

Between Co-existence and Conflict: Understanding Antisemitism among Muslims in Norway

Ahlem Saidani

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Ahlem.Saidani@uni-giessen.de

English Abstract:

Vibeke Moe Bjørnbekk's *Narratives about Jews among Muslims in Norway* is a unique exploration of the narratives surrounding Jewish-Muslim relations in Norway. The book examines Muslim attitudes and perceptions of Jews in Norway, tracing these views from their earliest historical interactions to contemporary society through interviews. While the book successfully sheds light on important aspects of the topic, it falls short by remaining somewhat superficial in its analysis of the historical events discussed.

Zwischen Koexistenz und Konflikt. Das Verständnis von Antisemitismus unter Muslimen in Norwegen

Abstract:

Vibeke Moe Bjørnbekks *Narratives about Jews among Muslims in Norway* ist eine einzigartige Untersuchung der Erzählungen über die jüdisch-muslimischen Beziehungen in Norwegen. Das Buch untersucht die Haltungen und Wahrnehmungen von Muslimen gegenüber Juden in Norwegen und verfolgt diese Ansichten von ihren frühesten historischen Interaktionen bis in die heutige Gesellschaft durch Interviews. Während das Buch wichtige Aspekte des Themas beleuchtet, bleibt es bei der Analyse der besprochenen historischen Ereignisse etwas oberflächlich.

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Ahlem Saidani

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

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“I see you as equal, you are Jewish and I am Muslim, so what? We are humans and we love each other” (p. 112), said Fatimah, one of the interviewees in Vibeke Moe Bjørnbekk’s *Narratives about Jews among Muslims in Norway*. In her study, Bjørnbekk, examines Muslim attitudes towards Jews in contemporary Norway, with a focus on antisemitism among Muslims. She draws connections to the Arab Israeli conflict and modern antisemitism, exploring how these factors influence the identities and experiences of both communities in Norway today. By analyzing the narratives, Bjørnbekk challenges the oversimplified dichotomy of “Muslims versus Jews” (p. 283) and illustrates how societal and political attitudes toward both groups impact perspectives on Muslim-Jewish relations.

For this study, the author conducted a series of qualitative interviews to examine the complex issues of identity, religiosity, and minority relations. Employing James Holstein’s and Jaber Gubrium’s ‘active interview’ method, Bjørnbekk explores the connections between individual narratives and societal issues. This approach is complemented by D. Jean Clandinin’s narrative inquiry, which emphasizes an interrelational approach to the exchange between interviewer and interviewee. This methodology suggests that the study is shaped by the interview process rather than being predetermined before the narratives are collected. In addition to the analysis of 32 interviews, Bjørnbekk’s also refers to historical events and other surveys related to Muslims, Jews, and religiosity in Europe.

One of Bjørnbekk’s main findings is that sectarian identities shape attitudes towards Jews. For instance, Bjørnbekk notes that Ahmadis were those who most often identified themselves as oppressed, similar to Jews. In contrast, Sunni interviewees frequently distinguished between

Judaism and anti-Jewish attitudes, attributing antisemitism among Muslims to misunderstandings and linking the complex relationship between Muslims and Jews to political issues, such as the Palestine-Israel conflict. While both antisemitism and Islamophobia were acknowledged in the interviews, interviewees perceived Islamophobia as having more immediate negative consequences, especially as they sometimes downplayed discrimination as “normal human behavior” (p. 280) in order to avoid victimization. The research suggests that antisemitism among Muslims is not primarily driven by negative experiences but is intertwined with majority-minority relations and societal biases. Some interviewees expressed concerns over Jewish victimhood receiving “too much attention,” which contributed to a perceived “competition for victimhood” (p. 281). The findings of the study indicate that societal dynamics influence interminority relations, suggesting that “relations between minorities are determined by broad societal conditions and cannot be studied in isolation” (p. 282).

Aiming to explore the in-depth meaning of Muslim individual narratives about Jews, Bjornbekk conducts her study while considering the societal dynamics shaping interminority relations. The author categorizes Muslim narratives into three key perspectives: *identification*, *transition*, and *opposition*. *Identification* refers to the perception that Muslims and Jews share a common experience of victimhood in Norway, with Islamophobia now paralleling antisemitism due to ignorance and xenophobia. *Transition* describes how antisemitism has gradually been replaced by Islamophobia in contemporary discourse, as Muslims are now perceived as the weaker group, while Jews have gained influence and support. *Opposition* presents a more controversial view, with some narratives portraying Jews as having shifted from being victims to becoming oppressors.

While these categories provide a useful framework for understanding Muslim attitudes towards Jews, the categorization of narratives into these categories risks oversimplifying the diversity of individual Muslim experiences and may not fully account for the varying personal, religious, and socio-political factors that influence these perspectives. Additionally, the study’s reliance on these three broad categories overlooks the complexities of intersectionality; how

factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity also contribute to attitudes toward Jews within Muslim communities.

One weakness of the book is that the author refers to certain historical events without exploring their context in sufficient depth, which limits a more comprehensive understanding. Bjørnbekk notes that “the dhimmi (Jews) status subjected the communities to special taxes [...] and in certain periods, oppression and even persecution” (p. 13). However, while dhimmi referred to protected minorities under Muslim rule who were required to pay *jizya*, Bjørnbekk does not clarify that this tax was imposed only on the wealthy and served as compensation for the protection provided by the Muslim military. Unlike Muslims, who were obligated to serve in the army, non-Muslims who paid *jizya* were exempt from military service. Moreover, the author does not mention the fact that Muslims had their own tax, *zakat*, which required them to pay a percentage of their wealth annually, whereas *jizya* was a fixed, low amount, independent of total wealth. Additionally, the discussion does not extend to the treatment of Jews under the Ottoman Empire, where policies varied across different periods and regions. By omitting these nuances, the book presents a one-sided portrayal of Jewish experiences under Muslim rule, which could have been enriched through a more balanced historical analysis.

The book’s key strength lies in its exploration of how perceptions of those belonging to a different religious group contribute to the development of prejudices such as antisemitism and Islamophobia. Rather than presenting a simplistic narrative in which one group is always the oppressor and the other is always the oppressed, Bjørnbekk highlights the complexity of historical narratives and identities. By examining historical events, modern discourses, and personal experiences, Bjørnbekk demonstrates how collective memory and identity are continuously shaped by social and political circumstances, as well as personal experiences, rather than by religious similarities or peaceful historical interreligious dialogue. Another compelling aspect of the book is its discussion of Jewish and Muslim victimhood narratives, which raises important questions about how historical suffering is recognized, remembered, and politically mobilized for one group while being overlooked for another. Bjørnbekk effectively connects these narratives to contemporary society, demonstrating how past

experiences of persecution shape modern attitudes, policies, and intergroup relations in Norway. The book provides a nuanced understanding of how these processes continue to influence present-day social and political aspects, empowering one group while reinforcing a sense of marginalization for the other.

This study is crucial for understanding how Jews are perceived among Muslims. What makes the book particularly outstanding is its empirical depth, evident in its extensive use of firsthand accounts that provide authentic insights into Muslim perceptions in Norway. Additionally, the book makes a significant contribution to minority studies in Norway by exploring how monotheistic minority groups interact, offering valuable insights into interfaith relations. Moreover, it highlights the similarities between these communities rather than their differences, emphasizing the potential for peaceful coexistence. It is an essential read for those seeking to better understand Muslim attitudes towards Jews and the broader complexities of religious coexistence in Norway.