Introduction: Christian-Muslim Relations in the 17th Century (Asia, Africa and the Americas)

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The 16th century added a new dimension to Christian-Muslim interaction, with the Islamic domains being consolidated beyond the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East and North Africa, while Portugal and Spain greatly expanded their presence in Asia and the Americas. The 17th century was to witness the advance of European colonial powers, bringing Christians into greater contact with Muslim communities in diverse new locations.

Developments in Muslim communities

In India, the Mughal Empire continued to flourish throughout the 17th century. The Emperor Akbar, arguably its greatest ruler, died in 1605 and was succeeded by his son Jahāngīr (r. 1605-27). It was during the latter’s reign that relations were first established with the emerging British East India Company, thereby forging a link that was to bind India and Britain together for centuries to come. In turn, Jahāngīr was succeeded by his son Shāh Jahān (r. 1627-58), during whose rule the famous Tāj Mahāl was built. In 1658, Shāh Jahān was deposed by his son Aurangzeb, who ruled the Mughal Empire for a lengthy period of 45 years and promoted a somewhat narrower and more literalist approach to Islam than had his great-grandfather Akbar.1

Further east, Islam was being expanded and consolidated throughout the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. At the turn of the 17th century, the Makassarese kingdom of Gowa accepted Islam as the state religion and engaged in mission in neighbouring regions. This was to bring it into conflict with the newly arrived Dutch East India Company (VOC), which sought to establish itself in the spice trade. This was also the period of the rise of the Sultanate of Aceh under its dynamic ruler Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607-36). During his first 20 years of rule, he embarked on a

1 For a comprehensive and very readable treatment of the Mughals, see A. Eraly, Emperors of the Peacock Throne. The saga of the Great Mughals, New Delhi, 2000.
series of military campaigns on the island of Sumatra and in the neighbouring Malay Peninsula, which established Aceh as the predominant power in the region, alongside Portuguese Malacca. This imperial expansion by Aceh was only blunted with the disastrous failed attack on Malacca in 1629. Nevertheless, Aceh remained a formidable presence throughout the 17th century, a fact recognised by the European colonial powers.

The forward movement of European colonial powers

In the 17th century, the Portuguese and Spanish continued their colonial expansion from the previous century with accompanying mission activity. The dynastic union of the crowns of Portugal and Spain between 1580 and 1640 meant that the two colonial enterprises worked in tandem to some extent. Meanwhile, the Dutch and English pursued their own separate colonial ambitions with vigour and urgency, seeking to displace their Catholic rivals.

The formation of dynamic new trading conglomerates set the stage for greater competition in European colonisation. The British East India Company was founded in 1600 and two years later it made its first voyage of significance, sending a fleet captained by James Lancaster to the Indonesian islands. The year 1602 also marked the establishment of the VOC, with the merger of several competing Dutch merchant companies. It lost no time in making its presence felt in the Far East, establishing its first trading post in Bantam, West Java, in 1603. In subsequent decades, its reach was to extend far and wide, including substantial penetration of the Indonesian archipelago, a VOC presence in the Siamese capital Ayutthaya (1608), and the founding of Cape Town, South Africa, in 1652. Both the British and the Dutch were increasingly involved during the 17th century in the slave trade, hard on the heels of earlier Portuguese involvement, shipping slaves especially from the coast of West Africa to the Americas, and adding another dimension to the engagement of Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, the creation of the Dutch West India Company in 1621 led to the establishment of New Amsterdam in North America in 1625.

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