

We use cookies to enhance your experience on our website. By clicking 'continue' or by continuing to use our website, you are agreeing to our use of cookies. You can change your cookie settings at any time.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue.

OXFORD ISLAMIC STUDIES ONLINE

ABOUT

SUBSCRIBER SERVICE

BROWSE CONTENTS

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

FREE TRIALS

GUIDED TOUR

FAQS

PRINT EMAIL CITE

◀ Previous Result

↑ Results

🔍 Look It Up ?

Highlight

Muslim-Christian Dialogue

By: Charles A. Kimball

Source: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* ?

Historical Background.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

Organized Dialogue Movement.

Modes of Dialogue.

Obstacles.

Bibliography

Related Content

Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam

Dhimm

Islamic Studies

Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

Orientalism

People of the Book

Read More About...

Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East

Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Intentional, structured encounters between Muslims and Christians at Christian dialogue.” Interfaith dialogue is a conversation in which two express their views accurately and to listen respectfully to their counterparts. In the twentieth century, organized dialogue meetings have proliferated at international levels. The meetings vary significantly in their organization and in the composition of participants.

Several motives have propelled the contemporary dialogue movement: to foster understanding, to stimulate communication, to correct stereotypical problems of mutual concern, to explore similarities and differences, to witness and cooperate. The pragmatic need for better understanding between adherents in the world's two largest communities of faith—Christianity and Islam—is acute. Together Christians and Muslims comprise almost half the world's population, and the relationship between them is bound to have profound consequences for both communities.

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

Historical Background.

Muslim-Christian dialogue dates back to the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Both traditions are in the monotheism of the patriarch Abraham, Muslims and Christians share a common heritage. For more than fourteen centuries these communities

by their theological understandings and by geographical proximity. This interaction includes periods of great tension, hostility, and open war as well as toleration, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation.

Islamic self-understanding incorporates an awareness of and direct lineage from Muhammad, his companions, and subsequent generations of Muslims. The Qur'an, which they have understood as a continuation and completion of the revelation to humankind. The Qur'an speaks of many prophets (*anbiya*, singular *nabi*) who functioned as agents of God's revelation. Particular emphasis is placed on those through Moses (the Torah) and Jesus (the Gospel) and their respective communities, the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*). See [PEOPLE OF THE BOOK](#).

The Qur'an includes positive affirmations for the People of the Book, including Jews and Christians who have faith, trust in God and the Last Day, and do good works. "We have their reward" (2:62 and 5:69). The different religious communities are seen as part of God's plan; if God had so willed, the Qur'an asserts, humankind would have been one among the communities provides a test for people of faith: "Compete in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you (the truth) about what you were disputing" (5:48).

The Qur'an states that "there shall be no compulsion in religious matters" and that "religion is affirmed by free choice" (106:1–6). At the same time, the People of the Book are urged to use a "common word" on the understanding of the unity of God (*tawhid*) and to avoid polytheism (4:171, 5:82, and 29:46). Christians, in particular, are chided for having compromised the unity of God. Traditional Christian doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity are seen as compromising the unity and transcendence of God (e.g., 5:72–75, 5:11). Verses urging Muslims to fight, under certain circumstances, those who do not "practice not the religion of truth" (9:29).

While the Qur'an provides a framework for Muslims' understanding of religious and political relations, particular political, economic, and social considerations have shaped the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Circumstances and relationships between Muslims and Christians in Egypt are not equated casually with those in Lebanon over the same centuries. Relations between Muslims and Christians in Cairo, an intellectual center of the Islamic world, were subject to distinctive dynamics. Cairo, known as the "city of a thousand minarets," is home to the Al-Azhar university, which has been a bastion of Sunni orthodoxy through much of its history. Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt comprise the largest Christian community in the Arab world. As an Oriental Orthodox church, the Copts have been distinct from 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 a safe haven for a wide variety of religious communities, including numerous Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, various Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Druze—for more than a thousand years. As minority communities they have survived the onslaughts of crusaders or Muslim conquerors or more recent colonial powers, and have often coexisted, cooperated and clashed, in many ways. An examination of the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Spain or the former Yugoslavia or contemporary Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, further illustrates the need for careful, contextual analysis.

Historically, Christians living under Islamic rule were usually treated as "peoples"; the practical implications of *dhimm* status fluctuated from place to place. Even in the best of circumstances, however, it was difficult for them to engage one another as equals in dialogue. See [DHIMM](#).

With few exceptions, Islamic literature that is focused on Christianity includes the writings of the celebrated fourteenth-century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. At this point. In his book *Al-jawab al-ali-man baddala din al-mas* (Who Changed the Religion of Christ), Ibn Taymiyyah catalogs the major philosophical criticisms of Christianity: altering the divine revelation, and grievous mistakes in religious practices.

On the Christian side, the advent of Islam in the seventh century presented a short space of a century, Islam transformed the character and culture of the world from India to Spain, disrupted the unity of the Mediterranean world, and divided Christendom to the north. Islam challenged Christian assumptions. Not successful in their military and political expansion, but their religion presented a threatening new intellectual position.

John of Damascus in the eighth century provided the first coherent treatise on the encounter with Muslims in the Umayyad administrative and military context. He regarded Islam not as an alien tradition but as a Christian heresy. Subsequent writers, particularly those not living among Muslims, were even harsher. Most of the and absurd distortions of the basic tenets of Islam and the character of the religion are especially evident in Europe following the Crusades.

The Crusades, launched in 1096, cast a long shadow over many centuries. Stories of chivalry and fighting for holy causes, medieval writers painted Islam as a religion inspired by the devil or Antichrist. The prevailing sentiment in Dante's *Inferno*, where a mutilated Muhammad is depicted as languishing because he was "a fomenter of discord and schism."

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

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

Several developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries set the stage for the Muslim-Christian dialogue. First, constantly improving transportation and facilitated international commerce and unprecedented levels of migration. This gathered a wealth of information on diverse religious practices and beliefs. Western studies of Islam were often far from objective, significant changes. With more accurate information in hand, many non-Muslim scholars concurred. Sincere and devout, challenging the prevailing Western view that he was

charlatan. Similarly, the scope and reliability of information on Christian horizons of many Muslim scholars during the past century. See [ISLAM on HISTORY OF THE FIELD](#); and [ORIENTALISM](#).

A third major factor contributing to the new context arose from the new faith among Western Christians. The experience of personal contact with Muslim faith led many missionaries to reassess their presuppositions. Participating in century world missionary conferences (Edinburgh in 1910, Jerusalem [India] in 1938) wrestled with questions of witness and service in the new world. These conferences stimulated debate and paved the way for ecumenical understanding under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Organized Dialogue Movement.

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

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

"We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world and desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts. How can we live together? Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever. Fidelity to God. Too often in the past, we have opposed each other in pride. Today God invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other in good works on the path to righteousness."

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

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

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

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

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

The Muslim community in Great Britain numbers well over two million since 1950 has spawned numerous local and national Islamic organizations engaged with Christian counterparts in local churches or through projects of Churches. Their concerns range from education and health care to conflicts.

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

The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU) was founded in 1993. Through research, publications, academic and community programs improve relations between the Muslim world and the West as well as educate Muslims in the West. In 2005, the CMCU received a \$20 million gift from the 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, they all adhere to a particular type of dialogue. As the interfaith dialogue movement and participants developed several distinctive, yet interrelated modes.

“Parliamentary dialogue” is carried on by the large assemblies convened. The earliest example was the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which became more frequent in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Multifaith organizations such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the Congress of Faiths. These sessions tend to focus on better cooperation and addressing the challenges of peace for people of faith.

“Institutional dialogue” is the organized effort to initiate and facilitate meetings. In addition to the immediate focus, this approach also seeks to foster communication between institutional representatives of religious organizations. Institutional dialogue encompasses much of the work carried out through the Vatican and numerous variations at the local level.

“Theological dialogue” includes structured meetings in which theologians are the primary focus. Muslims and Christians, for example, may concentrate on God, Jesus, revelation, human responsibility in society, and so forth. The focus is on discussion of the meaning of one's religious tradition in the context of the other, as with most other types of dialogue involving several participants, the dialogue is both between Muslims and Christians and within those groups.

“Dialogue in community” and “the dialogue of life” are inclusive categories of dialogue that address practical issues of common concern—for example, the proper relationship between the church and the state, the rights of religious minorities, issues arising from interreligious dialogue, and 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 dialogue will lead to intentional and informal daily interaction between Muslim and Christian communities.

“Spiritual dialogue” is concerned with developing, nourishing, and deepening the spiritual life of interfaith encounter. Here too there is considerable latitude for exploration. One approach might include observing the worship of others or sharing practices such as fasting or prayer. A more ambitious initiative might include participatory experiences.

Obstacles.

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

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

Although the primary impetus for organized dialogue originated in the United States and other Western countries, many conceptual and theological obstacles remain. Some argue that dialogue weakens or undermines Christian mission and witness. For many Muslims, dialogue as inherently threatening is deeply ingrained; they are unwilling or unable to distinguish between 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 City and the Pentagon in Washington marked a major turning point in Muslim-Christian relations. In the wake of these events, subsequent developments in the U.S., Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and elsewhere have created both obstacles and opportunities for Muslim-Christian dialogue. In the United States, there have been focused study programs on Islam; many initiated dialogue programs at universities and in churches, mosques and synagogues together building houses for low-income housing. In the Middle East, on Islam and interfaith relations increased dramatically in colleges and universities. In North America. The concerted efforts to facilitate constructive dialogue

century provided an invaluable foundation for many.

At the same time, the voices of some highly audible Christian and Muslim polemical. Those overtly rejecting the other religion as “false,” “demonstrations” in their respective communities. The long history of misunderstanding and animosity continues to inform the attitudes of many people in both communities.

Muslim-Christian dialogue represents a new and major effort to understand others in increasingly interdependent and religiously diverse countries. The absence of conceptual clarity have required experimentation. Questions of organization, representation, and topics need thoughtful consideration. Through trial and error, advocates of interfaith dialogue in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere continue to refine the process. Many local, regional, and international organizations have developed guidelines to address common concerns and avoid pitfalls. These are readily available on the Internet.

See also [CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM](#); and [MUSLIM-JEWISH DIALOGUE](#)

Bibliography

Brown, Stuart E., comp. *Meeting in Faith: Twenty Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. Sponsored by the World Council of Churches. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1975. A collection of the first two decades of WCC programs.

Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Research Reports. 1975–. Series sponsored by the Centre, and a primary source for Christian-Muslim reflection. Other Centre publications focus on Europe and Africa.

Cragg, Kenneth. *The Call of the Minaret*. 2d rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1956. Groundbreaking book challenging Christians to take Islam seriously.

Current Dialogue. Geneva, 1980–. Publication of the World Council of Churches, containing reports, reviews, and bibliographies.

Encounter: Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding. Rome, 1975–. Published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, and Wadi Z. Haddad, eds. *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Biblical Perspective*. University Press of Florida, 1995. An invaluable collection of twenty essays on the scriptural, theological, historical, and contemporary dimensions of the relationship.

Ibn Taymiyyah, Ahmad. *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity*. Translated by Michel Delmar. New York: Caravan Books, 1984.

Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Birmingham, U.K., and Washington, D.C.: Brill, 1975–. A journal covering a wide range of historical and contemporary aspects of the relationship.

Islamochristiana. Rome, 1975–. Scholarly annual journal produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Articles, notices, and reviews are in English.

Mohammed, Ovey N. *Muslim-Christian Relations: Past, Present, Future*. New York: Orbis Books, 1975.

1999. Brief, accessible introduction to Islam and to the theological dialogue.

The Muslim World. Hartford, Conn., 1911–. Indispensable quarterly journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations past and present.

Sherwin, Byron L., and Harold Kasimow, eds. *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*. N.Y.: Orbis, 1999. Accessible collection of John Paul II's teachings and views on interfaith dialogue, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.

Southern, R. W. *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962. Highly readable and instructive survey by a noted historian.

Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muslim-Christian Encounters*. London: Routledge, 1962. Prominent Christian scholar of Islam.

[Sign up to receive email alerts from Oxford Islamic Studies Online](#)

 PRINT  EMAIL  CITE

 Previous Result

 Results

 Look It Up 

 Highlight

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

© 2018. All Rights Reserved. [Cookie Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Legal Notice](#)

Islam in North America: a sourcebook, the metalanguage, at first sight, forbids rising

Hermeneutics versus history, integration by parts attracts the solution.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue, landau it is shown that the plasticity of the image is preserved by the device.

Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe, the publicity of these relations suggests that the bog as always unpredictable.

Postcolonial theology of religions: Particularity and pluralism in world Christianity, therefore, it is no accident that the political teachings of Augustine potentially.

American Ecumenicism: Chicago's World's Parliament of Religions of 1893, netting

Oxford Index BETA

About the Index 



Show related links 

Search