

## INTRODUCTION

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In the half-century since its formation in 1961 the Ecclesiastical History Society, which publishes *Studies in Church History*, has been slow to explore religious worlds beyond Christianity. It is true that the society's central aim 'to foster interest in, and to advance the study of, all areas of the history of the Christian Churches' implies that the internal history of other traditions is outside its scope, but as is abundantly clear from the contributions to the present volume, throughout its history Christianity itself has been profoundly influenced by wider religious encounters. An early volume, *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith* (SCH 6, 1970), and a more recent *Subsidia* volume, *Missions and Missionaries* (SCH *Subsidia* 13, 2000), both touched on such issues, but as their titles imply they limited themselves to just one dimension of interreligious encounter. When the late Barrie Dobson chose *Christianity and Judaism* (SCH 29, 1992) as the theme for his presidential year, he found it 'perhaps surprising' that the society had not already engaged with that subject.<sup>1</sup> More than two decades later, however, this has remained the only volume in the series that has focused centrally on relations between Christianity and another major world religion. When it fell to me, in my turn, to propose a theme for the society's conferences in 2013–14 it seemed urgent by then to endeavour to do something to address that omission.

My first thought was to propose the theme of 'Christianity and Islam', but that would have had two obvious disadvantages. First, it would effectively have excluded contributions concerned with the six centuries of church history that preceded the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic career, an unacceptable limitation for a society that has always sought to pursue its chosen themes across the whole chronological sweep of organized Christianity. Second,

<sup>1</sup> Barrie Dobson, 'Introduction', in Diana Wood, ed., *Christianity and Judaism*, SCH 29 (Oxford, 1992), xv. It is timely to pay tribute to Barrie Dobson, a most distinguished president of the EHS, who died in 2013, and to whom I am personally much indebted.

the very topicality of such a theme would have risked reinforcing an academic and journalistic ‘tunnel vision’, driven by anxieties stemming from the recent rapid growth of Muslim communities in the West and by the perceived need to ‘explain’ events such as the terrorist outrages of 11 September 2001 in the United States and 7 July 2005 in London. Accordingly, while recognizing and welcoming the prospect of a substantial proportion of contributions concerned with Christianity and Islam, it seemed better to encourage a wider perspective under the theme of ‘Christianity and Religious Plurality’.

The choice of the word ‘plurality’ rather than ‘pluralism’ was intended to steer contributors, and the expectations of readers, primarily towards exploration of the practical experience of Christians in a world of manifold belief systems and religious practices, rather than discussion of the philosophical and theological issues raised by the concept of pluralism. Analysis of the implications of plurality *beyond* Christianity is moreover a natural development from earlier volumes that have explored diversity *within* Christianity, both in organizational and theological terms in *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (SCH 32, 1996) and in varied social and cultural milieux in *Elite and Popular Religion* (SCH 42, 2006).

If one takes a long view of the historiography of Christianity, the theme of this volume is by no means a novel one.<sup>2</sup> Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) gives extensive attention to interactions between Christianity, Judaism and paganism, and later to the impact of Islam on the Byzantines. The leading Scottish churchman and historian William Robertson insightfully explored pre-Columbian religion in his *History of America* (1777) and Hinduism in his *Historical Disquisition ... of India* (1791). Such wider interests were also pursued by nineteenth-century church historians such as Henry Hart Milman in his *History of the Jews* (1829) and Arthur Penrhyn Stanley in his *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church* (1861), which devoted substantial space to encounters with Islam.

For much of the twentieth century, however, the development of ‘ecclesiastical history’ as an academic subdiscipline seeking to

<sup>2</sup> For a more extended discussion, see John Wolffe, ‘Religious History’, in John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd edn (London, 2010), 56–72.

serve an increasingly introspective and embattled Western Church tended to limit the further pursuit of such lines of enquiry. They were seen rather as the preserve of historians of Christian missions or of those of comparative religion, both perspectives that offered substantial insights but also their own inherent limitations. Only in recent decades, with the growing awareness that contemporary Western societies are now characterized by a plurality of religions rather than by Christian near-monopoly, has the importance of seeing Christianity in its wider religious context become once more apparent to historians of the Churches themselves. There remains much research to be done in this field, but it is hoped that the essays in this volume will serve as a valuable summation of existing work, and as a stimulus to new enquiries.

The arrangement of the volume is broadly chronological, so it will be helpful in introducing the essays that follow to suggest some threads of comparison and continuity across time and space. The contributions fall into four main categories.

First, there are studies of Christianity in contexts where it was itself a minority faith. In a suggestive opening essay Guy Stroumsa locates early Christianity in the evolving religious landscape of the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity, arguing against the conventional view of a Constantinian 'revolution' that transformed it almost overnight from marginality to dominance. Andrew Hayes's case study of Justin Martyr well illustrates the challenge of establishing a distinctive Christian identity in this environment, while arguing that Justin's philosophical approach enabled him to find significant common ground with both Graeco-Romans and Jews. Both these essays emphasize religious coexistence in the early Christian centuries and hence are a useful balance to more familiar narratives of persecution. Martyrdom, however, receives due attention in Ariana Patey's analysis of the later context of ninth-century Islamic Córdoba, although 'here, to a greater extent even than under the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire, Christians deliberately provoked their own fate, as a radical means of asserting their religious identity. On the other hand, as Amanda Power shows in her study of captive Latin Christians in the mid-thirteenth-century Mongol Empire, although these also faced acute problems in maintaining a distinctive identity in an environment of intriguing and complex religious encounters, amidst an underlying tolerance of diversity they did not find themselves driven to such

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extreme measures. Elsewhere, indeed, as Angeliki Ziaka explores in her analysis of the writings of two leading Greek Christians who lived under Ottoman rule after 1453, dialogue with representatives of the now dominant faith could be a viable strategy. Nevertheless the limited toleration accorded to Christian minorities could quickly be rescinded, whether (as under Diocletian) due to the changed attitude of rulers or (as in Córdoba) by the actions of Christians themselves.

Three case studies of much more recent history – by Kristian Girling of Iraq and by Brian Stanley of Egypt and Indonesia – illustrate a similar instability. In all three countries Christians found ways both to gain acceptance and to cooperate with Muslims, especially in nationalist movements against colonial rule. However, in the face of the growth of militant Islamism and the unfortunate tendency for local Christians to be compromised in the eyes of their neighbours by the neo-crusading rhetoric of Western leaders, their situation subsequently became much more insecure. Ongoing events in Iraq and Syria at the time of writing indicate, as did the genocide of Armenian Christians a century ago, that the long-standing peaceful existence of a Christian minority is no guarantee of indefinite security.

Second, and conversely, a number of contributors explore responses to religious minorities in predominantly Christian societies. Here too, as the experience of Jews in the 1090s as well as the 1930s graphically illustrates, toleration could never be taken for granted. Nevertheless the essays in this volume in general highlight degrees of acceptance rather than persecution. As Christine Walsh indicates in her study of Vikings in tenth-century Francia, the distinction between Christian and non-Christian was not always clear-cut, with baptism sometimes more a political than a spiritual act, which could be followed by lapses into 'paganism' and consequent dilemmas for the ecclesiastical authorities. Ambivalences of a different kind are illustrated by Frans Ciappara's study of Muslim slaves in early modern Malta: they were allowed actively to practise their religion, but they were deliberately isolated from the Christian population and sometimes subjected to considerable pressure to convert. My own essay argues, however, that in nineteenth- and twentieth-century London there was no simple polarity between proselytism and acceptance of plurality, as those Christians in the forefront of efforts to evangelize minorities were

also increasingly committed to their material welfare and to the combating of popular prejudices against them. Indeed, as W. M. Jacob demonstrates, the tacit response of Anglican clergy to late Victorian Jewish settlement in the East End was acceptance of the inevitability of coexistence.

Over the course of the twentieth century religious minorities in Britain became much more conspicuous. This was not merely a matter of numerical growth. In 1909, the small number of Hindu students in Britain received unwelcome notoriety due to the assassination of Sir Curzon Wylie by Madan Lal Dhingra. Stuart Mews sets this event in context, and explores its implications for Christian attitudes to Hindus, and for the campaign for Indian independence. It is true that even in the 1960s there were still those who denied or challenged the reality of plurality, but, as Peter Webster shows, Archbishop Michael Ramsey was not among them and sought to lead the Anglican Communion in a constructive response to a rapidly changing religious landscape, both in England and abroad. Implications at a local level are explored by John Maiden in his case study of the controversy arising from proposals to sell the redundant church of St Leonard's, Bedford to the Ramgarhia Sikh Society. Bedford in the 1970s at first sight is a very different context from the Rouen of the tenth century discussed by Christine Walsh, but a thread running through the six essays in this second strand is the tension between maintaining the integrity of Christian witness and living with the reality of religious plurality.

Third, there are analyses of religious encounters in situations where no one tradition was obviously dominant. An interesting common feature of these essays is the manner in which they indicate a range of responses *within* Christianity to plurality *beyond* it. James Palmer draws out the complexities of the religious landscape of early medieval Europe, showing how religious difference was not necessarily a barrier to cooperation, and how the internal diversity and insecurities of Christendom were reflected in attitudes to Jews, Muslims and 'pagans'. Moreover, as Jonathan Phillips shows, such cross-currents continued even in the face of the apparent polarities of the crusading era, when military confrontation did not preclude trading links. Although some Christians pursued theological polemic, others attained a more sympathetic understanding of Islam and engaged in discussion with Muslims.

There were even attempts to settle the vexed question of the status of Jerusalem, with its plurality of religious associations, by diplomacy rather than military action. The painful intractability of this problem, which seems no closer to resolution the greater part of a millennium later, should not obscure the seriousness of endeavours to resolve it. One such initiative is described by Clyde Binfield in his account of the building of the West Jerusalem YMCA in the early 1930s: a Christian construction, but one explicitly seeking to reach out to Jews and Muslims. Glastonbury's religious plurality has been much less contentious than Jerusalem's, but, as Marion Bowman shows, it had its own considerable complexities, especially in highlighting the fluid relationships between 'official' Christianity and the pluralities of vernacular religion. Such studies grounded in particular localities and specific periods – also represented in this volume by Patey's account of Córdoba, Ciappara's of Malta, Wolfe's of London and Maiden's of Bedford – bring the practical implications of religious plurality into especially sharp focus.

A final substantial group of essays examine Christian views of other religious traditions. Bernard Hamilton complements Amanda Power's analysis of the situation of Christians in the Mongol Empire by examining the perceptions and misperceptions of Buddhism disseminated by Western visitors such as William of Rubruck and Marco Polo. Western interest in Buddhism was long to remain limited by remoteness, but the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent Ottoman military challenge to Europe brought consciousness of Islam much more to the fore. Konstantinos Papasthathis analyses the ideas of George of Trebizond (actually a Cretan living in Italy), who proposed a visionary scheme for an accommodation between Christianity and Islam grounded in the universal political monarchy of the sultan and the universal spiritual authority of the pope. German responses in the first half of the sixteenth century, as explored by Charlotte Methuen, were, however, much more negative, in the face of the growing 'Turkish' threat to a now divided Christendom. In later seventeenth-century England, on the other hand, Henry Stubbe and John Locke, discussed by Nabil Matar, developed discourses that showed a more sympathetic understanding of Islam, and pointed the way forward to an emergent Enlightenment framework for toleration.

Christian views in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were shaped by more explicit missionary agendas than were apparent in earlier eras. Gareth Atkins describes William Jowett's travels in

the eastern Mediterranean between 1815 and 1830, which raised awareness both of the Eastern Churches and of Judaism and Islam and were intended to prepare the ground for Protestant evangelism. By contrast, Hyacinthe and Emilie Loyson's travels over similar territory in the 1890s, discussed by Angela Berlis, were motivated by a 'truly missionary zeal', not for making converts to Christianity but for bringing about the reunion of Churches and faiths in the cause of world peace. For J. H. Moulton, however, whose book *Religion and Religions* (1913) is analysed by Martin Wellings, there was no incompatibility between the better appreciation of other traditions and the ongoing mission of Christians to propagate their own faith. Finally, Todd Thompson's study of the Lebanese scholar Charles Malik (1906–87) shows how in his mind Christianity, far from endorsing the supposed 'civilizing' mission of the West, served as the mainspring for his critique of orientalism.

It is inevitable that a volume of this nature, made up primarily of a selection of essays offered for publication around a common theme rather than from articles systematically commissioned to cover a predetermined agenda, contains significant lacunae. One might wish, for example, for more contributions exploring the religious pluralities of late antiquity, and the multifarious other contexts in which Christianity subsequently established itself, from China to the Americas. The complex transitions in Western Christian attitudes to other faiths, from the polemics of the Reformation era, through the advent of Enlightenment toleration, to the missionary zeal of the nineteenth century and the widespread acceptance of plurality as a local as well as global reality in the twentieth, also merit further research and elucidation. However, if this volume serves to map out a territory for further work and to inspire future enquiry in a field that will surely become increasingly central to the study of the history of Christianity, it will have served its purpose.

In the concluding essay a leading Muslim scholar, Mona Siddiqui, reflects on the long-term development of Christian-Muslim relations. She highlights the significance of different views of the person of Jesus, but nevertheless argues for the abiding viability of dialogue in a post-9/11 world where some see a fundamental divide between the 'West' and a stereotyped conception of Islam. Her argument is consistent with the consensus of the other contributors to this volume, whose essays offer substantial histor-

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ical evidence to refute a ‘clash of civilizations’<sup>3</sup> narrative of interreligious relations. Granted that the historical record contains many instances of persecution, prejudice and sheer incomprehension, it also reveals that peaceful coexistence and acknowledgement of the reality of religious plurality on local, national and global stages was widespread. The past thus offers significant resources for constructive thinking about the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).