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BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

"CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS: EXAMPLES OF CONFLICT AND

COLLABORATION"

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SUMMARY

In today's world there are many well-reported examples of what appears to be conflict between Christians and Muslims. Deeper investigation, however, often reveals that these conflicts are not primarily religious, but rather political, socio-economic, or ethno-linguistic. There are also many, usually less well-reported, examples of collaboration between Christians and Muslims in different parts of the world. This paper will examine some of the causes of (so-called) Christian-Muslim conflict, and outline some of the examples of better relationships between the two communities in different geographical regions, in order to focus attention on how a constructive partnership between Muslims and Christians may be built for the future.

Conflict

The sad empirical reality today is that there are a number of conflicts taking place around the world which at first sight appear to be conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Moving from West to East this is the case in countries such as Africa's largest in terms of population, Nigeria, where in recent years there have been a number of riots and incidents of tension between the mainly Muslim north of the country and the mainly Christian south of the county. It is also the case in Africa's largest country in terms of surface area, the Sudan, where for some forty years now conflict has been bubbling with various degrees of intensity between the north and south of the country. The latest news about this conflict is more positive, in that talks have taken place and a peace agreement has been signed, but this does not yet mean that the conflict is finally settled.

In Europe, the past decade has witnessed two conflicts involving Christian and Muslim communities, both in the Balkans in the south-east of Europe, and both in different ways resulting from the break-up of the former federal state of Yugoslavia. In one of these conflicts, almost ten years ago (in July 1995) some 8,000 Muslim men were systematically murdered, and then buried in mass graves, by the Bosnian Serb army. This is at least twice, and possibly three times the number, of people who died in and around the World Trade Center on 11th September 2001, and is the worst massacre to have taken place in Europe since the end of World War II.

In the Middle East too there have been several conflicts over the past decades which may appear at first sight to be conflicts between Christians and Muslims, the most dramatic example being the civil war which took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991, which was often presented in media reports as

being a matter of Christians and Muslims killing each other because of their differences over religion. In other parts of this region too, such as Egypt, Iraq and Iran, there have been instances, generally on a smaller scale, of tensions boiling over between the communities and resulting in outbreaks of violence, including attacks on places of worship and the targeted killing of individual members of the different communities.

In South Asia too tensions between the two communities have on several occasions broken out into violence, with the most dramatic example coming from Pakistan where, in the context of the programme of Islamization begun by General Zia al-Haq, Christians and the members of other minority religious communities, including the Shi'i Muslim one, have on occasion experienced discrimination to such an extent that they have described their experience as persecution. The most dramatic manifestation of this conviction among Christians is the suicide outside a court house in Sahiwal, near Lahore, on 6th May 1998, of the Roman Catholic bishop John Joseph, whose sought by his death to publicise the suffering of the local Christian community at the hands of the Sunni Muslim majority, especially through the so-called blasphemy laws.

Finally, in South-East Asia, there have been well-publicised instances of violent confrontation between some elements of the Christian and Muslim communities in certain parts of Indonesia, particularly the Moluccan Islands, and also in the south of the Philippines, especially in Mindanao.

Many other instances could of course be highlighted, from many different regions and continents, but even this catalogue represents a sad list of examples of rather negative, confrontational and even antagonistic relations between

Christians and Muslims in different parts of the world. On this point at least, Samuel Huntington was surely right: on the basis of simple empirical observation it cannot be denied that many of the world's most serious and intractable conflicts in recent years have taken place on the frontier between what can, on one level, be called the Christian and Muslim worlds. Huntington, of course, does not use those terms, preferring to talk of the Western (by which he means Western Europe, North America and Australasia) and the Islamic (alongside the Latin American, the African, the Orthodox, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Sinic (which he sometimes calls the Confucian) and the Japanese), and it is very interesting to try and work out why in some instances he selects a simple geographical label whereas in others he focuses on religion as the main focus of identity. With respect to his descriptive analysis, however, he has highlighted an important, if unfortunate truth, namely the reality of a significant number of conflicts on the frontier between the Christian and Muslim worlds.

Where Huntington is wrong, however, is in his suggestion that the main cause of these conflicts is somehow essentially religious. Even if his description is pretty accurate, in other words, his diagnosis is, in my view, wrong, since it is not religion *per se* which is the main cause of conflict. It is rather the case that political, socio-economic, and ethno-linguistic factors are to a far larger extent responsible, so that in West Africa, for example, most of the violent confrontations have been between ethnic groups, one of whom happens to be mainly Christian and the other of whom happens to be mainly Muslim. Language and ethnicity, in other words, often reinforced by economic competition for land or other resources, are the most significant factors involved, and the same is true in the Sudan, where a much more important factor than religion in the conflict is culture and language, the north of the country being Arabic-speaking and to a

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large extent Arabic in culture, whereas the south is non-Arabic speaking, and Nilotic in culture. The north, it is true, is overwhelmingly (but not completely) Muslim, and the south has a considerable, though not even necessarily a majority, Christian population, but this does not make religion the main cause of the conflict.

Equally in the Lebanon, the civil war which was so often described as a Christian-Muslim conflict was more accurately a conflict about the fair distribution of political power between communities which happened, on the basis of the old Ottoman Turkish model, to define themselves on the basis of religion, rather than a conflict about religion as such. The traditional Lebanese system of 'confessionalism', whereby the President of the country has to be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament a Shi'i Muslim, the Foreign Minister a Greek Orthodox Christian, and so on, is the real problem rather than any essential antithesis between Christians and Muslims. In Egypt too, many of the instances of violent confrontation between the two communities turn out, on closer investigation, to have been caused by socio-economic rivalry between Copts and Muslims rather than any essential antagonism between the two faiths, and the same dominance of either political, socio-economic, or ethno-linguistic factors is generally found with reference to the other so-called conflicts between Christians and Muslims which have been outlined earlier.

One important piece of evidence which supports this thesis is the more recent conflict which has broken out in the Sudan, in the west of the country, in Darfur province. Fierce conflict has broken out here between the local population and an armed militia, the *janjaweed*, which the central government of the Sudan

is accused by some of supporting. As regards religion, both of these groups are Muslim, so it is very hard to make a case for religion being a cause of the conflict. It is rather a conflict between a desire for greater local political independence and a concern to preserve the unity of the nation (and here the conflict may be to some extent analogous with the conflict between the north and south of the country), but even more importantly, like some of the conflicts in Nigeria, it is a conflict between two ethno-linguistic groups, one Arabic-speaking and one not, and one basically nomadic and the other dependent on settled agriculture. Land and competition for resources in a fragile ecological environment, in other words, are much more important factors in explaining the conflict than religion.

Collaboration

Alongside all these conflicts, however, some of which have very long histories, there are also many examples of collaboration and fruitful interaction between Christians and Muslims. Two of the most famous go back to the medieval period, to use the most widely-used Western term, or the classical period, to use the term which is preferred in the Islamic tradition. In ninth and tenth centuries CE (or third and fourth centuries AH) Baghdad, firstly, there was substantial interaction between not only Christian and Muslim but also Jewish intellectuals in the fields of theology, philosophy, and science, in the context of the whole movement to translate the great works of the Hellenistic tradition from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, work which was in many cases undertaken by Nestorian Christian translators, the most famous of whom was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (890/193-873/260). These works provided much of the stimulus for the discussions which took place at the *bayt al-hikma* (House of Wisdom), which was founded in Baghdad by the 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (813/198-833/218).

At a slightly later stage, in the early years of the tenth/fourth century, the headship of the school of philosophy in Baghdad passed from a Christian, the Nestorian Yuhanna ibn Haylan, to the Muslim al-Farabi, and then back to another Christian, probably belonging to a different branch of the Christian church, the Syrian Orthodox, Yahya ibn 'Adi. This surely points to deep and prolonged interaction and collaboration between the two communities, and in the person of Saadya bin Yusuf al-Fayyumi (882/268-942/330), the Gaon (Head) of the Jewish Academy of Sura in Iraq, which was the leading Jewish academy of the day, we have a very significant figure in that community too, whose works, in both their style of argument and the organization of their content, reflect closely the ideas of the Mu'tazili school of theology within Islam.

As a second example of genuine interaction and collaboration between Christian and Muslims in the medieval period, the translation movement which had such an important place in Spain, and to a lesser extent Sicily, in the twelfth and thirteenth (CE) (or sixth and seventh AH) centuries is extremely significant. This time the translation was from Arabic into Latin, and as well as translations of Greek works which had been lost to Western Europe for many centuries, it was the works of the great Islamic philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), which were translated, along with many works of Islamic science, and it was the city of Toledo (not far from Madrid) which served as the main centre where the work was done. The most important translator, Gerald of Cremona (1114/508-1187/583), himself translated over eighty works from Arabic into Latin, including works by Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Galen, as well as works by al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina. The significance of these works being translated into Latin was simply that, once translated, they could be circulated throughout the

whole of Western Europe, where, as the language of the church, Latin was also the language of learning, and the translations thus contributed to, on the one hand, the start of a period of considerable intellectual ferment in Western Europe, the so-called 12-th century Renaissance, and on the other, to the establishment of the new (to Europe) idea of the university.

At the same time as this work of translation was taking place in the part of Spain which was under Christian control, in the part which was still under Islamic rule what has been called the last great flowering of the philosophical tradition in Islam within the Sunni community was also taking place, with its best known representative being Ibn Rushd (Averroes). He was born in Cordoba in 1126/520, and during his lifetime enjoyed mixed fortunes within the Muslim community, with his work sometimes being encouraged by the Almohad (*al-muwahhid*) rulers of the day in Marrakesh and sometimes being condemned, so that in 1195/591, for example, his views were condemned, the study of philosophy was prohibited, and his own books were publicly burnt. Ibn Rushd was rehabilitated shortly afterwards, however, so he returned to court before his death three years later. As well as for his own contributions in the field of both philosophy and law, Ibn Rushd was hugely influential as a commentator on the works of Aristotle, and many of these were also translated into Latin in Toledo within some thirty years of his death. These too became hugely influential in Europe, with a figure such as Siger of Brabant (1240/637-1281/680) becoming known as an 'Averroist' as a result of his being accused of following the doctrine of Aristotle (as mediated by Ibn Rushd) rather than that of Christianity.

As with the earlier period of interaction between Christian and Muslim thinkers in Baghdad, this second period of such interaction also saw a

considerable part being played by Jewish thinkers, with Moses Maimonides (1135/529-1204/600), arguably the most significant thinker of medieval Judaism, also being born in Cordoba, and then in the course of his writing demonstrating to a very large extent the influence on his thinking not only of Aristotle himself but also of Ibn Rushd as a commentator on Aristotle. One of the main streets of Cordoba today therefore has statues of two of its most famous citizens, Ibn Rushd and Moses Maimonides, next door to each other. It was for this reason that twelfth/sixth century Cordoba has come to be seen as a leading example of what later came to be called *convivencia* (co-existence), but in a sense that is too weak a description, since much more was involved than simply 'living together (peacefully)'. As we have seen, there was real interaction on many different levels.

Examples of real interaction and mutual influence between the Christian and Muslim communities did not cease with the ending of the medieval or classical period. Even as, on the one hand, the armies of the Ottoman Empire were laying siege to Vienna, the gateway to Western Europe, as they were in 1529/936 and 1683/1094, cultural influences continued to be transmitted from one religious community to the other, with Mehmed II, the Sultan who conquered Constantinople in 1453/857, having his portrait painted by the Italian painter Bellini, and in the mid-eighteenth/twelfth century, a Baroque-style mosque, the Nur-u-Osmaniye (Light of Osman) being built in Istanbul. This more positive trend continued into the nineteenth/thirteenth century too, with European ideas proving of great interest to the rulers and peoples of many parts of the Islamic world, as may be seen in the educational missions sent to France by the ruler of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali, in the first half of that century, and whose reactions to Europe were recorded so interestingly by a figure such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, a

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religious scholar who accompanied one of the earliest student groups sent to France from Egypt, and who meticulously recorded his observations of French society, including the role of religion within it. Arguably it was only the failure of Europe to practise some of its own ideals, in the form of the growth of European imperialism, which brought about a strong reaction against European ideas, and which thus contributed to the vigorous revival of the more antagonistic model of relations between Christians and Muslims.

The two models: resources and foundations

As this historical overview has demonstrated, the record of Christian-Muslim Relations over the centuries points to the availability of two possible models for the relationship between the two traditions, one of conflict and antagonism and the other of collaboration and interaction. The question which will now be investigated is the, perhaps more interesting, one of what are the resources and foundations for each of these models.

(a) Scriptures

The first, and obviously crucial, resource for both traditions, is their respective scriptures, and within each of these, respectively the Bible and the Qur'an, there is a wide range of material available. To take the Qur'an first, there are, on the one hand, with respect to religious diversity in general, verses such as the one which is often quoted in seminars and conferences such as this one, to the extent that it has become almost a kind of motto with respect to the whole idea of the 'dialogue' of civilizations, in contrast to Samuel Huntington's 'clash' of civilizations: it is Sura 49, verse 13, *wa ja'alnakum shu'uban wa qaba'ila li-*

ta'arafu (we (i.e. God) have made you peoples and tribes so that you can get to know each other), which is an excellent kind of proof text in support of the idea of religious diversity. Another favourite verse is Sura 2, verse 256, *la ikrah fi'l-din* (there is no compulsion in religion), a verse which is often quoted in discussions concerning human rights and used in that context to support the argument that Islam favours the modern concept of religious freedom. Another very interesting verse is Sura 109, verse 6, *la-kum dinukum wa li dini* (to you your religion and to me my religion), a verse which seems to give the strongest possible support to the legitimacy of different religious traditions for different people.

On the other hand, other verses of the Qur'an appear at first sight to point in a rather different direction: Sura 3, verse 19 contains the famous phrase *'inna al-din 'ind allah al-islam*, a phrase which is notoriously difficult to translate into other languages as a result of the double meaning of the Arabic word '*islam*'. Should it be put into English as 'surely the religion in God's presence is Islam' or 'surely the religion in God's presence is 'submission'? Just to take one other example, Sura 2, verse 257, which comes immediately after the verse about there being no compulsion in religion, then states that *al-athina kafaru awliyathum al-taghut yukhrijunahum min al-nur ila'l-zulmat; 'ula'ika ashab al-nar; hum fiha khalidun* (as for the unbelievers, their masters are false gods, who will bring them from light into darkness; they are the owners of the fire; they will dwell therein for ever). These verses have often been taken as suggesting a much more antagonistic point-of-view towards other religious traditions, in opposition to those verses which seem much more sympathetic towards religious diversity.

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With respect to Christians in particular (though Jews are often mentioned alongside the Christians in these verses) verses such as Sura 2, verse 62, *'inna al-athina amanu wa al-athina hadu wa'l-nasara wa'l-sabi'in – man amanu bi'llah wa'l-yawm al-akhir wa 'amila salihan – fa la-hum ajruhum 'ind rabbihim wa la khawf 'alayhim wa la hum yahnuna* (those who believe, and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans – those who believe in God and the Last Day and who do good – their reward is with their Lord, no fear shall come upon them, and they will not grieve), appear broadly positive in their judgements about Christians (and others). Other verses, such as Sura 9, verse 29, *qatilu al-athina la yu'minuna bi'llah wa la bi'l-yawm al-akhir wa la yuharrimuna ma harrama allah wa rasuluhu wa la yadinuna din al-haqq min al-athina utu al-kitab hatta yu'tu al-jizya 'an yaddin wa hum saghirun* (fight against those who do not believe in God and the Last Day, and who do not forbid what God and His prophet forbid, and do not follow the religion of truth among those who have been given the Book, until they pay the *jizya* (tribute) and are brought low), however, seem to point in a rather different direction, and although there is actually no reference to Christians or any other religious community in that verse, its prescriptions have often been taken by commentators and political authorities as referring primarily to the People of the Book.

A verse such as Sura 5, verse 82, *latajidanna ashaddu al-nas 'adawatan li'l-athina amanu al-yahud wa al'athina ashraqu, wa latajidannaa aqrabahum mawaddatan li'l-athina amanu al-athina qalu inna nasara - dhalika bi'anna minhum qassisin wa ruhbanan wa innahum la yastakribuna* (you will find the strongest of people in enmity to those who believe are the Jews and the idolaters, and the nearest of them in affection to those who believe are those who say 'we are Christians'. That is because among them there are priests and monks, and

they not think themselves important) then seems to differentiate between the different religious communities, and to commend the Christians in particular, partly because of the piety of their monks and priests. Sura 57, verse 27, however, *wa qaffayna bi 'isa ibn maryam wa ataynahu al-injil wa ja'alna fi qulub al-athina itaba'ahu rafatan wa rahmatan; wa rahbaniyya itada'uha – ma katabnaha 'alayhim* (we caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow and gave him the gospel, and placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him; but monasticism they invented – we did not ordain it for them), seems to have a different judgement concerning monasticism.

Taking all these different verses together, the difficult question is, of course, which of them is primary, in the sense of being the most important? Not surprisingly, different scholars and commentators have come to different conclusions on this question, with one commonly used criterion being the chronology of the different verses. Later verses, in other words, are seen as superseding, or abrogating, earlier ones, but even this is not a completely reliable guide since there is no complete agreement concerning the dating of the different Suras and verses of the Qur'an. With respect to 109:6, for example, the verse which states *la-kum dinukum wa li dini* (to you your religion and to me my religion), and thus may seem to indicate a high respect and tolerance for religious diversity, does the fact that this verse was revealed towards the start of the prophet's career, in other words in Mecca, mean that its message came in the context of his early discussions with the Meccans, where from a position of relative weakness the prophet's message seems to suggest some kind of tactical accommodation with the Meccans as regards their religion, but that this message is then superseded by some of the Qur'an's later, more negative, judgements on Meccan religion? Or do the sentiments expressed remain valid in spite of later

revelations seeming to point in a different direction? In terms of later Muslim thinking about religious diversity, much obviously depends on how this question is answered.

If we turn now to the Christian Bible, we will find many of the same difficulties, even if the text itself is very different from that of the Qur'an, not least with respect to its much greater length and its multiple authorship. Firstly, in the Old Testament, the first (and larger) part of the Christian scriptures which Christians share with Jews in considering as divinely inspired, in the first book, the book of Genesis (literally 'the beginning') it is affirmed that God created the whole of humanity in his own image, and it is specifically stated that both male and female are included within this statement (Genesis 1:26-27). This verse could also be taken as an affirmation of religious diversity, in the sense that all human beings, regardless of the religious community to which they belong, are made the image of God and are therefore to be valued and respected.

At the other end of the Old Testament, in its last book, that of the prophet Malachi (one of the prophets of the Old Testament of whom there is no mention in the Qur'an or the Islamic tradition), there is then another of what might be called the great 'universalist' statements of the Christian scriptures: 'From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name is great among the nations' (Malachi 1:11). This verse suggests that all over the world, among all peoples, God's name is known and honoured, and true worship is offered to Him, and some modern commentators have suggested that the particular religious tradition which inspired this verse was the Zoroastrian Persian one, so that Malachi was in effect saying to his

hearers 'if you want to see true worship of God, God being worshipped properly, don't look at what we Jews do in our worship, look at what the Zoroastrians do', a suggestion which, if true, is surely a very remarkable commendation of one religious tradition by a member of another.

On the other hand the Old Testament also contains a number of statements which appear to not only justify but also actively command the use of violence against other nations and communities: the book of Deuteronomy, which is generally taken by Jews and Christians to be one of the five books of the Torah which was given to Moses, contains the statement in Chapter 20, verses 17-18: 'You shall utterly destroy … the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their gods, and so to sin against the Lord your God.'

Deuteronomy Chapter 25, verse 19 then says: 'You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.' Later in the Old Testament, in the first book of Samuel, another of the prophets of the Old Testament who is not mentioned in the Qur'an or the Islamic tradition, Chapter 15, verse 3 says: 'go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them but kill both men and women, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.' These statements about the people of Amalek and the other peoples must be understood firstly as having originally been addressed to idolatrous religious practice, and secondly to a situation of bitter conflict between peoples for survival; it is therefore absolutely vital that the context in which they were originally delivered is considered carefully as part of the process of trying to

discern their meaning for today, but for Jews and Christians these are divinely-inspired statements, and great care is therefore necessary in using them in any discussion of inter-religious relations today.

Later in the Old Testament, in the first book of Kings, Chapter 18, there is the story of a figure who is mentioned twice in the Qur'an, Elijah (Elias), and indeed Sura 37, verses 123-132, recounts the same story, though in broader terms, without so much detail. The Old Testament account tells of Elijah's confrontation with the 450 prophets of the god Baal at Mount Carmel, and at the end of the incident, when the prophets of Baal have been humiliated, Elijah commands his followers to 'seize the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape. So they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the brook of Kishon, and killed them there.' (1 Kings 18:40). Finally, in the book of Psalms, which is sometimes taken to correspond to what the Qur'an refers to as the Zabur, the scripture given to David, there is one Psalm, number 137, which is a lament sung by the Israelites in their exile in the sixth century BCE in Babylon (in what is now Iraq). In the course of the lament, however, there are some bitterly vindictive statements against the peoples who have caused the Israelites to be carried off into exile, including the following statements in verses 8-9: 'O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy is he who pays you back with what you have done to us! Happy is he who takes your children and dashes their heads against a rock!' As with all of these other verses the context in which this sentiment is expressed is extremely important, since it is clearly an impassioned plea for recompense from an author who has himself witnessed or even experienced the kind of treatment which is being discussed. As a scriptural statement, therefore, great care is therefore necessary in interpreting these verses in later generations.

The second part of the Christian scriptures, the New Testament, the part which is not shared with the Jews, also contains a number of statements concerning religious diversity which may appear to point in rather different directions. On the one hand there is the statement attributed to Jesus himself in the Gospel according to John, Chapter 14, verse 6, 'I am the way the truth and the life: no-one comes to the father but by me.' At face value this verse seems to suggest that what Christians have generally called 'salvation', eternal life with God, is attainable only through Jesus. Equally, in the book of Acts, the earliest historical account of the growth of the early Christian community, a kind of Christian equivalent of those parts of the Hadith which chronicle the early growth of the *umma*, Peter, one of Jesus' closest early followers, says in a sermon in Jerusalem: 'these is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved.' (Book of Acts 4:12).

On the other hand, in the same chapter of the Gospel according to John (Chapter 14), verse 2, Jesus is recorded as saying 'In my father's house are many mansions', a statement which has been taken by some commentators as suggesting that there is a place with God for members of different religious communities, an acknowledgement, in other words, of at least some degree of validity to religious pluralism and diversity. Equally, among the writings of another very significant early follower of Jesus, Paul, there is the statement in his First Letter to Timothy, Chapter 4, verse 10, that 'We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe' (First Letter of Paul to Timothy 4:10), a statement which on the surface seems to point to universal salvation, even with perhaps a certain priority being given to 'believers' (though no specific reference is given the nature of those believers).

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The Bible, as well as the Qur'an, therefore seems to contain statements of very different kinds about religious diversity and plurality, and the same is true in the field of Christian ethics, where on the one hand in the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 5, verse 9, Jesus says 'Blessed are the peacemakers', and on the other, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 6, verses 14 and 17, Paul says 'Do not be mismated with unbelievers … Come out from among them', two statements which seem to point in very different directions in offering guidance to Christians concerning how they should interact on a practical level with members of other religious communities. These statements too, of course, need to be understood in their sociological context, so that the interpretation and application of them today must take careful account of the day-to-day interaction between different communities which the texts were originally seeking to address.

(b) Histories and traditions

In addition to their respective scriptures, the histories and traditions of the two communities can also, as we have already seen to some extent, provide resources and models for their interaction today. Sometimes these models may appear to be ones of confrontation and antagonism, the most obvious example from Christian history being the Crusading movement, beginning at the end of the eleventh century CE/fifth century AH. Much has been written in many different languages about the Crusades, by both Christian and Muslim authors among others, and they have sometimes been seen, on both sides, as being somehow representative of the whole of medieval Western Christian opinion with respect to Muslims. The reality is considerably more complex that that, as there

were many opponents of crusading even at the time, and modern research about the social and political background to the movement has emphasised the extent to which it should be seen in the context of the church authorities, firstly, seeking to further their influence in society as a whole at the expense of the existing political authorities (and thus seeking to encourage a 'transnational' religious movement which would be under the control of the church), and, secondly, trying to establish peace among Christians by seeking to control, or even prevent, hostilities between the different Christian nations of Europe by channelling the use of force and violence against an external enemy. This may still be difficult to reconcile with the ideals of Christian ethics, but examination of the context within which the movement grew up may help to provide some perspective on the original rationale of the movement.

Within Islamic history, something of the same issue emerges with reference to the traditions about *jihad* (literally 'struggle', often translated as 'Holy War') and *ghaza* (as practised by, for example, the Ottoman Turks, and which is often also translated as 'Holy War'). These concepts too have been understood in many different ways, with many different interpretations being given to *jihad* in particular. Is it primarily a spiritual struggle, or a military struggle, or both? Different emphases have been placed on the term by different groups within the Islamic community in different places and at different times. Is it necessarily a defensive war, in which Muslim communities seek to resist external aggression, or are there circumstances in which it can be used to expand the frontiers of the world of Islam, or even involve seeking the 'purification' of societies which are already Muslim in name? Again many different answers have been given to these questions/

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Crusade and *jihad* do not have a monopoly on the history of Christian-Muslim Relations, however. During the heyday of the Crusades a figure such as Francis of Assisi, when he encountered some of the realities of the crusading army outside the Egyptian city of Damietta in 1219/616, denounced the crusade and sought an interview with the Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, which was granted. Francis' conviction was that while the Crusades might appear on the surface to benefit Christendom, they did nothing at all to promote the proper understanding of Christianity among Muslims, and his suggestion was that a better policy was to seek to create Christians than to destroy Muslims by peaceful means such as preaching and compassionate service.

Only a little later, and not too far away in distance, the great Sufi poet Jalal al-din Rumi (1207/602-1273/672) was also reflecting on the relationship between different religious communities, and coming to his own distinctive conclusions on this topic, in his *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabriz* (Poems for (his teacher) Shams-i Tabriz):

> What do do, O Muslims? For I do not recognise myself;
>
> Not a Christian I nor Jew, Zoroastrian or Muslim.
>
> Not of the East am I nor West, nor land nor sea …
>
> Not of India am I nor China, not Bulgar-land nor Turkestan;
>
> Not the Kingdom of both Iraqs nor the land of Khurasan.
>
> Not of this world am I nor the next, not of heaven nor hell;
>
> Not of Adam nor of Eve, not of Paradise nor Ridwan (the angel in charge of
>
> > Paradise).
>
> My place is no place, my trace has no trace;

> Not body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of Love.
>
> ` Duality have I put aside, I have seen both worlds as one.
>
> One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.

It is thus clear that histories and traditions too provide many different models for the relationship between Christians and Muslims.

Today – conflict or collaboration?

We have already pointed to, and attempted to analyse, many of the instances of what are often presented as Christian-Muslim conflicts in the world today. In fact, as we have also seen, they are often conflicts about other issues, political, socio-economic or ethno-linguistic, between groups who happen to be either Christian or Muslim. What alternative models to conflict exist, then?

One of the most important is surely the movement for dialogue. 'Dialogue' is a term which, like 'pluralism', 'crusade' or *jihad* has many different meanings and operates on many different levels, but however it is defined and understood, a great many seminars, meetings and conferences involving Christians and Muslims have taken place under the general banner of 'Christian-Muslim dialogue' over the past few years. Some of these have been initiated and organised by Christian groups, such as the (Roman Catholic Christian) Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (PCID) or the (Protestant and Orthodox Christian) World Council of Churches, especially its Office of Inter-Religious Relations, and others have been initiated and organised by Muslim groups such as the World Muslim Congress (established in 1926), the (Saudi-based) Muslim

World League (founded in 1962), and the World Islamic Call Society (based in Libya).

Two groups committed to Christian-Muslim dialogue which are distinctive in that they have attempted to sustain their conversations over a number of years, as opposed to simply arranging one-off meetings, are the Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien (Muslim-Christian Research Group), a group of mainly Roman Catholic Christians and North African Sunni Muslims who have met regularly over a number of years to discuss important questions such as the meaning and interpretation of scriptures, and the 'Building Bridges' seminar, which consists of mainly Anglican Christians and Muslims from all over the English-speaking world. Both of these groups have produced significant contributions to the joint study by Christians and Muslims of both the Bible and the Qur'an, and these are among the most interesting publications to have emerged from dialogue between Christians and Muslims so far. (See Muslim-Christian Research Group, *The Challenge of the Scriptures: Bible and Qur'an*, New York: Orbis, 1989; and Ipgrave, M., (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, London: Church House Publishing, 2004, and ibid., (ed.), *Bearing the Word: prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic perspective*, London: Church House Publishing, 2005.)

It is very interesting, among other things, to compare the approaches to the joint study of the scriptures by the two groups, with the Muslim-Christian Research Group perhaps concentrating more on questions such as the role of scriptures within religious traditions as a whole, and technical questions involving the hermeneutical principles on which scriptural interpretation is based, with the 'Building Bridges' seminar focusing to a greater extent on more personal and

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contemporary questions about how Christians and Muslims hear the voice of God as they read their scriptures and what the scriptures teach about such urgent issues as gender and religious diversity. The latter group also undertakes more detailed study of individual scriptural passages during the course of its discussions.

Both groups continue to meet, with the 'Building Bridges' seminar having met annually now for four years, alternating between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority contexts. Thus the first seminar was held in London in 2002, the second (on the scriptures) in Qatar in the Arabian Gulf in 2003, the third (on prophecy) in Washington DC in April 2004, and the fourth (on 'Muslims, Christians and the Common Good') being held in Sarajevo in Bosnia, in May 2005. The 2006 seminar is due to take place in Washington DC in March 2006, on the theme of 'Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives', and it is planned that the 2007 seminar will be held in Malaysia, on a theme which is yet to be decided.

Many other initiatives have also been undertaken, on both national and local levels. In the United Kingdom discussions are underway concerning the possible establishment of a Forum of Christians and Muslims, involving representative figures from within both communities and with the intention of promoting better mutual understanding and collaboration on local, national and international issues. In Lebanon, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee was set up in 1993, and consists of representatives of each of the seven main religious communities in the country. The committee monitors religious developments within the country, acts to pre-empt inter-religious tensions, and undertakes regular educational programmes in

different parts of the country to promote better grass-roots encounter and dialogue. In Egypt the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church has initiated the practice of entertaining Muslim political and religious leaders to *iftar*, breaking the fast, on one day during the month of Ramadan, as a public affirmation of mutual respect and hospitality within one national community. Finally, in the Middle East as a whole, an Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, which was set up jointly by the Middle East Council of Churches and a number of significant Muslim intellectuals in Egypt and Lebanon, published a covenant on 'Dialogue and Co-existence' in December 2001.

In Malaysia I know of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, which was founded in 1983, but might there be a place, I wonder, for a Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam? It might certainly be worth discussion, not least in the context of the theme of this conference.

Much more could, of course, be said, and many other examples could be given of co-operation and collaboration between Christians and Muslims in different countries, just as, sadly, many other examples of tensions and conflicts could also have been given. To end on a positive note, however, mention of the 'Building Bridges' seminar brings to mind an event which took place in France just over three months ago, on 14th December 2004, when the Millau Viaduct in South-Western France was opened by President Chirac. This is the highest and heaviest bridge ever built. It is 1.5 miles/2.4 kilometres long, and the roadway which it carries is 885 feet/270 metres above the floor of the valley which it crosses. The pillars from which the roadway is suspended are 1,125 feet/343 metres high. Now I realise that this is not as high as the Petronas Towers, which

I think reach a height of 1,482 feet/452 metres, but the Millau Viaduct is a bridge over 2 kilometres long. It is also, all observers seem to agree, a very beautiful bridge, which graces rather than spoils the valley which it crosses, and it is therefore a worthy addition to the list of other world-famous bridges such as the (Roman) Pont du Gard (also in the south of France), Shah Abbas the Great's bridge over the River Zayandeh in Isfahan (Iran), the Ottoman bridge over the River Neretva in Mostar (Bosnia), the Golden Gate Bridge in California, and the Bosphorus Bridge linking Europe and Asia.

The Millau Viaduct was built by a French engineering company, the same one which built the Eiffel Tower in Paris, but was designed by a British architect, Lord Foster. Since, in a European context, Franco-British relations can sometimes seem a big chasm to cross, the viaduct is already an excellent symbol of bridges being built between nations and cultures. It also, however, crosses a valley which was, at one time, close to the frontier between the Christian and Muslim worlds, going back to the first half of the eighth/second century, when in Europe Muslim rule was established not only in Spain but also north of the Pyrenees mountains in the south-west of France. With a certain amount of historical licence, therefore, the bridge may also serve as a symbol or model of bridges being built between the Christian and Muslim communities in the modern world, a work which the 'Building Bridges' seminars, along with the many other examples of Christian-Muslim dialogue, will continue to seek to promote.