

Lecture three

Western Christianity and Islam: Their Views of Each Other Over the Ages

A. The Islamic View of Christianity

- 1.** Jews and Christians are mentioned often in the Quran and the *Hadīth*. The earliest Islamic community had contact with some of the Eastern Christian churches.
- 2.** Before he became a prophet, Muhammad had good relations with a Syrian monk.
- 3.** The heartland of the Muslim world lacked any knowledge of Western Christianity until the Crusades.
- 4.** Western Christian missionaries increased Islam's knowledge of Western Christianity as well as Western culture.

A. The Islamic View of Christianity

5. The case of the Philippines is unique in that the one country that had been Muslim and was then dominated completely through Christian conquest is located remotely in the Pacific.
6. There was a lack of interest by Muslims in Western Christian theology and philosophy until modern times.
7. Contention existed within the Islamic world between Muslims and Western Christian missionaries during the European colonial period—the missionaries had, however, little success in converting Muslims in the central countries of the Islamic world, but rivalries between Islam and Christianity were and remain significant in Africa and southeast Asia.

A. The Islamic View of Christianity

8. These rivalries have negatively colored the understanding of Christianity by Muslims in these areas and of course the Christian missionaries have nearly always had a negative image of Islam that they have transmitted back to the West.

9. Knowledge of Western Christianity in modern times has been made possible mostly through translations, dialogue, and ecumenical exchanges.

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

- 1.** There is a discrepancy in the way Jesus is viewed by Islam and Western Christianity. Islam views Jesus as a major prophet of God, but not divine, while Christianity sees him as God's son and a divine being.
- 2.** Even so-called "Islamic terrorists" would never attack Christ, as he is considered the next major prophet after Muhammad.
- 3.** How could a religion like Islam spread after Christianity was already established?

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

4. The role of eastern Christian sources can be seen in the person of John the Damascene, who wrote a tract against Islam while living under Muslim rule in Syria; it is important to note that he was never molested or persecuted for his beliefs.
5. The Middle Ages: Islam was seen as a heresy by Christians—they attacked the Prophet himself, and, thinking that Islam was based on Muhammad rather than God in the same way that Christianity is based on Christ, called Islam “Muhammadism” for many centuries.
6. The translation of the Quran into Latin began a long tradition of translating the Quran into nearly every European language, but it did not allay fears in Europe.

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

7. Islam was seen as a great danger to Christianity and was even identified with the forces of the Antichrist.
8. Medieval Europe respected Islamic thought and culture; even the mantle of the Virgin was often painted with Arabic-like characters.
9. Medieval Europe also had contact with esoteric currents and circles in the Islamic world (for example, the *fedeli d'amore* “*faithful to love*” organization, which Dante belonged to, had familiarity with some Islamic mystical elements).
10. The Templars and the story of the Holy Grail certainly grew out of the Muslim world.

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

11. The Renaissance and the seventeenth century: There was created at this time opposition to not only the religion, but also to the culture of Islam. Exceptions are to be found among mystics such as the Rosicrucians, Böhme, and later, Swedenborg.

12. The Age of Reason: Earthier views continued, while some used Islam as a weapon to attack Christianity (the case of Voltaire).

13. The Romantic Period: While opposition among members of the clergy of various churches against Islam continued, a positive appreciation was also shown in certain circles.

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

14. Some, such as Thomas Carlyle, saw the Prophet as a great historical hero.

15. There was a Western attraction toward Sufism and the mystical element of Islam; certain Europeans embraced Islam, including Richard Burton and Wilberforce Clarke.

16. The rise of Orientalism affected Western views about Islam.

17. The twentieth century saw sympathetic interpretations of Islam by a number of Catholic and Protestant scholars of Islam, including Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, and W.C. Smith.

B. Western Christian Views of Islam

18. Some Westerners turned to Islam, including Ivan Aguéli, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings, who for the first time have presented Islam to the West in an authentic manner and on the highest intellectual level.

19. The Second Vatican Council and the activities of the World Council of Churches helped to foster a real Christian-Islamic dialogue.

20. Today, the most extreme Evangelical churches in the United States are most like the medieval Catholic church in the belief that Islam is heretical.