



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Christian-Muslim Relations: Primary Sources*

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Thomas, David, Martha T. Fredericks, and Clinton Bennet, et al. eds. 2023. *Christian-Muslim Relations: Primary Sources 600–1914*. 3 vols. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 1301 pp.

Christian-Muslim Relations (CMR) is a 3-volume reference set that seeks to reflect the relations between the people of these two faith traditions over most of their history (up until 1900). The purpose is to show “how they used what they learned about the other, together with their own religious teachings, to shape their impressions of the other and their attitudes toward them” (p. 1:1). These perspectives of the other, in turn, impacted how Christians and Muslims perceived themselves and how they interacted with one another.

The project involved over 100 scholars who contributed some 400 extracts from historical documents. These records report Christian-Muslim engagement over a period of 1300 years. Each volume is organized by categories of language or geographical location.

Volume 1 (600–1500) consists of six categories of works: 1; Muslim Arabic, 2; Christian Arabic, 3; Iberian Arabic, 4; Greek, 5; Syriac, Persian, and other languages, and 6; Latin and Romance languages. Volume 2 (1500–1700) has works from the Middle East and North Africa, Southern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Volume 3 (1700–1914) is grouped into the Middle East and North Africa, Southern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Asia and Oceania, Africa, and the Americas.

Each volume exceeds 400 pages of text with a handful of illustrations, explanatory notes, and suggestions for further reading, along with a glossary (surely an essential feature since few readers will have knowledge of the terminology encompassed in this work’s massive variety). Each volume and each section begins with short introductions. The extract of each work selected is around 1,000 words. Many of the selections are first-time translations into English, and each provides a biographical background for the author and reveals a few important features of the work and its significance in the history of Muslim-Christian relations.

Works of famous personalities of the first 900 years in Christian-Muslim relations (vol. 1) are naturally included (e.g., al-Tabari, al-Kindi, Ibn Taymiyya, Abu Qurra, Ibn Hazm, Sophronius, and John bar Penkaye).

Typically, those works (as do many in the subsequent periods) evidence religious and theological disputes focused on attack, defense, and counterattacks between these two faith traditions. *CMR*'s grouping of works chronologically facilitates diachronic studies in which certain themes appear perpetually over the centuries, while others fade from the scene.

CMR encompasses an exceptionally broad range of genres, including works on theology, law, science, travel, captivity, martyrology, and literature (poems, novels, and plays). Given the expansive scope of the selections, it is likely that the names and titles of the majority of the works will be new to most readers. Many come from unexpected sources.

In a set containing more than 400 selections, it is unlikely that many will read the entire set from cover to cover. Instead, most will approach it like diners at a smorgasbord, selecting only what is appealing to them. Nevertheless, the brevity and variety of many fascinating selections may be very appetizing. Here are a few samples.

Vol. 1 takes an excerpt from Lord Cromer's two-volume work, *Modern Egypt*. Though not a work about Islam, it does describe Islam's role in society. In addressing the colonial concern to import European civilization, Cromer opines that Islam cannot be reformed or else it ceases to be Islam. (Note: This reflects an older essentialist perspective that is rejected by many contemporary scholars of religious studies.) Though Egyptians are Europeanized as Muslims, they are actually agnostics (i.e., they retain a Muslim identity, but their worldview and lifestyle are secular). While professing to affirm the futility of speculating on the future of the secularizing forces at work in Egypt, Cromer, nonetheless, proffers that a resurgence of Islam that is rooted in the Qur'an and Traditions "is nothing but the dream of poetic natures whose imaginations are carried away by the attractions which hover round some incidents of this faith" (1:56–57). Had Cromer lived another century, he would have eaten these words. Such extracts show us how our perspectives can be enlightened by examining documents such as are found in this set.

Najm al-Dīn al-Tūfī' (d. 1316) in his *Critical Commentary on the Four Gospels* claims that Christian teachings are not supported by the Bible but are the result of misinterpretation of later interpolations of the texts. He views affirmations of Jesus as "Lord" and "son" as honorifics of his status as a great prophet, not of his divinity (1:69–71).

Marco Polo, in *Description of the World*, often speaks of Muslims in neutral terms, but several times of their desire to harm Christians as much as possible. Among the Kurds are "Saracens, who worship Muhammad," while many Muslims in Maabar make pilgrimage to the body of the Apostle Thomas, claiming that he was a great Muslim prophet (1:381–382).

While so many documents of Christian-Muslim encounters reflect hostility, it is refreshing to be made aware of those which are more conciliatory. Vol. 2, Southern Europe, includes a translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam. Against the spirit of the age, Erasmus counsels, “It does not seem such a commendable thing that we repeatedly stir up war against the Turks; truly all is not well with the Christian religion if its security depends on such defenses” and “We intend to put all of Asia and Africa to the sword, though most of the people there are either Christians or half-Christians. Why do we not recognize the Christians instead, encourage the others, and correct them with mercy?” (2: 226–227).

Another example of *CMR*’s diversity is the excerpt in Vol. 3 from Mark Twain’s travelogue, *The Innocents Abroad*. Unimpressed by the famous St. Sophia Mosque (formerly a magnificent church), Twain expresses his distress at polygamy in the Muslim world (as in Utah), but even more at Circassian and Georgian parents in Constantinople who still sold their girls in private exhibitions (3:407–408).

The editors are to be commended for their enormous efforts in contributing such a monumental resource to the field. Nevertheless, perfection belongs to God alone. Obviously, limiting selections to 400 works necessitated excluding some significant works from *CMR*. However, the absence of the Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before Caliph Mahdi strikes this reviewer as a glaring omission. Perhaps its presence in A. Mingana’s *Woodbrooke Studies* collection (vol. 2 of 7, W. Heffer & Sons, 1928) obviated the need for its inclusion in *CMR*. Secondly, this reviewer has a bone to pick with a statement made in the introduction to Volume 1. The editors assert that the Qur’an criticizes orthodox Christian beliefs of the Trinity, Jesus as the son of God, and his crucifixion (p. 1:10). Though this is the prevailing view of Islamic teaching today, some Muslim and Christian scholars disagree (e.g., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran* [HarperOne, 2015]; Abdulla Galadari, *Qur’anic Hermeneutics* [Bloomsbury, 2018]; C. Jonn Block, *The Qur’an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue* [Routledge, 2013]; and Ungaran Rashid and Mark Harlan, “The ‘Son of God’ in the Gospel of John” and Its Relevance for Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” in *Interfaith Research, Education, and Practice*, J. M. Luetz et al. (eds.) [Springer Nature, 2023]). A more qualified assertion is in order. However, since the editors limited their selections to works that appeared prior to 1914, perhaps they may be excused for ignorance of more recent contemporary scholarship on this matter (though some early and medieval sources support these modern voices). Aside from such points, *CMR* reflects extremely high standards of scholarship, yet is thoroughly readable. It will likely become a classic in this field.

Courses on the history of Christian-Muslim relations should certainly have this set available for students who are doing research papers. But with a list price of more than \$600 (though Amazon offers an 18% discount), it is not a

viable candidate for a course textbook. Hence, the market for this set would seem to be university libraries, particularly those for political, historical, and religious studies. Religious organizations that do academic research or engage in interfaith relations may deem the purchase of *CMR* as a worthy investment.

As has been the case for the past 1300 years, much of today's world headlines continue to involve turmoil and conflicts between Christians and Muslims throughout the world. A study of the history of Christian-Muslim encounters is of much importance if we are to better understand each other, avoid past errors, and engage more constructively. *CMR* offers an important resource in this endeavor.

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