What are Christian-Muslim relations? A reflection on the second edition of Hugh Goddard's *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*

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In the conclusion of his first edition of *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, published in 2000, Professor Hugh Goddard invoked the gardens of Parcevall Hall, the retreat centre of the Anglican Diocese of Bradford, which features the Stations of the Cross laid out in a Moghul-style garden. Goddard, a prominent scholar in Christian-Muslim relations, suggested that this example of Christian spirituality in a physical environment inspired by Islamic tradition might symbolise the best model for the future relationship between Muslims and Christians. Following the theologian Kenneth Cracknell, he described this model as seeing ‘Christians and Muslims as fellow-pilgrims on the road towards the truth, which neither has yet grasped in its immensity’. The often dramatic events that followed in the new millennium seem to have had a sobering effect on this optimistic notion. In this regard, Professor Goddard’s new edition of his ‘History’, published this year by Edinburgh University Press, offers a very important and timely update of this major work. In this post I offer a reflection on this book, focusing particularly on its new chapter on developments in the last twenty years.

While Goddard begins his discussion of Christian-Muslim relations in the twenty-first century with some hopeful events, he soon turns to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and an extensive discussion of the numerous ‘confrontational approaches’ that followed. Goddard devotes special attention to violence perpetrated by Islamist groups around the world, the acts of warfare by the US and their allies in the Middle East, and the – at times violent – Islamophobic provocations of the far right. Next to his detailed discussion of these, often familiar, confrontational events, Goddard provides an equally extensive
account of ‘collaborative approaches’, many of which will be less known to members of the general public. He focuses on various (global) initiatives of interreligious dialogue and a number of prominent declarations concerning interfaith relations.

Goddard’s treatment of confrontational events includes an interesting discussion of the ‘culture-wars’ that have emerged between what he terms the World of Islam and the West. He makes the interesting observation that, in the twenty-first century, the focus of these tensions have shifted from the literary domain (e.g. the Rushdie affair) to the visual domain (e.g. the Danish cartoons controversy). A striking recent development that can be mentioned in this regard is the emergent debate in Europe about Christian identity, where (often populist) right wing political actors appropriate visible and physical manifestations of Christianity – such as Christmas trees, Easter eggs and church buildings – as ‘fighting symbols’ in an alleged cultural battle between Christianity and Islam.

An important question that Goddard’s text raises for me is this: how does one determine what qualifies as ‘Christian-Muslim relations’? To what extent do the conflicts and collaborations described pertain essentially to Islam and Christianity and to what extent do other factors, influences and modes of identification play a role? This question can be asked on at least three different levels, each of which brought up, or at least alluded to, by Goddard himself.

A first level concerns the question of religious credentials and representation. Goddard emphasises that the people (often young men) who have carried out terrorist attacks in the name of Islam in Europe were usually not ‘particularly pious’. Likewise he writes that it is ‘vitally important’ to recognise that someone like Pastor Terry Jones, the American evangelical preacher who claimed he burned a copy of the Quran in his
church, represents only a tiny church congregation and does not possess the conventional religious qualifications to serve as a pastor. This makes the important point that the views of these ‘radical’ exponents of either of the two religions are usually not widely accepted by their co-religionists. The thorny question here is how one determines when a religious expression is representative enough to count as an ‘official’ religious position. And, if an expression is scarcely representative, is it then less valid as a constitutive part of inter-religious relations? Furthermore, while less representative, the actions committed by the likes of Jones might, unfortunately, often have a greater impact on the relations between ‘ordinary’ Muslims and Christians than the peaceful encounters between highly recognised religious leaders, such as the occasion on which the Sheikh of Al-Azhar and Pope Francis signed the Declaration of Human Fraternity.

A second aspect of the question what counts as Christian-Muslim relations relates to the issue of motivation, especially in the context of conflicts. To what degree were the attacks of 9/11 motivated by antagonism toward Christianity rather than, say, ‘America’ or ‘Western imperialism’? Conversely, would it be justified to describe the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ as a Christian one? It has often been pointed out that political interests, ethnic identity and belonging, or economic gain and claims on land (or oil), may be more important sources of motivation than religion in such conflicts – even if all of these factors often feed into one another. Goddard addresses this point when he writes about the need to distinguish between religion, culture and politics, suggesting that some of the most dramatic cases of confrontation pertain more to ‘the relationship between the World of Islam and the West’ than to that between ‘Christians and Muslims specifically’. These categories could be questioned further by asking whether ‘Islam’ as such necessarily takes central place in these conflicts (as Goddard notes, Saddam Hussein’s regime could hardly be described as Islamic).
Closely related to this, a third level on which the question ‘what are Christian-Muslim relations?’ can be posed concerns the salience of religious identity. Terms like ‘Islamic societies’, the ‘World of Christianity’ and, indeed, ‘Christian-Muslim relations’ itself, suggest that religion is a paramount category of identification in the particular examples under discussion. This does not always need to be the case however. Thus, Goddard points out that categories such as ‘Christianity’, ‘the West’ and ‘secularism’ need to be carefully distinguished, even if the boundaries between them are ‘somewhat fuzzy’. Similarly, he remarks that the religious ‘culture-wars’ pertain less to the Christian-Muslim binary than the secular-Muslim one. These boundaries, however, are indeed fuzzy: as noted above, anti-Muslim politics in Europe today not only refer to secular values but also mobilize notions of Christian identity. At the same time, the salience of Muslim identifications in these conflicts can be debated too. The anthropologist Samuli Schielke, for example, argues that the emotional intensity of some Muslims’ responses to the Danish cartoons are better understood as the product of populist agitation than as the result of Islamic sensitivities alone (he moreover argues that populism played an equally important role on the ‘secular’ side of this conflict).

As the questions raised here hopefully demonstrate, Hugh Goddard’s new volume offers important input to ponder the manifold relations between Muslims and Christians in nuanced and contextualised ways. The book as a whole provides a wide-ranging discussion of Christian-Muslim relations that is highly impressive in terms of its scope; given its broad historical reach, geographical spread and the vast body of literature it draws from. As such, it remains essential reading for anyone interested in the long history of Christian-Muslim relations.
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