Islamic culture is often discussed as if it were radically (radix) different from Western culture. Yet in fact the two share the same origins, being based on the monotheistic tradition of the Near East and Late Antique philosophy and science.

The similarities between Islam and Christianity, as well as Judaism, are rather commonly known but less attention is usually given to the Greek background of Islamic culture. The influence of Greek thought on the nascent Islamic culture in the 7th and 8th centuries was not restricted to philosophy and the “foreign sciences” (ulum al-ajam) but its influence was also felt in the “Arab sciences” (ulum al-arab), including religious sciences. The importance of this influence was, though, later played down by Mediaeval Muslim scholars during the process of rewriting and reinterpreting the early history of Islam.

Greek philosophy and logic gave a common basis for interreligious disputations in the Mediaeval Near East. On a theoretical level, we find the influence of Greek thought in the jadal manuals, handbooks which define the acceptable ways of disputation. These manuals are firmly anchored to the Aristotelian tradition—Aristotle’s Topics was

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2 For a survey of Christian-Muslim relations, cf., H. Goddard, A History of Christian-Muslim Relations (Islamic Surveys, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000). The interreligious disputations and dialogues have in recent years received more attention. In this context, I would like to mention the doctoral dissertation in Turku by the scholar and clergyman S. Rissanen (Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam during Early Abbasid Rule [Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press 1993]).
very early on translated into Arabic—even though they also tap the Qur’an and the Hadith for general rules of polite disputation.

Mediaeval disputations, however, were not interfaith dialogues. Dialogue on an equal basis in the modern sense of the word was unknown to the Middle Ages: the participants were always certain of their own religious superiority. Many such meetings were polemical and, moreover, the religion of the rulers, Islam in the Near East, always had the upper hand. Christians and Jews had to be more circumspect than their Muslim opponents, who were free to use all the arguments which they could possibly find. It should be remembered, though, that, at the same time, in the Christian West such disputations were virtually non-existent and a deaf ear was turned towards unbelievers and heretics.

The written versions of these disputations are, obviously, far from reliable. They are not the minutes or transcripts of what was actually said, and are always coloured by the religious biases of the author. In Christian versions, the Muslim opponents are usually left speechless by the end, whereas for Muslim authors the disputes conclude in the opposite manner.

Sometimes disputations seem to have been organized in the Near East almost on an equal basis. An Andalusian Sunni scholar described one such session, held in Baghdad around 1000, when the Buyid rule gave more room for religious variation, the rulers themselves being Shi-ite and thus less prone to a rigid religious standpoint than their Sunni colleagues who were able to rely on the mainly Sunni population.

In the first session, which I attended, I saw different religious groups convening. There were Sunnis as well as heretic Muslims and unbelievers, Zoroastrians, materialists, Manichaeans, Jews, Christians and various others.

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