Patterns of Christian-Muslim Encounters in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Islam emerged nearly seven centuries after Christianity and purports to be a continuation and the culmination of the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its own internal logic to account for Christianity. The Qur’an is replete with references to Christian beliefs and prescriptions for behaviour towards Christians. Jane Dammen McAuliffe’s Qur’anic Christians provides an excellent survey and insight into the Qur’anic depiction of Christians. For Muslims, therefore, the Qur’an remains the standard authoritative source when it comes to relations with Christians, taking priority over lived experience as far as Islamic orthodoxy is concerned. In addition to the Qur’an, Muḥammad’s dealings and relationship with the ahl al-kitab or ‘People of the Book’ (Jews and Christians) in the seventh century, ‘became the standard Muslim treatment for Jews and Christians, and was subsequently extended to other faiths’. Muslims can talk of a ‘standard’ or official treatment for Christians defined to a great extent by a fixed text, the Qur’an, and a set context, seventh century Arabia.

In contrast to the paradigmatic model set out in the Qur’an and prophetic precedent or sunna for Muslims in their engagement with Christians, there are no clear biblical references to Islam or Muslims, despite claims to the contrary by Muslim apologists and polemicists. To go looking for references to Islam or Muslims in the Bible is like looking for specific references to Christian beliefs and Christians in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). The absence of clear scriptural references has meant that ‘there has never been, and in the nature of things never could be, a unified or official Christian attitude towards Islam’. Christian encounters with Islam and Muslims have tended to

3 Kate Zebiri, Muslims and Christians Face to Face, Oxford: Oneworld (1997), pp. 6–7.
be in the form of responses or reactions defined and marked to a large degree by specific historical contexts and existential experiences. This situation, in my view, accounts for ‘both the greater virulence of Christian anti-Islamic polemic in the medieval period, and the greater flexibility and openness in the contemporary period’ in Western Europe.4

It is against the background of the wider context of Christian Muslim encounters that we turn to examine the sub-Saharan African context. We use the word ‘encounter’ to denote the wide spectrum of ways in which Christians and Muslims have met and interacted over the years in Africa. This ranges from casual meetings to confrontations and open conflicts as enemies, as well as competition and co-operation on various fronts and levels as members of the same families and communities. The main focus of the chapter is to chart the various ways or patterns in which Muslims and Christians have historically encountered one another in the African context.

Encounters as Hosts and Guests

Christianity was already well established in Africa, in Egypt, North Africa, the Sudan and Ethiopia at the time Islam emerged in the seventh century. Coptic (Monophysite) Christianity was well-entrenched and flourishing in Egypt and Ethiopia by the seventh century. According to Muslim tradition, in 615 the Prophet of Islam, in the face of severe persecution, advised over eighty male converts and their families to seek asylum in Christian Abyssinia (Ethiopia) on account of his belief that ‘it is a friendly country’. During this very first meeting between Christians and Muslims on African soil in 615, one of the female refugees, who later became a wife of Muḥammad, is reported to have said: ‘When we reached Abyssinia the Negus [the Christian king] gave us a kind reception. We safely practised our religion, and we worshipped God, and suffered no wrong in word or deed’.5

Muslim traditions would have us believe that the meeting was more than just warm African Christian hospitality accorded to refugees but a meeting of minds. Islamic traditions recount that at the King’s request, Ja’far, the leader of the delegation, recited a passage from Qur’an chapter nineteen, the Chapter of Mary. Upon hearing it: ‘The Negus wept until his beard was wet and the

4 Zebiri, Muslims and Christians Face to Face, p. 7.