

Is there an escape from the history of Christian-Muslim relations?

Af Jørgen S. Nielsen, professor i islamstudier.

Leder af Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Birmingham University

It is interesting to look back just a quarter of a century from where we are today in the attention being paid to Christian-Muslim relations. There was a sense in which the past still ruled supreme. The preceding fourteen centuries had been characterised by conflict: the Arab conquest of Byzantine provinces, North Africa and Spain, followed by Turkish and Ottoman expansion over the ruins of Byzantium into south-eastern Europe, interspersed with Crusades and Reconquista and followed by triumphant European imperialism.

The mutual theological and ideological views were deeply infused by these political and military rivalries. In Christian eyes Islam was a heresy of the worst sort and its prophet was an impostor. Islam started with an inherent sense of superiority in relation to Christianity, and the accusation of falsification of scripture (*tahrif*) weighed heavily in the balance, even while a degree of legal tolerance was implemented. Of course the historical realities were more differentiated than such a crude summary. Throughout the political and military conflicts there was a continuous exchange of people, knowledge, goods and culture. This traffic always went both ways with dominance shifting at various times from one side of the Mediterranean to the other - few scholars any longer support Henri Pirenne's thesis that the Mediterranean became a barrier as a result of the Arab conquests. And in the theological sphere there were always exceptions, on both sides, to the general pattern. Such more constructive elements in the tense history are not unknown - they have not been suppressed as conspiracy theorists would sometimes have us believe - it is rather that they have tended to be the exception rather than the rule.

But there are also, I would suggest, later reasons why little has been made of the positive experiences, so that the history of rivalry has been free to dominate the collective memories on both sides. Historians and theologians do not research and write in a vacuum, they are not isolated from their own time and environment. For the medieval scholars on both sides, history was contemporary. Von Ranke's "wie es eigentlich geschehen" would hardly have made sense: history was written as much for current purposes, to throw light on current events and tensions and to help interpret them, as it was out of plain curiosity about the past - if not more so. Scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries are no less innocent of this, even if they may on occasion be more subtle and sophisticated in pursuing their research and presenting their results.

Theologically, very few scholars on either side had any interest in leaving the other be. Many in the Christian West carried on the medieval themes of heretical Islam and the false prophet, associating them with the often fantastical myths which had grown up around Islam and the Muslim world. Others sought to be more objective working from carefully edited texts or, increasingly, observation of Muslim society. The latter, manifested so remarkably in the scientific team taken by Napoleon to Egypt in 1798, was an expression also of the impact of the European Enlightenment with its more secular view of the world. But even in such circles one could not usually escape a consequent sense of superiority over this rather curious civilisation. And often when Muslim cultures were portrayed positively it was a device to criticise parts of one's own civilisation, as in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* or Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail*, rather than primarily out of interest in the other.

For virtually all of them, Muslims would have been better off becoming Christian or western, and many actively sought to achieve that end.

In the Muslim world, Christian rulers were cursed as a matter of routine in the texts. The dominant hard line of theological dismissal and condemnation of Christianity, established already in the early medieval period, persisted into the 19th century, with little change or further thought. With a few exceptions there was no interest whatsoever in finding out what Christians really believed in in their own terms. After all, the Qur'an told one what Christians believed: what more did one require? The legally tolerated status of *dhimma* ensured that such views only seldom impacted in practice on Christians in their everyday lives under Muslim rule, but they established a 'default' position which amounted to gentle but relentless pressure on smaller internal communities to become Muslim and legitimised a generally hostile attitude to Christians outside the Muslim realms.

In different ways the 19th and early 20th centuries produced conditions which encouraged a breach with this past. In Europe the growth of secularism and secular political and intellectual movements demoted religious identities and considerations from their primacy. Christianity became just one factor among many, and in the natural sciences gradually lost a role altogether. Above all, the growth of nationalist and socialist political movements introduced patterns of complementary or alternative loyalties and paradigms of intellectual analysis and socio-political action. Where previously religion had been an issue almost of collective life or death, this position was gradually being usurped by nation or political ideology. States became gradually more secular, leading in England to the abolition of the Tests Acts and in France in 1905 to a full separation of church from state.

The export to the Muslim world of these ideas was associated with the expansion of European power, whether directly or indirectly, whether political, economic or cultural. The growth of the national movements through the end of the 19th and into the 20th centuries in particular tended to marginalise religious dimensions of the public discourse. Turkish nationalism was, especially in its Kemalist form, explicit in this. Arab nationalism and its various off-shoots - e.g. Baathism, Nasserism, or Palestinian resistance - was contingent on religion being played down. This could take different forms. In Gamal Abd al-Nasir's proposition that Egypt functioned within 'three circles', the Islamic world had to be satisfied with sharing the platform with the Arab and the African circles. In its Syrian forms, Arab Orthodox intellectuals could speak of being Christians in belief and rite and Muslims by culture. The Arab National Movement and various socialist tendencies were, in effect, Kemalist if not explicitly anti-clerical or even atheist. The economic and social changes which were taking place were for various reasons favouring these new movements, and the Islamic sectors of society were under serious pressure, at least for a time.

The two world wars and the intervening years of crises could be argued to have had opposite effects on either side of the Mediterranean. The self-confidence of Europe was shattered, and large sections of the political, cultural and religious establishment embarked on a process of self-analysis, one result of which was that the imperial project and the previously unquestioned sense of superiority lost confidence and ultimately legitimacy, one reason why the deconstruction of empire took place with such sometimes almost indecent haste. This self-analysis strongly affected also Christian thinking. The assertive, imperial Christianity of the 19th century began to give way to a conciliatory Christianity, often embarrassingly aware of its own complicity in some of the worst outpourings of religious hegemonism, a change encouraged further by the history of the Nazi period and the death camps. Out of this context grew the ecumenical movement among the churches, rippling out first to

opening up a dialogue with Judaism and subsequently also with Islam, a move given official sanction by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and taken up by the World Council of Churches over the following decade.

But this very same period saw, for parallel reasons, the beginnings of a revival of Islam in the public space in the Arab world. The same events which had had undermined European self-confidence and encouraged a self-analysis had also undermined European prestige in the wider world leading, for example, to a 'crisis of orientation' in Egypt in the late 1920s and early 1930s and the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. But the change also encouraged native nationalist movements to push harder for political independence. When the empires then did break up in the 1940s and 1950s the native nationalists, generally secularist, replaced their European teachers. And for a time the balance between them and the Islamic trends was delicately poised.

It may be worth briefly reminding ourselves of what the world looked like in 1975 when the World Council of Churches adopted its first significant statement on Christian-Muslim dialogue at its assembly in Nairobi - and when the founders of my Centre met. In the religious sphere, Christian-Muslim dialogue had just been legitimised at the highest level, but it was still a primarily Christian initiative. In the Middle East, the October war was hardly two years old and disengagement agreements were still the issue of the hour. In 1969 a crazed Australian Jew had set fire to Al-Aqsa Mosque provoking the initiative for the establishment of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. In 1973 riots in Syria had prevented the elimination of Islam from the constitution. In 1975 the Shah of Iran celebrated the ancient Persian empire in its pre-Islamic identity in Hollywood fashion. Sadat had - again - cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood; clearly it was not finished as had been implied in a couple of studies published the previous decade. In waves of nationalisation oil production had been brought under local control and prices had quadrupled, and western Europe closed its gates to labour migration. The Lebanese civil war started. Only four years previously the only state hitherto set up on the basis of Islamic identity had fallen apart in an internecine war in which one part, to become Bangladesh, had welcomed the aid of the Indian arch-enemy. Two years previously, the Afghan monarchy had been overthrown by a military coup.

There is nothing here to indicate the way in which the balance was so soon to be thrown decisively in the direction of Islamic revival: the Iranian revolution in 1978-9, the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Syria going on till the crushing of Hama in 1982, the military islamisation of Pakistan under General Zia al-Haq, the return of religion as a prime marker in Indian community politics, the adoption in Malaysia of islamisation as official government policy.

In Europe itself, the arrival and settlement of immigrants from outside Europe was laying the foundations for a shift in public discourse. The vast majority of these immigrants came from Muslim countries. In Britain the mixture was much broader, with communities settling from the Caribbean (mainly Christian), from India (Hindus and Sikhs) as well as various national and ethnic groups of Muslim background. In the Netherlands, likewise, there was a not negligible Hindu community, and smaller non-Muslim communities were to be found everywhere. But generally the picture was one of Muslim immigration and settlement, overwhelmingly so in France (North Africans) and Germany (Turks). When the gates of labour immigration closed at the time of the oil crisis, the emphasis shifted to family reunion, and with the family came cultural and religious identity, often finding expression in very practical issues in health and education particularly.

It was as their children grew up during the 1980s that religious priorities increasingly found their way into the public sphere. The 'affairs' of 1989 - Rushdie and head scarves - came to symbolise this trend. The demand for a Muslim presence in the public sphere evoked a variety of responses across the western part of the subcontinent. Laicist and republican France met Islamic fundamentalism with secular fundamentalism, an encounter not eased by the complex interrelationship between France and events in the burgeoning Algerian civil war, itself provoked by an Islamist claim to public participation. But as the 1990s passed so the two sides started venturing out of their trenches and entering into a tentative dialogue. In Britain, the long-term effect of the Rushdie affair has essentially been to admit to Muslims and to others a place in the public space alongside the various religious groups with a longer presence. The exact nature of that Muslim presence is one which, in characteristically British fashion, is subject to constant pragmatic negotiation. In Germany the strength of the pseudo-tribal character of the German *Volk* has been the stubborn obstacle to attempts to move towards a more inclusive response to the new religious and ethnic minorities. The smaller countries of northern Europe, Benelux and Scandinavia, each have their own ways of responding, some with more success than others.

Common to all of the various ways of dealing with this question has been the re-opening of the issue of national identity. Especially in Scandinavia, where *folk* and church were essentially identical, the monolithic concept of nation state which had also been typical of central Europe was under challenge such as it had not experienced since its birth. British national self-understanding was both weak, compared to these much stronger ones, and was, and plural in nature, both with reference to multiple national identities and to religious plurality. It thus stood in stark contrast to the ideas of nation which had grown up in central Europe and Scandinavia. But the 'affairs' and Muslim reactions to various foreign policy issues at about the same time, particularly the second Gulf war, the Bosnian war and the Algerian civil war, began to raise issues in some peoples' minds about the extent to which these communities were integrated or alien - and could a Muslim also really be German or French or Italian?

But as we moved into the 1990s, a new dimension entered the scene, namely eastern Europe. Following the collapse of the Soviet system, the constraints were taken off what to the outsider often appeared to be an incomprehensible cauldron of atavistic sentiments. The solidarity of the working class had not overridden previously unsolved questions of national identity. And as the lid came off, communal religious adherences of the kind the Lebanese called *ta'ifiyya* claimed the place of other categories of identity, sometimes assisting in the re-formation of old national identities, as in Catholic Croatian and Orthodox Serbian or Muslim Albanian, or forming the basis of resistance to attempts by majorities to impose unwanted national identities as among Muslim Pomak and Turks in Bulgaria.

Obviously the history of the old Muslim presence in eastern Europe is markedly different from that of the new Muslim presence in the west, but the developments across Europe since 1989 have contributed to something of a convergence: religion, citizenship, state and nation are now equally open questions in both parts. And in both parts Islam is a significant element.

Through all these developments, the process of Christian-Muslim dialogue had by the 1980s become part of the mainstream activities of most of the main churches. They had come to it in a variety of different ways. There were individuals with a theological or spiritual interest, some were former missionaries in the Muslim world who could now see their experience being relevant at home. Some came out of various forms of social and community work. The institutional motives of

the churches differed. In Germany, the initiative had been spurred on by the churches' social welfare functions for migrant workers in official partnership with the state. In Britain, the immediate cause had been the preparations for the World of Islam Festival in 1976. The strengthening of grass roots and formal institutional interests arose out of the rising profile of Islam in the news media, especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran and then, ten years later, by the 'affairs'. The conservative and evangelical movements retained a strong sense of an obligation to 'preach Christ to the Muslim' - ironically the Arabic version of the papers published from an international conference on evangelism to Muslims in the early 1980s is being sold by Muslim centres in the Middle East as proof of Christian perfidy - but some trends also preserve a socially active tradition and are finding it possible from that background to work together with Muslims in what might be called a practical dialogue.

In the Muslim world the dialogue had been much lower-key and slower to progress. It is hardly surprising that the multi-religious context of India was one which offered a fertile ground for inter-religious relations generally, nor that some of the earliest Christian-Muslim meetings after political independence took place in Lebanon. But many felt at the time that dialogue was not necessary in such regions where the communities had been living together for centuries. Events in Lebanon would show that there was a strong element of wishful thinking in this, as did similar events later in Yugoslavia. Christians committed to the improvement of relations were often charged with the fact that dialogue projects were usually Christian initiatives to which Muslims were invited, usually selected by the Christian organisers. While there were exceptions, I think it is difficult to avoid having to plead guilty as charged.

But in the last decade we have, I believe, experienced a significant change. The collapse of the Soviet system and the end of the cold war removed a layer of priorities and pressures in state domestic and foreign policies in the Middle East and other parts of Africa and Asia with massive effects which we can all identify but which would take me outside the scope of this paper. But the geopolitical change led directly into the talk of 'Islam, the new enemy' and Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'. What is not at stake here is the validity or otherwise of Huntington's thesis, but its impact. For western, and above all US audiences the Islamic threat could be identified in a series of armed actions by Muslim organisations both within their own countries and internationally. A variety of different economic, political, cultural and military issues could suddenly be gathered together under the slogan 'clash of civilisations'. But here was a new imperialism, with reference to the US-led liberation of Kuwait and President Bush's short-lived 'new world order' and then the dreaded new globalisation symbolised in the World Bank, the IMF and then the WTO. Islam and the West became flavour of the month, and then of the decade.

Within six months of Huntington's paper appearing, the first conference on this subject took place, and they have been taking place almost without break since. At the same time this new agenda broke down the invisible barriers which had been keeping the religious dimensions isolated. The dialogue between Islam and Christianity acquired a breadth of content and participation which had been unimaginable only a few years earlier. Euro-Arab discussions started to include religious dimensions as more than just a token. In November 1995, a meeting of member countries of the European Communities and the littoral states of the Mediterranean signed an agreement to promote cooperation in politics, economics and culture, the third 'basket' explicitly including reference to the dialogue of religions. Several billion Euros have been put into this account, much of it still unspent. Other European institutions, Parliament and Commission, started paying attention. The Swedish foreign ministry opened a new section entitled 'Euro-Islam' which has been active in

pushing the Barcelona agenda, including the religious dimension. The Council of Europe has also been active. In the last few years UNESCO has joined in with its own programme, including conferences on inter-religious dialogue in Central Asia.

Most remarkable has been the way in which the Muslim side has taken up the initiative - it is certainly no longer possible to say that dialogue is mainly a Christian initiative. The annual Saudi cultural festival, the 'Janadiriyyah', has run conferences on Islam and the West since 1996. Various official and semi-official Malaysian institutions hold seminars and conferences, and most recently the Iranians have become exceedingly active. Of course, there are all kinds of mixed motives behind such initiatives - there always were, whoever took the initiative. But one of the motives on both sides has been a perception that Huntington's thesis was not going to be allowed to be proved right, and that by responding jointly in this way the extremists on both sides could be contained.

But the events of the last ten years are also taking place in an environment which in the Middle East and elsewhere is experiencing significant changes, which tend to more supportive than not of the new level of mutual interest. Most significantly, possibly, is the growth into adulthood of the first significant generation of the children of the immigrants from the countryside, those who moved into the cities during the 60s and 70s, those who in Tehran brought down the Shah. This is exactly the same generation which is now in western Europe taking over the leadership of Muslim organisations and projects - they were after all part of the same process of migration, they just happened not to stop within the home country borders. This is a much more broadly educated generation which is forming the new urban professional middle class. It did not experience the urban-centred secular nationalist movement, it generally preserves its active identification with Islam. Its discussions are heavily laced with Islamic themes and Islamic analyses of events.

Women are a large and active component, often characterised by a greater willingness to challenge conventional social norms and intellectual givens. By the late 1990s they were rapidly becoming the majority on university campuses. One annual report of the Emirates university at al-Ayn indicated that every single faculty had a majority of women students, and that their graduating levels were 5-10% higher than their male counterparts. Headscarved Shi'ite women are now a commonplace sight on the campus of the American University of Beirut, something virtually unknown twenty-five years ago. A recent study showed that in Amman, many such women spend some years in employment after graduating before returning to traditional female roles in the home. But the impact of their very different biographies on the way they will bring up their own children in turn will be extremely interesting to follow, especially in the case of the boys.

These people are the audience for the great breadth of debate which is now taking place among Islamic thinkers, a debate which since the early 1990s has included very centrally human rights, democracy and dialogue, religious and political. The debate is penetrating into the centres of Islamic power. Three years ago at the annual general Islamic conference organised by the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Affairs - the subject was Islamic priorities in the next century - every single speaker, whether from government or not, placed dialogue with the West and a better understanding with Christianity among the top priorities. And one of the things which most annoys the participants in this debate is the refusal of western media, politicians and many academics to recognise that this change is going on or to attribute any validity to it. I am reminded of one of my own teachers in Islamic law in the late 1960s, who dismissed my interest in a piece by the late Prof. Abd al-Rahman Doi revising traditional views on the *dhimma* as 'unrepresentative' - the orientalist was determining what constituted correct Islam. The annoyance of these people at our refusal to take notice is partly

to be explained by the implied arrogance; worse, however, is that it contributes to undermining them in relation to the extremists.

While most of these new intellectuals are not graduates of the Islamic faculties, some of the latter are also engaging with these pluralist and open discussions, the most well-known currently probably being Yusuf al-Qaradawi. But these institutions themselves are also attempting to move forward, often against great internal resistance. There has for over a decade been an active cooperation between the Vatican and the Ilahiyet Fakultesi at Ankara University involving exchange of lecturers. Al-Azhar has signed several cooperation agreements with European institutions in the field of theology and religious studies. The Shari'a Faculty at Kuwait University has negotiated to place PhD students at selected British universities in the context of the development of a modern and more open undergraduate curriculum.

Having made it clear above that I think that the social, political and cultural environment have played a crucial role in the past in determining the move from confrontation to dialogue, it would be naive of me, in momentary euphoria over such a positive breakthrough, to forget that the environment will also continue to have an impact in the future. And here it is frighteningly easy to identify possible developments which will disrupt and draw us backwards. In Europe, the expansion of the Union eastwards will gradually bring in more Muslim populations with a very different history and recent experience than those living in the west. Especially in the Arab world, the demographic pressures of stubbornly high birthrates continually threaten to outpace material development and growth of GDP.

The inherent weakness of borders and lack of state legitimacy in parts of sub-Saharan Africa is a looming shadow. The future of post-soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus is far from resolved. In China rapid economic and social change are in tension with centralised party power and places question marks against the allegiance of major outlying regions, including the Muslim north-west. Human mobility generally, and especially that of refugees, impacts disproportionately on the Muslim world. Climatologists suggest that global warming will lead to a desiccation of the Mediterranean basin - some will say that we are already seeing the early signs - with yet greater consequent pressures on populations.

This picture is not cheerful. But it is a question of whether the progress which has taken place, and the patterns of individual and institutional cooperation which have been established, have attained the resilience to survive such adverse pressures or whether they can achieve the requisite resilience in time. The current response to the events of September 11 are perhaps the first serious test of the resilience of the networks of relations which have arisen in the last 25 years. It is as yet too early to judge the outcome.