

The History of Christian-Muslim Relations

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The Bible in Arab Christianity

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Photo front cover: f.14r of Codex Sinait Arabic NF 8, an early copy of the Gospels in Arabic, possibly eighth century, written on re-used parchment. This composite folio contains the text of Matthew 7:21-8:4, with Greek underwriting visible in the two right-hand portions.
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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Christians and Muslims have been involved in exchanges over matters of faith and morality since the founding of Islam. Attitudes between the faiths today are deeply coloured by the legacy of past encounters, and often preserve centuries-old negative views.

The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, Texts and Studies presents the surviving record of past encounters in authoritative, fully introduced text editions and annotated translations, and also monograph and collected studies. It illustrates the development in mutual perceptions as these are contained in surviving Christian and Muslim writings, and makes available the arguments and rhetorical strategies that, for good or for ill, have left their mark on attitudes today. The series casts light on a history marked by intellectual creativity and occasional breakthroughs in communication, although, on the whole beset by misunderstanding and misrepresentation. By making this history better known, the series seeks to contribute to improved recognition between Christians and Muslims in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The spectacular growth of culture that followed the Muslim seizure of former Byzantine and Sasanian territories in the seventh and eighth centuries was as deeply indebted to the existing cultures within which it took place as to its own native resources. And as Muslims developed distinctive forms of thinking, articulation of faith and systematization of belief, they did so in debate with Christians and others around them. Thus, the first surviving Muslim religious literature is replete with analyses of the beliefs of Christians, Jews and dualists as attempts to demonstrate what is deficient or wrong in them, and later works contain refutations of these beliefs alongside expositions of Muslim beliefs themselves. Muslim authors were intent on showing that any alternatives to the strict monotheism which they themselves followed were incoherent and logically unviable, with the obvious inference that any form that differed from Islam could not be sustained.

In this theological endeavour, which can be witnessed in Muslim writings from the earliest times through the tenth and eleventh centuries and later, Muslims were, of course, giving systematic form to suggestions in the Qur'an that religious communities which preceded them had neglected and mishandled the truth revealed to them and lapsed into error and confusion. A basic part of this accusation was that they had not only departed from the revealed scriptures they had been granted through the divinely appointed messengers sent to them, but had also lost those scriptures themselves in their pristine form. Thus, an important part of Muslim polemical literature was occupied with showing that the scriptural texts of Christians and others were no longer true to their revealed antecedents. Over a relatively short period of time it became the accepted view that these books were corrupt, often in the case of Christianity because they were reconstructions of lost originals into which alien doctrines from exotic places had been introduced, and so the teachings derived from them were bound to be wrong. Muslim polemicists tended to accept this as a norm and search for reasons to support it, and none challenged its basic premises.

Christians for their part came under increasingly powerful influence in the early Islamic centuries to relate to, and to some extent