians generally supporting religiously neutral political parties in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, as well as in India, where Christians and Muslims both feel threatened by Hindu extremist movements and parties.

Historical developments make the relationship of Christians to each Muslim state unique. With Ataturk's establishment of the Republic of Turkey and the dissolution of the Ottoman state in the 1920s, Turkey was declared a secular nation, where no religion would take precedence or have privileges over any other. This is despite the fact that since the population exchange between Turkey and Greece in 1926, over 99% of the population of the Republic of Turkey is Muslim. The prerogatives of certain Christian confessional groups—the Greek Orthodox, Gregorian Armenians, and Syrian Orthodox—are further regulated by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923.

In the traditional monarchies, Christians, like others, have been subject to the policies, whether enlightened or repressive, of the ruler. Where the monarchy is committed to a broad application of the principles of religious tolerance and freedom, such as in Jordan, Oman, most of the Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, Christians are generally strong supporters of the monarchy.

Indigenous and Migrant Minorities

When it comes to claiming religious rights, we must distinguish between states where Christians are part of the indigenous population, such as in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Palestine, and Jordan, and those where the Christians are mainly foreign workers. In the latter, which includes the nations of the Arabian peninsula and countries of the North African Maghrib (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco), where the Christians are not citizens and their presence is generally temporary and voluntary, the rights of Christians have been limited to demands for freedom of worship, the right to have religious personnel and to offer religious instruction to their adherents.

The expectations of indigenous Christians go far beyond permission to have churches and clergy and to perform their liturgical rites. They desire nothing less than all the rights, duties, privileges, and opportunities that accompany full citizenship. Any intimation of second-class status is abhorrent to them, and they judge the Sharī'a concept of 'protected peoples' to be incompatible with a modern understanding of citizenship and nationhood.

The reluctance of local Christians and other minorities to back political options motivated by the Islamic revival is a recurrent source of tension in a number of countries. Christians assume that political systems and programmes of Islamic inspiration will result in communal marginalization and suppression of their religious prerogatives. Muslims respond that Christians are under the influence of liberal Western prejudices which presume that only a secular interpretation of the separation of religion and state can be the proper basis for a modern polity.

Clichés commonly repeated by both Christians and Muslims often distort the issue. In debates about political matters, one often hears the bromide: 'In Christianity, there is separation of Church and State. Religion is a private affair between a person and God. In Islam, on the other hand, religion covers every aspect of human life, including politics.' Whereas modern Christian political philosophy widely affirms the necessity of
a separation of church organizational structures and leadership from those of the state, there is a corresponding affirmation of the link between faith and politics. Committed Christians are everywhere urged to bring their religious convictions to bear upon the shaping of the political, as well as economic and social order.

On the other hand, Muslims do not form a monolithic block in political matters, as the wide diversity of political systems in Islamic history and in predominantly Muslim countries today testifies. Among those who propose political options inspired by the Shari'a there is wide diversity of opinion concerning the place of religion in an Islamically guided state, and Muslim thinkers can be quite critical of proposals put forward by other Muslims as Islamic. It is obvious that the Islamic Republic of Iran has a very different concept of the role of Islam in public life from that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the political programmes of the Muslim Brotherhood are dissimilar from those of Jamiat Islami. Scholars of Islamic jurisprudence hold that this diversity of political systems is not due to human stubbornness or to an inadequate understanding of Islam, but rather is presumed and promoted by the Shari'a itself.

Muslim proponents of Islamist political options have often argued that the rights and status of Christians and other minorities must and will be respected in states governed according to the Shari'a, but they have failed to convince most local Christian communities of this view. The experiences of Christians in Shari'a-guided countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan make local Christians unwilling to consider the possibility that an Islamically guided political system would in practice succeed in respecting their rights and status as full citizens. There is thus an urgent need for dialogue between Christian leaders and those of Islamist political programmes, if this impasse to Muslim-Christian relations is to be resolved.

The Umma and the Church: communitarian life

Problems of Dialogue

Turning from issues of the political order that influence Muslim–Christian relations to those that pertain more specifically to communitarian life, a factor of sweeping implications lies in the differences in the structure of the church, understood as the socially-organized community of Christians, and the Islamic umma, or international community of Muslims. A lack of conscious awareness of these differences can be the cause of misunderstanding, frustration, and alienation between the two communities.

Christians, especially the highly centrally organized Roman Catholic Church and in the equally hierarchically structured Orthodox communion of sister churches, often complain that there is no corresponding structure among Muslims. No Muslim represents or speaks for another Muslim. No Muslim organization or entity, at least since the suppression of the caliphate, is indisputably recognized as representative of the whole umma.

Christians consequently often express feelings of frustration in encounters with Muslims in that one can never do more than meet with a circumscribed group of Muslims who express a particular viewpoint. Any type of understandings or accords between the two communities would seem to be, from the commonly held Christian viewpoint, an impossible task. Christians ask, what is the use of trying to enter into an understanding or arrive at an agreement with a group of Muslims which will not be accepted by others?
On the other hand, Muslims often regard the Christian churches as dominated by a small group of highly committed, usually celibate clergy who claim to speak in the name of the whole community. Muslim professors, doctors, civil servants, and business leaders who are, at the same time, deeply involved believers find it frustrating that in encounters with Christians, their counterparts are, more often than not, members of the clergy and hierarchy.

They would like to discuss the everyday problems of religious believers who are immersed in the world of earning a living, raising children to be upright, God-fearing believers, paying off housing and education loans, trying to run businesses or keep their jobs and who, at the same time, are striving to respond to the complex demands of religious conviction in today’s world. It should be noted that there is more affinity between these Muslim ‘lay’ leaders and representatives of the Protestant churches, whose structural organization and patterns of leadership are more similar to those of Muslims.

These respective frustrations must be kept in mind, as they are certain to affect the success or failure of what is called organized dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In the past thirty years, Muslims and Christians have voluntarily come together at the local, national, and international levels to study, discuss, and work together on a wide range of topics. They range from strictly theological issues, clarifying misunderstandings and delineating points of convergence and divergence between the two faiths, to academic questions of historical, philosophical and scientific interest, to broad social issues related to family, religious education, business ethics, poverty, injustice, the roles of women and men, ecology, armaments, and human development, to specific local problems of drugs, violence, corruption, and neighbourhood organization.

Dialogue as a Modern Phenomenon

Dialogue encounters are characteristic of a distinctly modern understanding of Muslim–Christian relations. Certainly, Christians and Muslims down through the centuries had always lived together and had often discussed, studied, and worked together, but the need felt by both sides for conscious efforts to bring representatives of the two communities together is a recent phenomenon. Although still in its infancy, the dialogue movement has produced palpable results in creating a network of Muslim and Christian leaders around the world who know and trust one another, who can work together on issues of common concern and who, in moments of crisis or tension, can search together for mutually acceptable solutions.

Dialogue cannot solve all problems or bring all conflicts to an end, as the unhappy experience of so many Muslim and Christian Lebanese testified during the recent war. Nevertheless, dialogue efforts, of both Muslim and Christian initiative, hold out the promise that there are alternatives to conflict and violence. They operate on the hope that yet unforeseen conflicts in the future can be avoided by the two communities coming to better understanding and co-operation today.

However, if dialogue is to remain credible and not devolve into an elitist discussion club, it must reflect the real concerns of the community and strive to be truly representative of its constituencies. The need today, on the Christian side, is for lay people, business leaders, women, and youths—those groups that have been under-represented in dialogue encounters—to take the leadership in meeting and working together with Muslim counterparts. On their side, Muslims will have to develop their ‘consensus theology’ into stronger national and international representative structures.
in order to have leaders who can credibly speak in the name of more than groups of like-minded associates.

**Differences in Organizational Structure**

An aspect of the organizational life of the Islamic and Christian communities that has been a source of tension between Christians and Muslims lies in the divergent roles of the Christian priest and Muslim *imām*. When Muslims gather to perform their daily ritual prayer, the *salāt*, any Muslim who knows the proper form can act as *imām*. Muslims often fail to appreciate the fact that for the fullest and deepest expression of Christian worship, the Eucharistic celebration, Christians, at least in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, have need of ordained clergy. Church buildings are not necessary, and Christian worship can function well without them but, at least in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, without a priest, although Christians can read the Bible, give catechetical instruction, and pray together, there can be no Mass.

This basic difference between Islamic and Christian faiths is relevant for Christian-Muslim relations wherever Christians live in predominantly Muslim countries. It reflects well on Muslims that all Muslim governments but one permit this full expression of Christian worship. Indigenous Christian communities in the Middle East and Asia can worship freely, and most Muslim states whose Christian communities are mainly comprised of expatriate workers, such as Oman, the Emirates, Bahrain, Libya, and Morocco, have made generous provision for the demands of Christian worship.

The exception is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where, although several million Christians, mainly of Filipino and Indian origin, live and work, the presence of Christian clergy is not permitted. In speaking with Muslims in Saudi Arabia, I often receive the impression that they do not see the religious crisis for Christians involved in a prohibition of clergy. When the question of freedom of worship is raised, the response is often that Christians, like others, are free to pray in the privacy of their homes. What further need do they have of priests? This response makes sense within the context of Muslim communitarian life, in which any group of Muslims who gather to perform *salāt* can choose one to be *imām* and perform the prayer.

For Christians this prohibition results in their inability to carry out a fundamental religious duty to worship God according to their faith. It is as though Muslims were told that they are free to read the Qur'ān and pray forms of devotional *du'a* but that they may not perform *salāt*. This lack of understanding of one of the principles of religious obligation, to worship God, is a factor that continues to colour Christian-Muslim relations not only at the local but also at the international level. Christians feel that they are dealing with a community that does not respect one of the fundamental elements in their religion and wish that Muslims would stand in solidarity with them in urging all governments to grant true freedom of worship to all subjects.

**Human Factors: the burden of history**

We have discussed factors that influence Muslim-Christian relations: confessional identification, majority–minority status, political structures, and the nature of the community. There is a final set of factors, though nebulous and difficult to define, that play a powerful role in determining the ways in which Christians and Muslims relate. It has less to do with politics, sociology, and demography, or even with the particular characteristics of Islam and Christianity, than with universal human challenges and
failings. It concerns the burden of history, distant and recent, and apprehensions about
the future. It involves common human problems of how we deal with anger, resentment,
frustration, and fear, how we react to suspicion and prejudice, and how we arrive
at forgiveness and reconciliation. If we are to confront these human factors, it means we
must speak of some unpleasant matters.

We have noted that Christian–Muslim relations do not exist in a sociological
vacuum. It is equally true that they are not detached from their historical context. Any
community of people can draw up a long list of the times and ways they have suffered
and are still suffering at the hands of others. Indignities and injustices are not forgotten
and rise up again in later generations as causes or pretexts for reprisals.

**Muslim Burdens**

Although they occurred almost 1000 years ago, Muslims have not forgotten the outrage
of the Crusades, and the emotive power of these memories still colours their perceptions of Christians. Those opposed to the massive American troop presence in Arabia at the time of the Gulf War often referred, in speeches, articles, and radio broadcasts, to the American forces by the term *salibiyyūn*, Crusaders. The term, taken, as in European languages, from the word for 'cross', carries in Arabic the ironic weight of those who invade and destroy under the banner of the cross, in contradiction to the express source and significance of that symbol.

**Colonial Injustices and Indignities**

Of more recent memory, and perhaps for that reason, more galling, is the colonial period when for more than 200 years virtually the entire Muslim world was governed and controlled by a handful of Christian nations. The multiple indignities suffered in that period—the replacement of indigenous and time-honoured ways of behaviour with new and allegedly superior codes of government, law, personal conduct, and education, the paternalistic ideologies of the 'white man's burden' and 'la mission civilatrice', the economic exploitation, and the reduction of Islam to a 'pagan' religion, are resonant memories that powerfully affect the ways that Muslims regard Christians today. Particularly hard to forget is the introduction of missionaries that accompanied colonial rule and even, through the humiliating 'capitulations', affected independent nations such as the Ottoman and Qajar states.

Muslims from nations of the Middle East and Asia can provide many examples of unforgotten indignities. I will mention only two from Asian experiences of colonialism. As recorded in his auto-biography, the Indonesian nationalist leader, Tjokroaminoto, was dismissed from his civil service position for a double offence: wearing shoes and remaining standing in the presence of Dutch officials. Secondly, in the nearby Philippines, well into this century, all Filipinos, whether Christian or Muslim, were required to kneel in the street when the Spanish bishop passed by. These were policies, not individual whims, part and parcel of colonial rule, intended to create a cultural apartheid, express a sense of European superiority, and show where the power lay. Although individual missionaries—local clergy were not encouraged—protested against many of the more degrading aspects of the colonial system, they too were often co-opted into the ruling élite.

Recalling such indignities, imposed in our own century, in the living memory of many, usually by the same nations that created and promoted the Enlightenment,
Muslims cannot possibly relate to Western Christians today without the intrusion of feelings, even when well-concealed, of anger and resentment. Muslims cannot view Christianity today simply as the teaching of the holy prophet Jesus, but rather as a contributing element in a comprehensive system of oppression and cultural destruction that caused suffering and violated the dignity of their people. Muslim leaders as diverse as Muhammad Mahatir, Mu'ammar Qadhafi, and Ḥasan al-Ṭurābī, who do not hesitate to express this indignation, know that they are putting into words the deep-seated sentiments of many.

**Post-Colonial Onslaughts**

It is too easy for Christians to say that this is all in the past; today we live in a different era. The colonial era would be easier to forgive if it were simply part of the past, over and done with. But the perception of many Muslims today is that while the more blatant forms of colonial rule have ended, a subtle and pervasive form of neo-colonialism has replaced it. Many are convinced that the West, i.e. Western Europe and North America, is out to destroy Islam. This onslaught is perceived to be carried out on many fronts: political, military, economic, religious, and cultural.

The campaign is political in the formation of an international alliance against the Muslim world aimed at isolating Islamic countries much in the way that the communist bloc had been isolated before 1989. It is military in that tactics of war—blockades, frozen assets, recourse to air attacks, and other coercive actions—are more readily directed against Muslim nations than against others. It is economic in that the old colonial régimes have been replaced by economic control, markets manipulated from the outside, political leaders bought off by international industry, and military actions threatened or taken to ensure control of resources. It is religious in the continual media presentations of Islam—in film, global television networks, news magazines, and spy novels—as a backward, fanatic, violent, xenophobic faith unable to live with others. The attack is cultural in that all things Western—education, clothing, law, manners, music, films, house furnishing, relations between sexes—are presented as superior and to be admired, imitated, and, most importantly, bought.

**Reading Events in the Light of History**

If this seems overstated, it reflects a widespread feeling throughout the Muslim world. The conviction that Islamic faith and Muslim culture are under attack, imperiled, threatened, explains many of the reactions among Muslims, both political and religious leaders as well as the man and woman in the street, to events that occurred during the Gulf War, after the Algerian coup d'état, and to the continuing dramas in Palestine and Bosnia.

Each of these tragedies is interpreted in the light of previous history. The Gulf War was seen as a war for control of ‘Muslim’ oil fields, waged by a Western-assembled coalition attacking a predominantly Muslim people with vastly superior technological weaponry. The Algerian elections proved to many Muslims that a grass-roots Islamic reformist political movement could succeed in being democratically elected. When these hopes were dashed by the military coup and severe repression of activist Muslims that followed, the reformers claimed that the Western powers’ ready acceptance of the new government showed that their commitment to democracy in Muslim regions was mere lip-service. Israel is seen as the unilateral implantation of a Western people and
ideology in the heart of the Islamic world to assuage the guilt of another group of Europeans. Bosnia is viewed as evidence that the European powers will never permit a Muslim-dominated nation, no matter how progressive, to exist in Europe.

**Christian Burdens**

*Christian Memories in the Middle East*

Just as the burdens of history bear on the way that Muslims relate to Christians, so also local Christian attitudes towards Muslims are formed and shaped by history. If Muslims retain vivid memories of the Crusades and the expulsion of Muslims from the Iberian peninsula after the Reconquista, Christians preserve their own images of Muslims based on historical fact. Memories of the 1453 Fall of Constantinople and the destruction of some of the world's most beautiful Christian art, of Saracen raids in the Mediterranean and the dev imre policy when Christian boys were taken and forced to become Muslims and serve the Sultan, of atrocities committed during the Greek War of independence and elsewhere in the Balkans, of the massacres of Armenians, of the 1861 slaughter of Christians in Lebanon, are all part of Christian heritage in South and Southeast Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Christian historical memory in the Middle East is as complex as it is unhappy. If Christians remember the events in which they were victims of Muslim governments and armies, they remember also the 1099 Sack of Jerusalem by the Crusaders when Eastern Christians as well as Muslims were butchered in the Holy City, and the first, perhaps more destructive, Sack of Constantinople by armies of European co-religionists in 1204. Feeling that, through sharing the same religion, they have often been regarded unjustly by Muslims as allies of European invaders, as collaborators with the colonial powers, and as local promoters of modern liberalism, Middle East Christians are also conscious of the many ways they have been dismissed, disregarded, and patronized by their fellow Christian believers of the West.

**Cultural Alienation in Asia**

Except for South India, whose Christian tradition is very ancient, Christians in Asia make up younger churches exposed to the weight of a different history. These churches are rooted in the missionary efforts of the colonial period. They are descendants of those who accepted Christian faith by conviction, often at great hardship, but also of 'rice Christians' whose Christian commitment was compromised by material benefits such as promises of food, land, better education, health care, and social status.

Becoming Christians did not save them from multiple indignities. They were denied posts of leadership in the church and regularly refused admission to religious orders. It was not until the 1930s that prominent religious orders in the Philippines accepted Filipino members, although the country had already been predominantly Catholic for centuries. In mission schools they were frequently forbidden to speak local languages and wear national dress; following local customs and celebrating popular festivals were condemned as participation in pagan rites. Christians in Asia are conscious that Muslims, like Hindus and Buddhists, tend to regard them as a continuing unwanted reminder of the colonial project. They are seen as communities who have abandoned the ancient culture, traditions, and religion of the place and adopted, along with the 'European' religion, a European way of life, values, and expectations.
No matter what their origins may have been, the Christian churches of Asia today profess a faith which is as deep as in the regions from which it was brought, and often more vibrant and active. For these Christians, the challenge is to find ways to integrate their Christian faith into national cultures and traditions to create something which is both culturally valid and authentically Christian. For this reason, the churches of Asia have been in the vanguard of dialogue with Muslims and followers of other religions. It can be safely said that in no part of the world have Christians devoted so much time, expense, training, and expertise to the study of other religions and encounter with their followers as in Asia.

Christian Concerns

When we listen to the concerns of Christians in the Middle East and Asia it is clear that it is with some apprehension that they regard the Muslims whom they live and by whom, in many cases, they are governed. Their concerns, more often than not, revolve around the basic necessities of everyday life. Is preference given to Muslims in jobs, university seats, housing, positions in the civil service and military? Can Muslim preachers get away with public diatribes against Christianity, while Christians have to be cautious about any criticism of Islam or Muslims? Can blasphemy laws be used, as many Christians believe to have been the case in the widely publicized case in Pakistan this year, to settle scores and appropriate property? Are Christians forced to study from textbooks that present Islam as the final, complete religion and Christianity as a superseded, corrupt form of prophetic religion? Is it possible for Christians, as a community, rather than as isolated individuals, to play a fully active and constructive role in the shaping of society, or are they merely to be ‘tolerated’ and ‘protected’? These are issues that local Christians discuss among themselves and that colour their attitudes towards Muslims.

Christians in the Middle East and Asia feel vulnerable, dependent upon the good will of Muslim majorities and governments. In times of international crisis, when Muslim public opinion is indignant at the actions of one or another Western power, their anger is frequently directed, not at those distant Christian nations of the West who are safely beyond their reach, but towards local Christians. Examples within the past decade could be given of churches in Pakistan and Egypt that were burned by angry mobs in protest against American policies directed against Iran and Iraq. Local Christians, who may or may not agree with such policies and who, in any case, have no power to influence them, are angrily used as scapegoats for events of which they are innocent and over which they have no control.

Anger at being treated as second-class citizens and feelings of insecurity within their own societies are often directed by Middle East Christians at their fellow believers in the West. In discussions with representatives of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, questions like the following are repeatedly raised: ‘Why do Christians in Europe and America grant Muslims full religious rights and assistance to Muslims in the West when Christians in predominantly Muslim areas meet with continual discrimination? ‘How can the Vatican permit the construction of a huge mosque and Islamic centre in Rome when Christians are not allowed even the smallest church building in Saudi Arabia?’ ‘How can you enter into dialogue and co-operation with one or another country when Christians of that country are deprived of the right to express themselves freely?’
Reconciliation: a universal human challenge

In my opinion, it is these ‘human factors’ which, being the most deeply rooted, are the most difficult to overcome, and will thus will be the strongest obstacles to establishing good Muslim–Christian relations in the twenty-first century. It is no more or less difficult for Christians and Muslims to move beyond the injustices of the past and concerns of the present to arrive at a stage of mutual trust, forgiveness, and reconciliation than for people of other religions or of no religion. One need only think of the weight of the history of wrongs which Jews must face if they are to forgive and live in peace with European Christians. The anger of Koreans and Chinese towards the Japanese, of Irish towards the English, of black Africans towards both Arabs and Europeans, of Russians and Poles towards Germans shows that collective resentment is a universal human phenomenon, but it is for this reason no less important as a factor complicating and hindering Christian–Muslim relations. Put simply, the problem is, how can victims and victimizers both move beyond the past?

Christians and Muslims are called to mercy and forgiveness by their faiths. Both the Qur’ān and the Bible are filled with exhortations to compassion, pardon, and acceptance of others. We all know that a deeply felt injury can become like a cancer of the spirit, eating away at an individual or a community until it can seem greater than our powers to withstand or overcome. Christianity and Islam, however, both teach that we are not prisoners of the past, nor hostages of our present situation, and thus, it is possible to live together better in the twenty-first century than we often have in the past and than we have in this century. But there are no easy answers. It is possible to find ways to live together, firstly, if we do not minimize the problem and, secondly, if both communities are willing to look self-critically at our pasts. What Muslims and Christians can accomplish together by living together in harmony and co-operating for the good of all is too important to be thwarted by old grievances and suspicions.

By way of conclusion, I may add, as a Catholic Christian, that this is the task solemnly given to Christians and Muslims by the Second Vatican Council, which states:

Although in the course of centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all humankind, let them make common cause of safe-guarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom. *(Nostra aetate, 3)*

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