

## Introduction: Jewish Muslims?

Muslims are not Jewish.

This would normally go without saying, but perhaps it needs reinforcement lest someone misinterpret this book's title, *Jewish Muslims*, by reading it literally. Muslims do not self-identify as Jews, and self-identifying Jews do not regard Muslims as Jewish either. Jews and Muslims have interacted in a wide variety of ways across history, but even in the context of close relations it has been obvious to the participants and to outside observers alike that Jews are not Muslim and that Muslims are not Jewish. Although Judaism and Islam are similar in certain respects—both are monotheistic, forbid pork consumption, and revere common figures such as Abraham, to cite only the most familiar examples—these traditions ground their beliefs, practices, and foundational stories in different sets of sacred texts that refer to mutually exclusive conceptions of divine revelation. The Bible makes no reference to Muslims, because Islam postdates biblical texts by many centuries, and the Quran refers to the Jews as a group distinct from its own audience.

Premodern Christians fully understood that Muslims are not Jews. Precisely for this reason, many found it useful to allege that Muslims *are* Jewish—or, if you prefer, “Jew-ish”—as a means of defining Muslims and Islam as the enemies of Christians and Christianity. This intentionally counterfactual assertion of similarity bordering on identity, like the insult, “you’re a pig!,” is metaphorical: it adds value to rhetoric by

distorting reality. The metaphor “my love is a rose” illustrates this definition in a positive fashion. The person I love has neither petals nor thorns, but by associating that person with a rose I conjure up images and experiences of beauty, fragility, pain, and care that profoundly enrich my depiction of that person and our relationship. The assertion that Muslims are Jewish is also an intentional distortion that, many Christians believed, increases the value of their rhetoric by applying to Muslims familiar negative ideas about Jews.<sup>1</sup>

Polemicists (the term for those who aggressively disparage their rivals) branded Muslims as Jewish in an effort to accomplish something that they otherwise would not achieve as readily. Examination of this rhetoric offers valuable insights not only into premodern Christian ideas about Muslims and Jews but also into the polemicists’ goals and techniques. Although polemicists today are unlikely to allege that Muslims are Jewish, they often employ the same techniques as their predecessors in pursuit of similar goals. For that reason, the study of premodern rhetoric about Jewish Muslims can help us to better understand contemporary as well as historical anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiments. (I use the term “premodern” to encompass late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period. The premodern period of Christian engagement with Muslims begins with the seventh-century rise of Islam and, for the purposes of this book, concludes in the early seventeenth century.)

#### “JUDAISM” AS GRIST FOR POLEMICAL METAPHORS

Muslims were not the only non-Jews to be tarred in derogatory fashion with the label “Jewish,” and that label often bears little resemblance to the beliefs and practices of actual Jews in any case. Recent historical scholarship demonstrates that this disconnect is commonplace in premodern Christian rhetoric about Judaism. As Jeremy Cohen explains, “the Christian idea of Jewish identity crystallized around the theological purpose the Jew served in Christendom; Christians perceived the Jews to be who they were *supposed* to be, not who they actually *were*.” Sara Lipton demonstrates that this dynamic characterizes artistic no less than literary sources. Daniel Boyarin takes this point further, emphasizing that, in premodern times, the very term *Judaism* consistently refers not to the religion that Jews observed but rather to beliefs and practices that Christians regarded as antithetical to Christianity. David Nirenberg shows that Western intellectuals used Judaism as a negative foil when thinking not only about matters of theology but also about “top-

ics as diverse as politics and painting, poetry and property rights,” even in contexts without any actual Jews. Nirenberg makes a powerful case that *anti-Judaism*, as he calls such thinking, constitutes a rhetorical tool with which Christians, Muslims, and others from antiquity to the present critique the world—and one another.<sup>2</sup>

Anti-Judaism does not merely define Jews as the Other. Rather, it promotes the cultivation of certain characteristics by virtue of their opposition to characteristics it associates with Judaism. In this respect, *anti-Jewish* resembles the current term *antiracist*, which refers not merely to those who oppose racism but more specifically to those who seek to promote racial equity while combatting policies and ideas that foster racial inequity.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many people in the past regarded Judaism (as they defined it) to be as harmful to society as we now know racism to be. Still more unfortunately, some today continue to hold this negative opinion of Judaism, continue to regard racism as beneficial, or both.

The ideas that underpin anti-Judaism often have nothing to do with actual Jews, and the targets of this rhetoric often do not self-identify as Jews either. Premodern polemicists routinely labeled fellow Christians as “Jews” in the course of alleging that these rivals display negative characteristics that the polemicists ascribed to Judaism. Anti-Jewish assertions of this nature, like those that label disliked individuals as “pigs,” are inherently metaphorical because they disparage their targets through intentional, derogatory, and even shocking misrepresentation—in this case by calling a Christian a Jew. This distortion of reality enhances the perceived value of the accompanying rhetoric: to call someone a pig, after all, is far more impactful than to state, for example, that this person behaves in an uncivilized manner. Calling someone a pig implies that the target’s behavior is inhuman and, in the process, powerfully reinforces certain ideas about what constitutes proper human behavior. Similarly, rhetoric that employs Judaism as a negative foil forcefully disparages its target as un-Christian and, in doing so, promotes contrasting characteristics as authentically Christian.

Anti-Jewish statements, although diverse and occasionally contradictory, collectively constitute an influential discourse, a body of interrelated rhetoric powerful enough to shape popular attitudes and behaviors as well as governmental policies. The discourse of anti-Judaism brands as “Jewish” specific characteristics (beliefs, practices, traits, etc.) that non-Jews also display in order to critique as deviant those characteristics and their bearers, whoever they might be. Christian anti-Judaism reflects deep anxiety over the ease with which Christians themselves can become

Jewish, metaphorically speaking, by straying from normative beliefs and practices.

Anti-Judaism, as defined here, differs in several crucial respects from its more familiar cousin, antisemitism. Most fundamentally, the discourse of antisemitism asserts that Jews are inherently different from non-Jews in negative ways, while the discourse of anti-Judaism urges audiences to *differentiate themselves* from Jews precisely because it recognizes that the characteristics of Jews and non-Jews are often not so different after all. The simplest current definition states that “Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).”<sup>4</sup> Anti-Judaism, in contrast, seeks to motivate self-improvement through the cultivation of beliefs and practices opposed to those that the polemicist brands as Jewish. Antisemitic rhetoric specifically targets Jews; anti-Jewish rhetoric instead targets all who bear purportedly Jewish characteristics, especially non-Jews. Although antisemitism and anti-Judaism both seek to minimize the influence of Jewishness within society, antisemitism condemns *what Jews are* while anti-Judaism condemns *what certain people do or think*.

This distinction between antisemitism and anti-Judaism reflects the fundamental difference between the essentialism of racist logic and the presumption of choice that underpins not only moral exhortation but also the very process of asserting one’s own identity. As theorist of religion Tim Murphy observes, the differentiation associated with anti-Judaism “*constitutes* identity” in asymmetrical terms: “Religious differentiation does not merely say ‘I differ from you,’ it says ‘I differ from you’ so that it may also say ‘I am *better* than you.’”<sup>5</sup> The prominence of anti-Judaism within the long history of Christian rhetoric reflects the fact that many Christians defined what it means to be Christian in terms of differentiation from that which they denigrated as Jewish.

Many prior scholars distinguish anti-Judaism from antisemitism on different grounds—for example, by associating anti-Judaism with theological beliefs and antisemitism with racist beliefs or, relatedly, by stating that the former discourse aims to convert Jews to Christianity while the latter seeks to eliminate Jews.<sup>6</sup> David Nirenberg, however, shows that the discourse of anti-Judaism is not always theological and often does not aim to convert Jews. His banner example is Karl Marx’s polemical association of capitalism with Judaism.<sup>7</sup> Marx condemns all capitalists, most of whom are not Jews, and his proposed solution (socialism) would likewise affect everyone in society, not just Jews. Why, then, does Marx allege that capitalism is Jewish? Because this derogatory metaphor

increases the persuasiveness of his anti-capitalist rhetoric: Marx taps into his audience's existing disdain for Judaism and channels that disdain toward capitalists, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity. If capitalism itself is Jewish, then those who want to differentiate themselves from Jews should embrace the inverse of capitalism—namely, socialism. Marx's anti-Jewish rhetoric differs sharply from that of antisemites, who employ allegations about the malicious activities of Jewish capitalists to promote discriminatory policies that target Jews alone.

The discourses of antisemitism and anti-Judaism often function in tandem as distinct but mutually reinforcing forms of a broader phenomenon that one might call Judeophobia. The contemporary white nationalist rallying cry, "Jews will not replace us!," exemplifies the overlap. This rhetoric does not merely promote discrimination and violence against Jews: more fundamentally, it seeks to motivate fellow whites to oppose policies that foster immigration or promote diversity as a societal value by branding these policies and their proponents as Jewish. Through such opposition, these whites differentiate themselves from all who value diversity and racial equity just as Marx's followers differentiate themselves from all capitalists.<sup>8</sup>

This book devotes hardly any attention to antisemitism: antisemitic rhetoric emphasizes purported differences between Jews and others, but this study focuses on rhetoric that emphasizes purported similarities between Muslims and Jews. Muslims, according to this rhetoric, are Jewish because they bear negative characteristics that Christians associated with Judaism. These allegations, we will see, advance the goal of promoting opposing characteristics: Christians should differentiate themselves from Muslims just as they differentiate themselves from Jews because Muslims, too, are Jewish, metaphorically speaking.

Christians who condemn Muslims for their purported Jewish characteristics employ the discourse of anti-Judaism while contributing to the anti-Muslim discourse commonly known today as Islamophobia.<sup>9</sup> *Jewish Muslims* examines how and why premodern polemicists selectively fused these discourses. In doing so, this study further demonstrates the lesson that literary critic Edward Said derives from the modern discourse of Orientalism: "discourses construct what they purport to describe." Premodern Christian discourse constructed Jewish Muslims that do not exist in the real world.<sup>10</sup>

Most anti-Jewish rhetoric, of course, does not target Muslims. Similarly, most premodern anti-Muslim rhetoric does not draw on

anti-Judaism but rather on early Christian discourses about pagans and heretics or ancient Greek discourses about Africans and “Orientals” (that is, people from the region now known as the Middle East).<sup>11</sup> Although relatively uncommon, rhetoric alleging that Muslims are Jewish offers especially valuable insights into the premodern discourse of Islamophobia as a whole precisely because the metaphorical nature of this rhetoric is readily apparent. Many Muslims, after all, were in fact from Africa or the East, and prior generations of scholars assumed that Christians genuinely mistook Muslims for pagans or heretics: these scholars misinterpreted metaphorical assertions, such as “Muslims are pagan,” by reading them literally. Because the parallel statement “Muslims are Jewish” is clearly not literal, we can more easily recognize the ways in which this claim and others like it intentionally distort reality, and we can more readily deduce the reasons why those who make these counterfactual claims find value in employing metaphorical language.

Premodern polemicists construct comparisons that emphasize purported similarities between Muslims and Jews (or pagans, or heretics) for three related purposes:

1. to explain Muslims in biblical terms;
2. to justify military and political assaults against Muslims on theological grounds; and, especially,
3. to motivate self-differentiation through the cultivation of proper Christian characteristics.

These purposes build on one another: polemicists explain Muslims in biblical terms in order to justify assaults and motivate self-differentiation, and rhetoric justifying assaults against Muslims defines such discriminatory behavior as proper. Most rhetoric about Jewish Muslims, however, motivates Christians to cultivate behaviors that have no direct impact on either Muslims or Jews: the primary thrust of this rhetoric, like that of anti-Judaism more broadly, is self-differentiation rather than discrimination.

In *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, cultural theorist Gil Anidjar contends that the very identity of Christian Europe, past and present, rests on its self-differentiation from both Jews and Muslims, imagined as distinct but indissociable. Anidjar simultaneously emphasizes the distinct but indissociable roles that religion and politics play in structuring European ideas about self and other. In his reading, however, the enmity ascribed to Jews is theological in nature, rooted in the

Bible and Christian doctrine, while that of the Muslims is entirely political, enacted through warfare and other forms of state-sanctioned violence. (For this reason, Anidjar employs the ethnic term *Arab* instead of *Muslim*, which refers to a person's religious identity.) The present book, in contrast, demonstrates that premodern Europeans regularly ascribed theological enmity to Muslims, either by branding them as Jews or by employing other means of reading Muslims into the Bible. Christians, in other words, defined their enmity toward Muslims not only in political terms but also in theological terms, thanks in part to rhetoric about Jewish Muslims. The association of Muslims with Jews renders both groups alike as anti-Christians: the timeless enemies—even, as Anidjar demonstrates, the singular enemy—not only of Christendom, the collective body of Christians, but also of Christ and Christianity. In the process, this rhetoric reinforces specific conceptions of Christianity and, by extension, of Europe (and America, one might add).<sup>12</sup>

Representations of Jewish Muslims, we will see, draw on distinctly Christian ideas, address exclusively Christian audiences, advance explicitly Christian objectives, and employ specifically Christian forms of rhetoric. To the extent that this is true more broadly, Islamophobia is not really about Muslims at all, even as Muslims suffer its consequences: it is about how to be a proper Christian and, today, a proper European or American. As such, this discourse functions in the same way as the discourse of anti-Judaism, which is also not really about Jews or even directed toward Jews, although it often affects Jews in terrible ways through the antisemitic acts it inspires. Anti-Judaism and certain forms of Islamophobia construct foils against which to define Christianity and with which to promote specific normative beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

*Jewish Muslims*, in short, is about neither Muslims nor Jews. This is a book about Christians who intentionally misrepresented Muslims as Jewish because they believed that such rhetoric would spur their audiences to become better Christians. It shows how these Christians employed metaphors and other forms of comparison to define Muslims and Jews alike as hostile to Christ, Christianity, and Christendom. Contemporary polemicists also frequently portray Muslims, Jews, and other outgroups in derogatory fashion for the purpose of promoting self-differentiation: these polemicists seek to motivate members of their own community to adopt specific characteristics by warning that they would otherwise resemble disfavored outsiders. By explaining premodern rhetoric, I hope to help readers more fully appreciate the goals of moral exhortation and self-identification that underpin rhetoric we encounter