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Bridging Histories, Empowering Futures: Jewish-Muslim Relations in Religious Education

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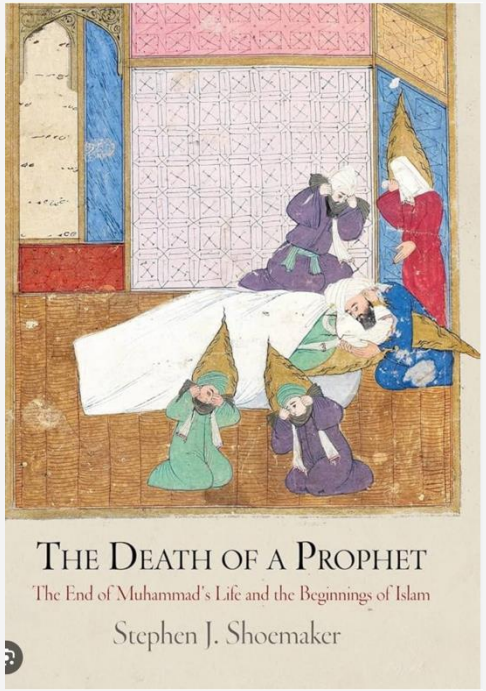
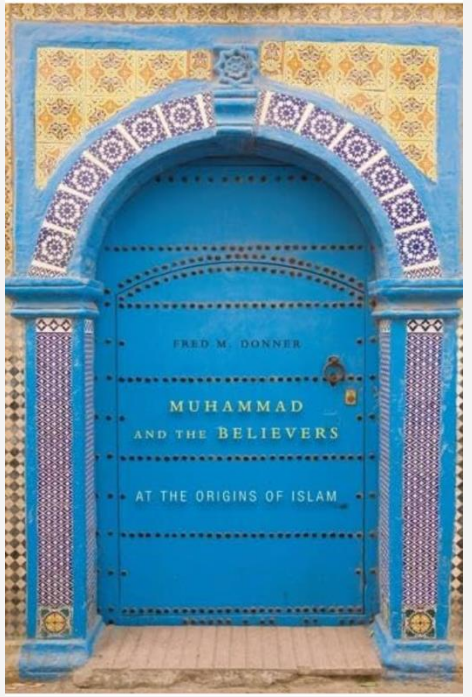
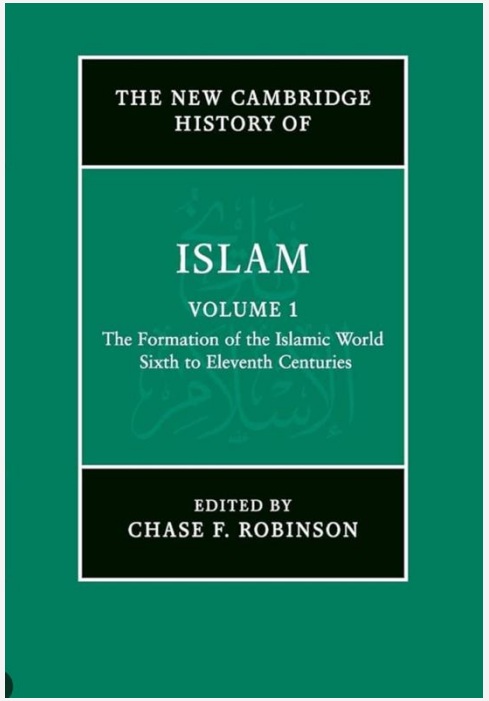
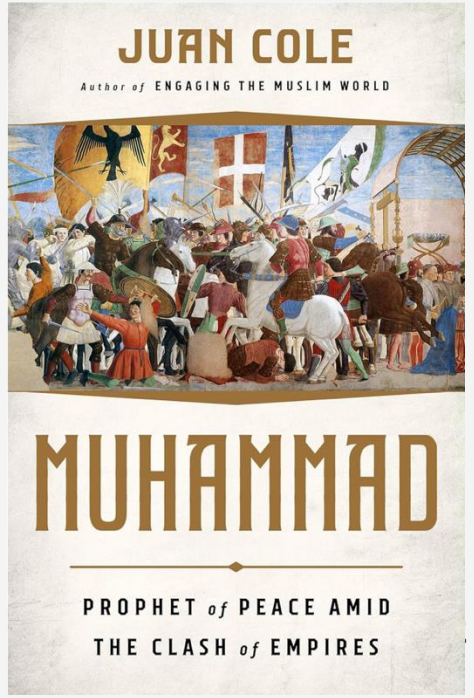
A Look into History

- The beginnings of Muhammad's mission are essential for understanding Jewish–Christian–Muslim relations.
- Before Muhammad's arrival in 622, Medina was predominantly inhabited by Jewish tribes (Bobzin, 2000, pp. 59–61).
- How did the rapprochement and relationship between Muhammad and these Jewish tribes unfold in the 7th century?
- What was Muhammad's aim?
- The founding of a new religion?









Late Antiquity: A Time of Change in the Greco-Roman and Iranian Worlds

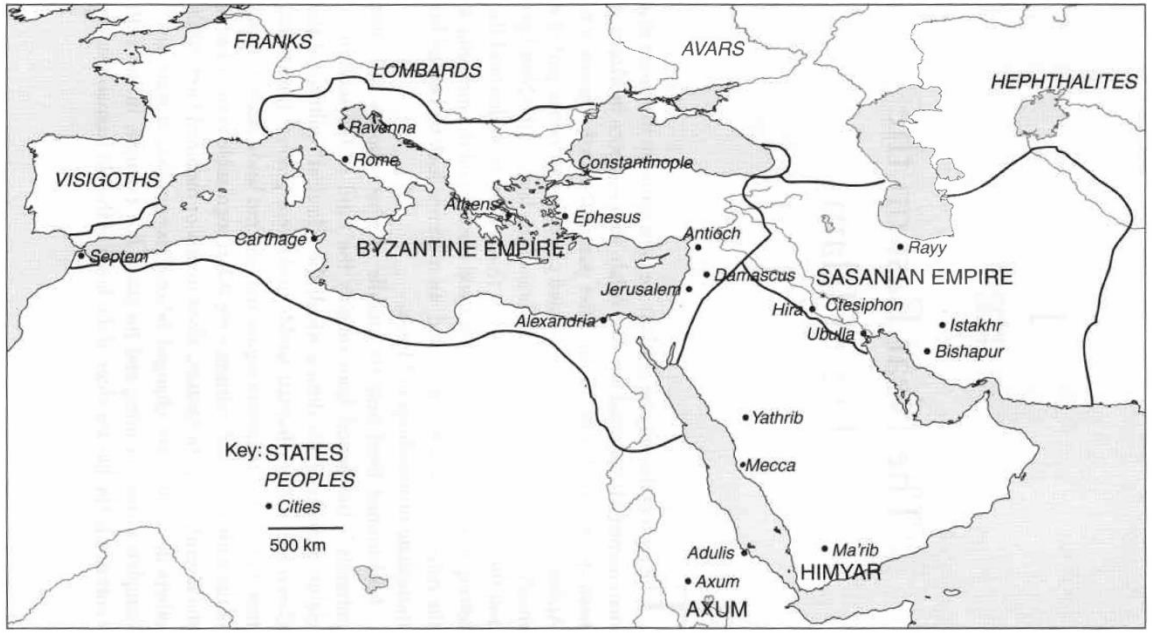
Great Powers: The Byzantine and Sassanid Empires dominated the Middle East.

Christianity: State religion under Constantine I and Theodosius I.

Arabia: Characterized by polytheism.

Monotheism: Judaism and Christianity spread across the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th century.

Judaism: Reached Arabia shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE).



Who Is Being Addressed in the Qur'an?

Frequency: *Mu'minūn* appears nearly 1,000× in the Qur'an; *Muslimūn* far less often

Early community: Primarily self-identified as a "community of believers" (*mu'minūn*)

Later tradition: About 1 century after Muhammad's death → predominantly referred to as *Muslimūn*; terms treated as synonymous

Qur'an 49:14: Bedouins claim to be *mu'minūn* → Qur'an rejects claim, instructs them to call themselves *muslimūn*

Significance: Linguistic distinction shows the terms are not synonymous in the Qur'an

Implication: Qur'anic address ("O you who believe…") is directed explicitly to those already convinced (Donner, 2010, pp. 57–58).

Who were these “believers”? And what did they believe in?

- Acknowledgement of the Oneness of God (strict monotheism)
- Belief in the Last Day, in revelation and prophethood, in angels
- Regular observance of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting
- Commitment to doing good deeds
- Charitable and humble conduct towards others
- Living a pious life in accordance with these convictions (Donner, 2010, pp. 59–60).

The “believers”

„At this early stage in the history of the Believers’ movement, then, it seems that Jews or Christians who were sufficiently pious could, if they wished, have participated in it because they recognized God’s oneness already. Or, to put it the other way around, some of the early Believers were Christians or Jews – although surely not all were. The reason for this „confessionally open“ or ecumenical quality was simply that the basic ideas of the Believers and their insistence on observance of strict piety were in no way antithetical to the beliefs and practices of some Christians and Jews. Indeed, the Qur’an itself sometimes notes a certain parallelism between the Believers and the established monotheistic faiths (often lumped together by the Qur’an in the term „people of the book,“ ahl al-kitab; Q. 48:29)” (Donner, 2010, S. 69).

The Community of Believers

“Behold, among the People of the Book there are indeed those who believe in God and in what has been sent down to you and to them. They are humble before God and do not sell God’s signs for a small price. For them, their reward is with their Lord. Indeed, God is swift in reckoning.” (Qur’an 3:199)

“They are not all alike. Among the People of the Book is a community that stands upright; they recite God’s verses during the hours of the night and prostrate themselves. They believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and are quick to perform good deeds. Such are among the righteous. Whatever good they do, never will it be denied them, and God knows the God-fearing.” (Qur’an 3:113–115)

What is Islam? Wo is a Muslim?

3:67: *Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; rather, he was a true believer (ḥanīfan musliman), one who submitted to God. And he was not among those who associate others with Him.*

In the Qur'an, the term *muslim* refers to someone who submits to God's will and acknowledges His oneness—in essence, a professing monotheist. In this context, *Islam* likewise denotes professing monotheism in the sense of complete submission to God.

What is Islam? Wo is a Muslim?

Therefore, in Qur'anic usage, *Islam* and *Muslim* did not yet carry the religiously exclusive meaning that these terms bear today. They referred to a broader and more inclusive understanding of monotheism and were at times even applied to Christians and Jews, as other verses show (3:52, 3:83, and 29:46) (Donner, 2010, p. 71).

Monotheistic reform movement

- Pious reform movement led by Muhammad
- Self-identified as *believers* (*mu'minūn*)
- Emphasis: piety & rejection of polytheism
- Inclusive: pious Jews, Christians, new converts
- Not a new religion, but a monotheistic reform (Donner, 2010, pp. 87–88).

Rethinking events from Muhammad's lifetime

- Early movement had an ecumenical character, open to pious monotheists of all faiths
- Requires rethinking events from Muhammad's lifetime
- Conflicts with some Jewish groups (e.g., Qurayza) → not proof of general anti-Jewish stance
- Likely tied to specific political contexts or rejection of Muhammad's prophethood (Donner, 2010, p. 74).

Later Developments up to the Present

Muslim–Jewish Relations in the Medieval Period

- Shaped by political & social power structures under Muslim rule
- Jews & Christians = People of the Book with special minority status
- Nature of relations varied by time, region, and ruler
- No medieval Islamic anti-Judaism comparable to Christian Middle Ages (Benz 2004)

Jews and Christians under Muslim Rule

- Dhimma: Pact granting People of the Book protection & religious freedom for poll tax (since 680s).
- Later periods saw varying degrees of tolerance and discrimination.
- Persecution under Fatimids (909–1171), Almohads (1121–1269), Safavids (1501–1722) , Qajars (1794–1925); some forced conversions.
- From 10th c.: Jews & Christians in prominent roles (Meri, 2016a, p. 21).
- Pogroms rarer than under Christian rule; Jews often sought refuge in Muslim lands.
- 1492: Expelled Spanish Jews welcomed in Ottoman Empire & North Africa (Meri, 2016a, p. 27).

Shift in Muslim Perceptions of Jews in the 20th Century

- Major change triggered by the establishment of the State of Israel
- Sayyid Qutb's *Our Battle with the Jews* influential in shaping anti-Jewish sentiment (Qutb, 1989, first published in 1950).
- Claimed a Jewish conspiracy against Islam since Muhammad's time in Medina
- Other influential figures: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Amin al-Husseini, Ruhollah Khomeini, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek
- Promoted the notion of an eternal Islam–Judaism conflict
- Contributed to the spread of antisemitism in the Muslim world (Aafreedi, 2019; Jikeli, 2021; Rubinstein-Shemer, 2017; Tibi, 2012).

Shift in Muslim Perceptions of Jews in the 20th Century

- Rise in antisemitism directly linked to increasing Jewish settlement in Muslim-inhabited areas of the West Bank
- Resulting tensions as a key driver of this development
- Religious arguments entered the conflict later, more as a consequence than a cause
- Jerusalem gained heightened religious and symbolic significance for Muslims during the conflict
- This added further complexity to Jewish–Muslim relations

Perceptions

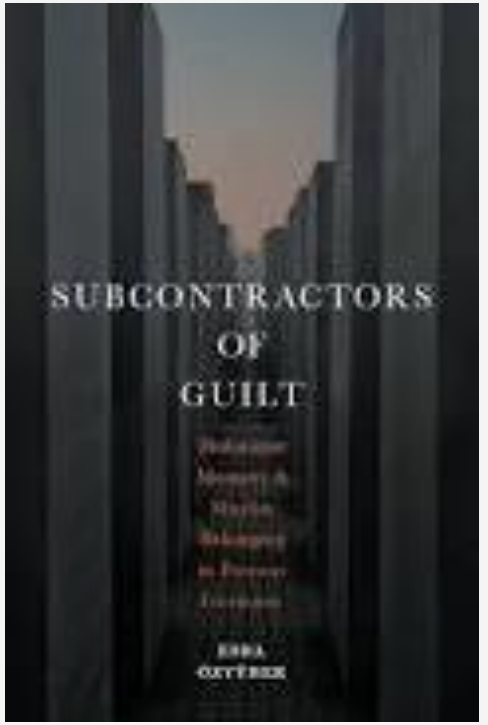
- Social and political contexts shape Muslim–Jewish perceptions
- Both groups face various forms of discrimination
- Shared discrimination can lead to solidarity or tensions
- Discrimination may contribute to antisemitic attitudes among Muslims
- Generalizations (e.g., “imported antisemitism”) are counterproductive and can worsen the problem
- Marginalization can reinforce Islamist victimhood narratives
- In certain sub-milieus, rejection of Jews is used as community-building ideology
- Islamist actors exploit dissatisfaction to project blame onto Jews (Ulfat & Mattern, 2024).

Philosemitism and Anti-Muslim Racism

- Link between exaggerated pro-Israel solidarity and anti-Muslim racism
- Right-wing populist and far-right groups use *philosemitism* to build alliances against “Islam”
- Example: English Defence League (EDL) (UK), Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Alternative for Germany (AfD)
- Narrative of defending “Judeo-Christian values” against an imagined Islamic threat
- Supported by conspiracy theories (e.g., “Eurabia” thesis)
- Jews instrumentalized; *philosemitism* can turn into antisemitism if expectations are not met (Wetzel, 2016)

Shifting Perceptions of Antisemitism and Muslim Communities in Europe

- From historic antisemitism in Germany/Europe to framing migrant Muslims as carriers of “new antisemitism.”
- Antisemitism presented as an imported, exogenous threat linked to migration rather than to Europe’s own history and structures.
- Antisemitism among Muslims framed as more urgent/dangerous than other discrimination forms (e.g., anti-Muslim racism, antigypsyism).
- State programs focuses on “new” antisemitism among Muslims.
- Overlooked: Muslims are also targets of racism, often by the same antisemitic actors (Özyürek, 2023, pp. 78–80).



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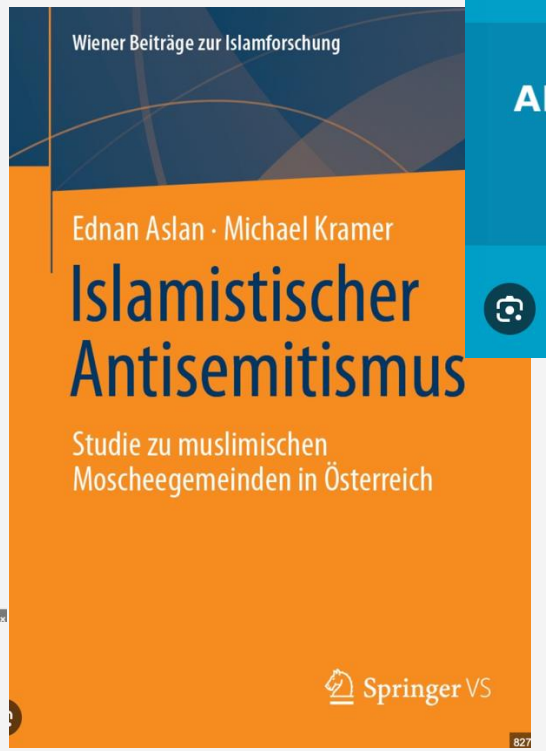

Of course, antisemitic attitudes are found among Muslims, and especially in Germany there is a substantial body of empirical quantitative research on the subject. This fact should not be relativized by the observations of Esra Özyürek.

Thematic Dimensions for Educational Work on Jewish–Muslim Interconnections

1. Historical Interconnections

- **Torah, Qur'an, and their Exegesis**: Parallels and differences between the Torah and the Qur'an, hermeneutical approaches, interpretative traditions.
- **Muslim and Jewish Legal Traditions (Sharia and Halakha)**: Comparison and exchange between Halakha and Sharia in history and the present.
- **Interfaces in Thought**: Points of contact between Jewish and Muslim thought in philosophy, mysticism, education, and systematic theology (Kalam).

→ **Aim**: Make historical connections visible to counter essentialist dichotomies with a complex and intertwined perspective.

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Thematic Dimensions for Educational Work on Jewish–Muslim Interconnections

2. Contemporary Interconnections

- **Media and digital spaces**: The role of traditional and social media in constructing images and narratives.
- **Politics and social positioning**: The influence of political discourse and international conflicts on local relationships.
- **Migration and minority positions**: Experiences of belonging, exclusion, and intercultural negotiation.
- **Forms of discrimination**: Antisemitism, anti-Muslim prejudice/Islamophobia, and their intersections.

→ **Goal**: To identify current areas of tension and use them constructively for educational processes.

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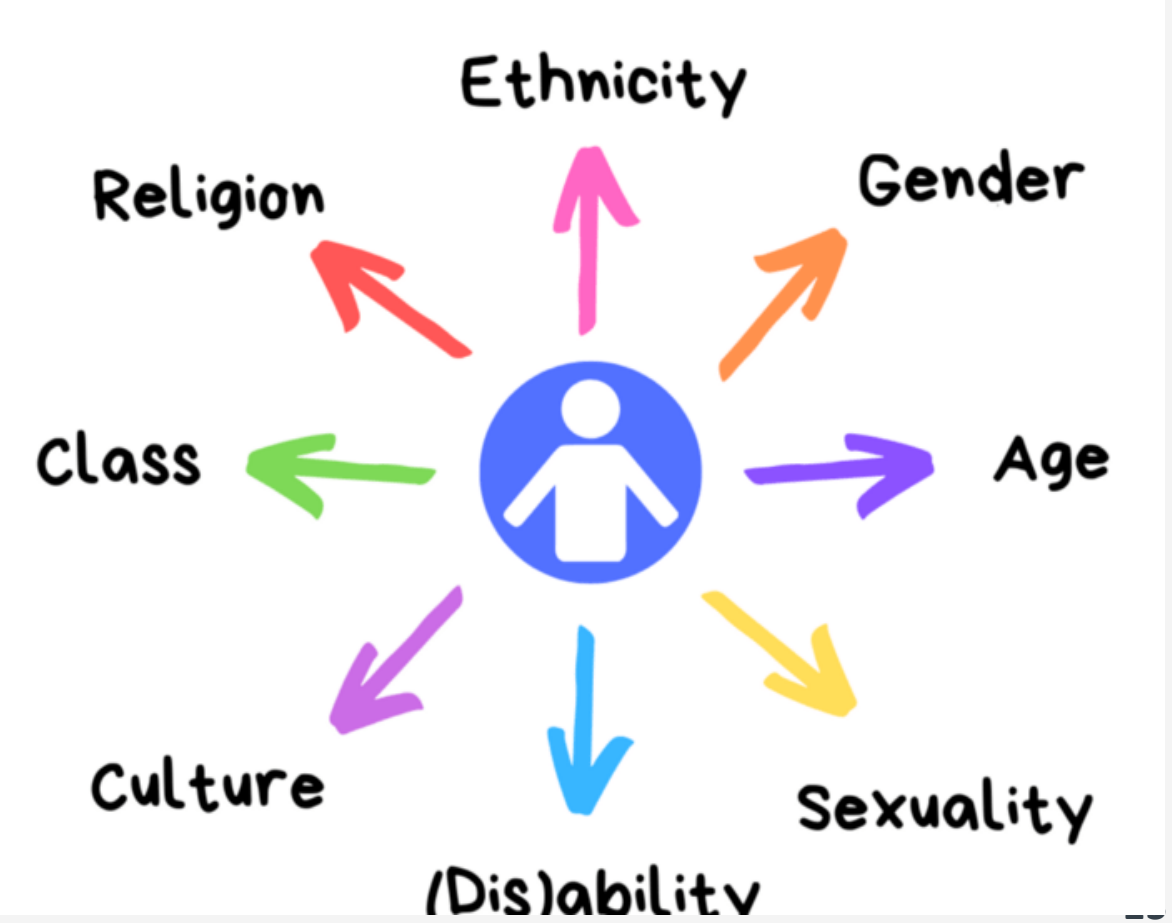
Pedagogical Implications

Intersectional Perspectives

Young people of Jewish and Muslim faith navigate a variety of categories of difference (religion, gender, social background, migration history, etc.) that intersect.

An intersectional approach helps to avoid one-sided and essentialising attributions and to understand affiliations as dynamic resources (Auga, 2013).

Educational task: Use diversity as a learning resource, reflect on power asymmetries, and create inclusive learning spaces.



Pedagogical Implications

Political Education as Part of Religious Education
Religious education must always also be political education, providing critical perspectives on power relations, discourses, and international conflicts. The Middle East conflict and its media representations require a reflective and differentiated approach in the classroom (Schlag, 2013).

Pedagogical task: Deconstruct stereotypes, promote multiperspectivity, strengthen democratic competences.

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Pedagogical Implications

Innovative Approaches – Extended Reality (XR)
XR technologies offer the possibility to address discrimination processes in an immersive way, foster empathy, and enable perspective-taking – even when direct encounters are lacking due to numerical asymmetries.

Pedagogical task: Strategically use digital formats to create new experiential spaces for interreligious learning.

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