ICMR – Jan 2018 Themed Issue: Islam and Christian-Muslim Engagement at the Edges of Empires

Guest Editorial – *Douglas Pratt*

In the process of working as Team Leader on the Asian section of *Christian-Muslim Relations: a bibliographical history* (CMR) project in regards to the 16th century and down to the terminus of the project in 1914, a number of issues emerged that led to this themed issue of ICMR. On the one hand, there are items that may be included in the bibliographical history but about which more can be yet be written. On the other hand, there is material which in and of itself does not qualify for inclusion in CMR, either as an individual entry or as part of a cluster entry, but which contributes something of interest and relevance for the wider story of Christian-Muslim interaction. Threading through such as these is an observation of underlying context that holds at least some of this material together: that of the engagement of Muslims and Christians taking place at the edges of empires, be that of their own far-flung extremities, or encountering each other in the context of someone else's empire.

One of the guiding elements of the CMR project is that from around 1500 CE each faith was on the move, globally. The geographic regions of origin and early development produced an initial sense of each faith having its own spatial 'realm' such that, normatively, people of each geographic realm were presumed to be people of the faith of that realm. To be in a realm, but owning a religious identity not of its faith, was to be in a minority position and at the mercy of prevailing policies in respect to religious 'others'. Christians, along with Jews, were accorded the status of dhimmis within Muslim territories. Albeit deemed a second-class citizenship, it was for the most part more than Christians extended to Jews and Muslims when the roles were reversed. But as each religion extended its reach beyond these initial realms, often in the context of expanding empires with colonising ambitions, but also simply in the context of entrepreneurial commercial enterprises seeking new opportunities and markets, new contexts were encountered wherein the playing field of religious engagement might be levelled, or at least the terms of the engagement re-negotiated.

So it was with the advance of both Islam and Christianity into South Asia, North- and Southeast Asia, and further on into Oceania. In India, both Islam and then Christianity were at their apex of influence when identified with ruling empires. Mughal Empire and British Raj – the jewel in the crown Victoria's British Empire – they each in turn held some measure of sway if not predominance. Alan Guenther dips into that context with a discussion of a Christian's apprehension of Islam in respect of north eastern reaches of South Asia. In Southeast Asia, both faiths arrived on the back of commercial enterprises. While Islam gained the initial foothold, and arguably retained predominance, European Christianity in the form of colonising aggrandizement for a time gained a substantial presence and sphere of influence. This is the context for Peter Riddell's discussion of attitudes of Christians and Muslims held by one toward the other.

Moving northwards, James Harry Morris explores Christian-Muslim relations in China and Japan in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Here neither Christianity nor Islam predominated; each was equally 'foreign' in this context; each faced similar issues and problems with, very often, little if any contact one with the other as each sought to survive. In China, many Muslims did so by way of acculturation: a distinctive Chinese Islam emerged over time. Christians, such as the Jesuits, who tried a similar route, in the end were brought up short by ecclesiastical authority – something Muslims did not have an equivalent of, breathing down their necks. So if the playing field was relatively level, the rules of engagement were not necessarily the same for each side. Nevertheless, an interesting tale of Christian-Muslim engagement plays out within these other realms in which neither side had dominance. And whereas Morris deals with an earlier period of engagement, when the Christian presence was Western and Catholic, Stuart Vogel explores a later time when Christian presence was also Protestant and more diverse. Through the lens of reportage and comment found in 19th century missionary journals a picture can be gleaned of the nature and extent – or lack thereof – of relations between Muslims and Christians in China.

It is, of course, in respect to the other two papers in this themed collection that the sense of edges of empire is most obvious. For the Antipodes – Australia and New Zealand – within Oceania were late-comers to Christian-Muslim engagement. They were among the last lands to experience the arrival of either Christianity or Islam. And in both cases they were lands that had come under Britannia's rule; they were the furthest outposts of the British Empire. The received historical tradition is that Christianity arrived first courtesy of European – predominantly British – colonial expansion. However, Jennings uncovers the much earlier arrival of Islam to the Australian continent, as well as discussing the importation of Muslims from within the wider British Empire once that governance had been established. Abdullah Drury delves into the New Zealand experience and, as with Jennings, takes the narrative beyond the 1914 CMR terminus for, in each case, engagement of Christians and Muslims is of a much later provenance than the time-frame of the CMR project, although certainly commencing in some way during the closing phase the project covers. Furthermore, for the most part, the engagement is of an indirect or oblique nature as compared to many other situations the CMR project includes. For a select taste of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations found at the edges of empires and at different points in the last four centuries, read on.

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