



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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the nature of relations among Muslims, Jews, and Christians easier, and therefore will be used as an analytic tool in this chapter.

Another important tool for analyzing Muslim-Jewish-Christian relations is the placement of ideas and behaviours in specific temporal and geographic contexts. Visions of the past have had a strong influence on each of the religions, and none more strongly than Islam. Many Muslims have as keen an awareness of the events around the time of the Prophet as they do their own time. It is important for a practicing Muslim to know what the Prophet did in his relations with Jews and Christians as a means of shaping their own behaviour toward them. The Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet are key guides for a Muslim in dealing with Jews and Christians, as they are in all areas of conduct. This same historical consciousness is also present among Jews and Christians, as each group makes claims for positions and status in Islamic societies. What is important to remember is that the historical interactions of Muslims, Jews, and Christians have resulted in each constituency being shaped, affected, and transformed by the others, such that it is difficult to imagine how each religion would be as it





Ethiopia represent the ruler as seeing little difference between Islam and Christianity. The Qur'anic presentation of the life of Jesus and Christian belief shows that Muhammad and the early Muslims understood eastern Mediterranean Christian belief and practice, particularly if one acknowledges the importance of the "infancy



traditions from Muhammad, presaging the debates about the inclusion or exclusion of outside ideas. The resulting balance between religious and scientific learning became such a part of Islamic societies that even in periods of political fragmentation, Jews and Christians contributed along with Muslims to the intellectual and cultural life of the Islamic communities.

### **The Medieval Period**



When Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain in 1492 CE, the majority of Jews chose to



places where there was not an indigenous Jewish or Christian population to be exploited for economic gain, Western European powers arrived as colonialists with professedly Christian institutions, expectations, and ideologies. The British were able to separate Egypt from the Ottoman Empire and establish a protectorate in 1882, as they were able to put India under direct British rule in 1857. The French colonized Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881. The Dutch competed with the British for Southeast Asia, so that by the end of the nineteenth century, most Muslims were under Western political and legal influence. The secular legal systems devised in the West supplanted both Christian and Muslim customary and religious law, seriously challenging or eliminating the category of *Dhimmi* in those countries. The result was often a complete separation of Jews and Christians as groups from a relationship in law with Muslims.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, resulting in the creation of a number of small nation-states, resulted in a further separation of non-Muslims from Muslims. The ideology of nationalism reduced religion to the status as one of the components of a nation-state ideology. Education became Western, technological, and secular, further reducing religion to peripheral status. By the eve of World War II, most Islamic countries were prepared to overthrow colonialism and establish nation-states. When this happened after World War II, constitutions were modelled after such countries as Switzerland, the United States, and France, usually guaranteeing freedom of religion but providing no particular safeguards for religious expression. Other religious and ethnic groups also desired nation-



Other Muslim intellectuals read the same foundation texts with an emphasis on the special relationship between God and People of the Book. While deploring the problems in Palestine, they separate the Arab-Israeli conflict from discussions about Jews and Christians. Some at al-Azhar in Egypt cite the Qur'an and *sunna* to support peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians, and Warith D. Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad, in the United States has countered the anti-Jewish essentialist reading of the past with a Qur'anic-based message of mutual cooperation among Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

### **The Future**

As Islam spreads to new places in the world, more and more Muslims are living as minorities in non-Muslim lands. This, too, has proved to be an intellectual challenge. Some Muslim states and organisations have tried to revive a notion of *Dhimmi* in reverse, seeking to be the protectors of the rights of Muslims in non-Muslim countries, as, for example, the Muslim World League and the Islamic Call Society. Linked to these ideas is the notion of the *da'wa*, or the invitation to Islam to non-Muslims. The situation of minority Muslim communities in Africa, North America, and Asia, many of whom express Islam in ways different from those in Muslim-majority countries where Islam and indigenous cultures are intermixed, is prompting a form of inter-Muslim ecumenism parallel to the willingness of Muslims to participate in the essentially ecumenical dialogues with Jews and Christians, the aims of which are understanding without attempts at conversion.

Discourse about Muslim-Jewish and Christian relations has been dominated in the first half-century by the problems of forming new group identities after the dissolution of colonialism. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities have all suffered from conflicts pitting one group against another. As with any conflict, this period has produced considerable polemic. It has also produced positive calls for mutual respect and cooperation. The World Council of Churches has called for positive dialogue with Islam as part of its movement to reach out to people of all religions, and at the Vatican II Council, the Roman Catholic Church called on its members to esteem Muslims. Among synagogues in America, groups are expanding to promote Jewish-Muslim dialogue. As peace treaties are negotiated and conflicts are reduced to non-belligerency, members of all three religions find themselves in a position to build on the traditions of common heritage and common experience.

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