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## Confused or Deliberative: Narratives About the Birth of Islam in Polish History Textbooks<sup>1</sup>

(pp. 89–111)

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### **Abstract:**

**Objectives of the research:** The aim of the article was to identify and analyse problematic areas related to how early Islam is presented and narrated in history textbooks, taking into account the local context.

**Research methods:** The data corpus consists of 12 history textbooks. The mixed methods approach applied in the study included cluster analysis and discourse analysis.

**A brief description of the context of the issue:** Islam and Muslims occupy limited space in the Polish school curricula, yet there is a plethora of information about the Islamic world in the public discourse. This puts a tremendous challenge on the shoulders of teachers and textbook authors to accurately present information about Islam and Muslims in schools.

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**Research findings:** Three problematic areas were discovered and analysed: (a) narrating Islam from a mainstream, non-Muslim perspective, which in the Polish case might be skewed into presenting Islam through the lens of Catholicism; (b) navigating between historical accounts and legends whilst presenting early Islam; and (c) explaining past events by interpreting them through contemporary events.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** The article concludes by indicating challenges of teaching different religions in a largely mono-religious school setting, from the perspective of the classroom majority and Muslim students. Due to the marginal presence of Muslims in the public sphere, these narratives call for a more balanced approach. Otherwise, they can only further alienate and otherise Muslim students in the classrooms – and Islam in mainstream society.

**Keywords:** Islam, textbooks, Poland, teaching

## Introduction

Islam and Muslims occupy limited space in the Polish school curricula, yet there is a plethora of information about the Islamic world in the public discourse. This information is often biased, emotionally loaded and unprecedented in terms of its (mis)use for political gains, whilst Muslims are essentialised into a culturally distinct group (Horolets et al., 2021). As a result, the anti-migrant discourse has gradually become normalised, often with its racist and radical extremes becoming perceived as mainstream opinions (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 505).

This knowledge gap between the overwhelming negative discourse and the space available to present Islam and Muslims in schools puts a tremendous challenge on the shoulders of teachers and textbook authors to accurately present information about Islam and Muslims in schools. It should not only equip students with basic knowledge about Islam and its followers so that they can understand and interpret the contemporary world, but also teach about the beliefs of other people whom

they might encounter at school or beyond. Presenting Islam is even more challenging if there are any Muslim students in the class, as being (usually) the only Muslim in the class or at school puts them in a particularly vulnerable position (Górak-Sosnowska, 2023).

Polish students encounter the history of Islam at school twice: in the fifth year of primary school and the first year of high school. In both cases, the textbooks cover more or less the same elements of the story: Arabia before Islam, the life of Muhammad, the main practices and dogmas of Islam, Arabic conquests and Arabic influence on the mediaeval sciences. This leaves the students with basic knowledge about early Islam, without bringing the story further across the curriculum. In other words, students learn about Islam from the times of Muhammad only. There are some excerpts about contemporary Islam in geography textbooks, but a narrative gap remains between the past and the present. Knowledge about Islam is presented as historical, within the history curriculum. That means that a history teacher should be skilled at not only presenting a religious doctrine, but also sensitive enough if there is a Muslim student in the classroom.

The image of Islam and Muslims in history textbooks has been extensively studied in Europe (e.g. Estivalèzes, 2011; Otterbeck, 2005) and North America (e.g. Oueslati, 2011). In most cases, these studies were of a context where significant Muslim minorities live. The Polish context is significantly different: the local Muslim community is tiny – far below 0.5% of the whole population – and Poland had limited contact with Muslim-majority countries and never had any colonies in Asia or Africa (thus there is no post-colonial presence that could be reflected in intellectual thought or demographics [Piela et al., 2023]). Moreover, the history curriculum seems to serve the purpose of teaching nationalism, and many history teachers seem to take these nationalist representations for granted (Jaskułowski et al., 2018). I argue that these characteristics frame narrations about early Islam in Polish history textbooks.

The article identifies and analyses problematic areas related to how early Islam is presented and narrated in history textbooks, taking into account the local context. Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis

I discovered three such problematic areas. The first one is narrating Islam from a mainstream, non-Muslim perspective, which in the Polish case might be skewed into presenting Islam through the lens of Catholicism. The second challenge is about navigating between historical accounts and legends whilst presenting early Islam. The third problematic area stems from the need to link the past and the present, that is, explaining past events by interpreting them through contemporary events or giving meaning to the present by rooting it in the past. I will elaborate more on these three areas after briefly presenting our data corpus and methodology.

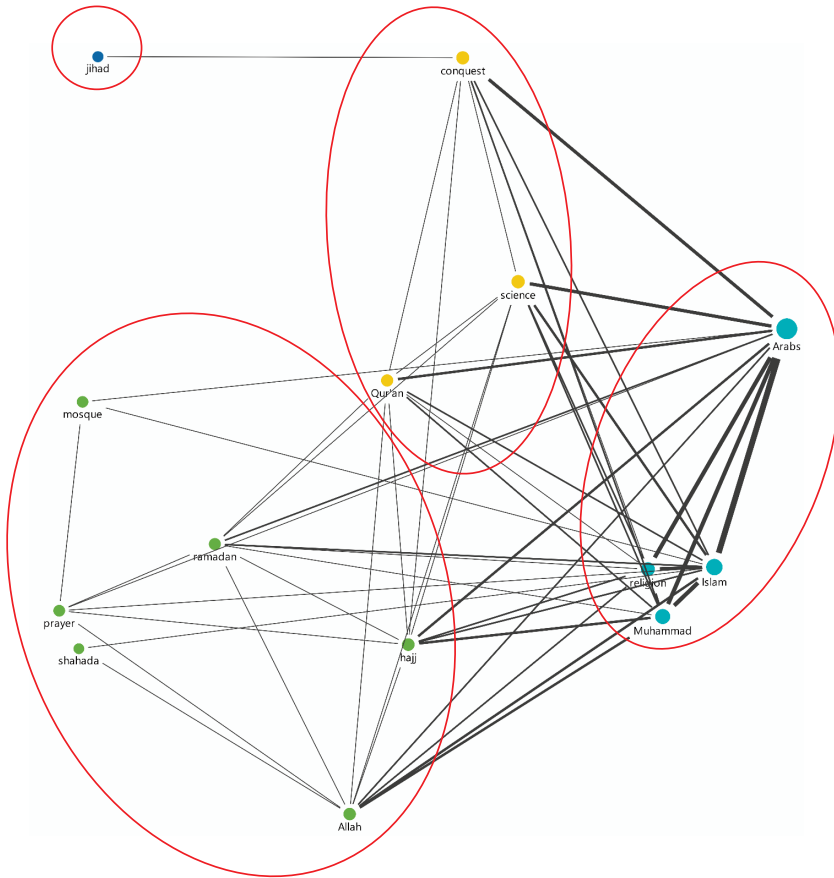
### **Data and methodology**

In this article, I analyse history textbooks that depict the birth of Islam. The sample comprises 12 textbooks: 5 for year 5 of primary school (Ciechanowski, 2018; Kowalewski et al., 2018; Małkowski, 2021; Trzebniak & Trzebniak, 2018; Wojciechowski, 2021) and 7 for year 1 of high school (Choińska-Mika, 2019; Faszczka et al., 2021; Kępski et al., 2021; Kulesza & Kowalewski, 2019; Pawlak & Szweda, 2019; Ustrzycki & Ustrzycki, 2019, 2021). Each book excerpt consists of 2–7 pages, 2–3 for year 5 and 3–7 for year 1. The textbooks were published between 2018 and 2021, and all had been accepted by the relevant ministry as of the 2022/2023 school year.<sup>2</sup>

The textbooks were scanned twice: as graphic files and as text (with OCR software) to enable a dual analysis of the textual and non-textual content. The data was coded in MAXQDA software for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The coding process combined auto-coding based on a MAXDictio dictionary and thematic coding to uncover the context, semantics and narrative patterns. Thus, the quantitative analysis allowed us to identify the main thematic clusters, whilst the qualitative one enabled us to unpack the narratives behind these patterns. The subsequent part of the article puts into the forefront the qualitative analysis, which serves as the preliminary analysis and is represented in Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> This data was preliminarily analysed in Górak-Sosnowska et al. (2023).

**Figure 1: Main thematic clusters of Islam and Muslims as presented in history textbooks as presented in history textbooks**



The preliminary quantitative analysis revealed four main thematic clusters in the history textbooks. The first dominant one comprises codes related to Arabs (the core), Muhammad, Islam and religion. The code “Arabs” is in the centre, whilst the other three codes are closely interlinked; thus, Muhammad was the Prophet of Islam, and Islam is a religion. The second cluster covers the Qur’an, science and conquests. The two latter codes reflect an interesting intersection of Arabs conquering other lands and contributing to the mediaeval sciences, two narrations which were often located in the same section of the textbook (Górak-Sosnowska et al., 2023).

The Qur'an is linked to the first cluster – as the Holy Book of Islam that was revealed to Muhammad – but at the same time is positioned close to the third cluster, which covers the religious dimension of Islam, i.e. the pillars of Islam, Allah and mosque. The pillars of Islam are positioned closely to each other since the textbooks usually list them one by one. The fourth cluster contains just one entry: jihad. It is linked to the conquests but seems unrelated to anything else. The quantitative analysis identified the main clusters but did not unpack the narratives about early Islam in history textbooks. They will be explored in the subsequent parts of the article.

### **Between facts and legends**

Narratives about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the birth of Islam in history textbooks are hued with details. Apart from what is known as the “authoritative set” of biographic information about Muhammad,<sup>3</sup> the textbook authors added numerous minutiae that are rarely found in academic texts on early Islam. There are two difficulties related to this presentation, which will be further elaborated on in the course of this section. The first one refers to a general, undisturbed trust in the information as presented; thus, the biography of Muhammad is treated as if it was a real reflection of his life rather than a biography that depicts the knowledge and beliefs of people who wrote it two centuries after his death. The second one refers to the abundance of information that combines mainstream narratives with minutiae without differentiating them.

Historical sources related to the life of the Prophet Muhammad are very limited. Muhammad became a prophet as an adult, a middle-aged man. The early revelations brought him a growing, but modest number of followers. In 622 he had to leave Mecca with his followers because the situation became tense. Muhammad died in 632 and left a growing Arab-Islamic empire united by Islam. This story has two serious consequences

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<sup>3</sup> I do not mean here evidence-based historical data, but rather what is usually presented in publications about the life of Muhammad – e.g. Danecki (2011) or Cook (1983).

related to what we may know about his life. Firstly, there is hardly any reliable information about his childhood or adolescence, as Muhammad was orphaned soon after his birth and was an ordinary boy who had to earn his living by travelling with caravans. Not even the exact year of his birth is known. Secondly, when he proved to be the Prophet, his life became particularly significant for Muslims as a source of knowledge, an inspiration and a role model. This is where the reconstruction of Muhammad's life can easily melt with Islamic hagiography (Danecki, 2011, p. 25).

Sources relating to the origins of Islam pose many problems as evidence-based, as Donner (1998, p. 4) points out. They were not contemporarily written. The first biography of the Prophet Muhammad was finalised in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and later amended in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This gives a two-century-long gap between the events reported and the time of writing. In the same manner the Qur'an – whilst being considered the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad – can hardly be considered an independent source that could be useful in reconstructing the life of Muhammad (Peters, 1994, p. 261).

Modern scholarship developed different approaches to studying early Islam. Donner (1998, pp. 5–20) enumerates four such approaches: descriptive – accepting the narrative about the origin of Islam as reported in Muslim sources; source-critical – aimed at exploring and critically assessing the historical sources with the ultimate goal of dividing them into credible and not so credible; tradition-critical – considering Islamic sources in an evolutionary manner, as a reflection of later interests; and sceptical – which questions the possibility of tracing any historical fact behind these traditions. When it comes to the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Shoemaker (2018, p. 50) lists three contemporary approaches: political and economic – which stresses the political leadership of Muhammad with religion submitted to unite Arab tribes; eschatological – focussed on the immanence of Judgement Day; and apologetic and theological – which present the Prophet Muhammad as a role model.

Whilst presenting Muhammad and his prophecy, Polish history textbooks use either the political and economic approach or the theological one. In other words, they either distance themselves from the prophecy

(and thus indicate that according to Muslims the Qur'an contains the word of God) or write in the language of the faithful (and therefore assume that the Qur'an contains the word of God). Estivalèzes (2011, p. 50) noted the same challenge whilst analysing French textbooks. The theological approach is presented by Kowalewski et al. (2018, p. 97); accordingly, Muhammad "as a mature man had revelations".

Most textbook authors take a safe distance from the theological perspective, by reporting Muhammad's revelation. They do so in two ways – either by referring to Islamic tradition that acknowledges Muhammad's prophecy, or by referring to Muhammad's claim. The first way is illustrated by the following quotes:

"According to the Muslim tradition, he received many divine revelations" (Kępski et al., 2021, p. 195).

"According to Islamic tradition, in around 610 whilst staying in a mountain cave, Muhammad received a revelation" (Ustrzycki & Ustrzycki, 2021, p. 20).

"According to the Arab tradition, it was [in the cave] that the archangel Gabriel first appeared to the 40-year-old Muhammad" (Małkowski, 2021, p. 90).

The second way of reporting the revelations seems to be much more problematic. Whilst technically it was Muhammad who started to transmit the revelations to his closest companions and later other Meccans, bringing this information to the forefront – without the relevant context that this is what teachers of Islamic tradition or Muslims believe – depicts Muhammad as if he was a usurper:

"According to his words, he had revelations" (Choińska-Mika et al., 2019, p. 154).

"Around 610 he began to claim that he had received revelations from the archangel Gabriel. Muhammad then declared himself a prophet



(messenger of God) and began to claim that there is only one God...” (Wojciechowski, 2021, p. 109).

“According to Muhammad’s own testimony, the archangel Gabriel appeared to him and dictated the exact content of the revelation” (Kulesza & Kowalewski, 2019, p. 254).

It is therefore perhaps not so much an inappropriate way to present the birth of Islam, but rather a problematic selection of information (Otterbeck, 2005, p. 801).

The last type of narrative fits well into the political one. Accordingly, Muhammad acted deliberately, aiming to use religion for political goals.

“He was not an educated man, but an enterprising man who knew the world. Once he announced that the archangel Gabriel had appeared in a dream, telling him the truth about God and appointing him a Prophet with divine commands to preach to people” (Pawlak & Szweda, 2019, p. 147).

“Religious considerations and a desire to reform the relations prevailing among the Arabs led Muhammad to create his religion, called Islam” (Trzebniak & Trzebniak, 2018).

Whilst the textbook authors distance themselves from Islam and Muhammad’s revelation, they seem to paradoxically follow the theological approach in other instances. According to Shoemaker (2018, p. 55), this approach is characterised by a “lack [of] any critical perspective regarding the traditional Islamic sources”, which are treated “as if they were entirely unproblematic records of Muhammad’s life and teachings”. Consequently, the textbooks offer information that is hard to find in the literature.

For instance, Małkowski (2021, p. 89) mentioned that 360 idol figures were standing around Al-Kaba. This piece of information is likely taken from one of the accounts of the fall of Mecca by Ibn Ishaq (cf. Peters, 1994,

p. 236; Guillaume, 1967, p. 552), or Armstrong (2002, p. 11), but might also come from Polish Wikipedia. Only Armstrong states the number of idols without any hesitation. Other authors (e.g. Rubin, 1995; Danecki, 2011; Donner, 1998) mention idols worshipped by Meccans, yet do not specify their number, whilst Hawting (1999, p. 129) explicitly adds that this information “is matched by the willingness of some scholars to use the evidence [...] to corroborate the traditional accounts”.

Similarly, Polish history textbooks provide information about the Black Stone being originally white but changed its colour whilst absorbing the sins of pilgrims (Kulesza & Kowalewski, 2019, p. 255; if anything – not of pilgrims, but from the pagan era), or that Adam built Al-Kaba, but it was destroyed during a flood and only re-built by Abraham, or it was Gabriel who gave the Black Stone to Abraham (Pawlak & Szweda, 2019, p. 146). These details are not even fully described (only mentioned in the section “The Ka’ba in Legend and Superstition”) in the monumental “Encyclopaedia of Islam” (Wensinck, 1997, p. 321), yet they paved their way into history textbooks for high school. Again, it might be Armstrong (2002, p. 17) or Polish Wikipedia (the English one is far more prudent in this regard). Wojciechowski (2021) included kissing Al-Kaba as an element of *hajj*. Danecki (2011) and Bianchi (1995, p. 89) provide a much more nuanced picture of the pilgrimage with “most pilgrims merely salut[ing] the Black Stone from a short distance as a gesture of their renewed covenant with God. Others struggle to touch or kiss the Black stone...”.

Whilst studying the textbooks I also encountered two pieces of information that we could not relate to any other source. One is a description of an illustration by Al-Wasiti that depicted a caravan going to Mecca (c. 1240). According to the textbook authors, the banners indicated the religious character of the pilgrimage (Faszczka et al., 2021, p. 154). Robinson (1996, p. 141) describes the same miniature but does not mention the banners. The same authors also mention that Arabs preferred to ride mares over stallions for their comfort (Faszczka et al., 2021, p. 157). I was unable to substantiate this information.

## Explaining Islam from a Christian perspective

When it comes to presenting Islam, Polish history textbooks are instruments of power (Estivalèzes, 2011, p. 48). They shape students' image of Islam and situate knowledge about Islam in a particular sociohistorical context. Because Poland is strongly embedded in the Catholic religion, Christianity becomes a natural lens through which to look at Islam. The textbook authors use this opportunity in two different manners: either as boundary-making – to indicate the difference between “us” (Christians) and “them” (Muslims) – or as a way to show how Christianity impacted Islam.

Boundary-making is manifested in different ways across Polish history textbooks. Direct manifestations are hard to spot. Only one textbook clearly distinguishes between “us” and “the Muslims”:

“This relocation – *hijra* in Arabic – was considered by the Muslims as the beginning of a new era. To this day, they count time from it, just as we do from the birth of Christ” (Małkowski, 2018, p. 91).

“In 622, fearing for his life, he fled his hometown. This event was recognized by the followers of Islam as the beginning of the Muslim era (just like Christians from the birth of Christ)” (Kowalewski et al., 2018, p. 98).

The first textbook is written from a Christian perspective and addressed to Christian students, who constitute the majority. One could only wonder whether a Muslim student reading this statement would also feel included in the class. The second example does not take sides by describing how Muslims and Christians set the beginning of eras.

Another example of a direct difference – though not very visible – is the way of writing the word God. In Polish, “God” (*Bóg*) indicates a monotheistic deity, whereas “god” (*bóg*) is a polytheistic one. Some textbooks describe the God of the Muslims as a “god” and often add his name, Allah, as if it was a name:

“According to him [Muhammad], he had revelations in which the angel Gabriel told him the truth about the only god, Allah. He claimed that the followers of Judaism and Christians had not fulfilled God’s message recorded in the Holy Scriptures” (Faszczka et al., 2021, p. 135).

“Muhammad, the founder of the religion known as Islam, was born [in Mecca] in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. He preached the belief in one god called Allah. He recognized himself as one of the prophets who were to spread the will of god” (Ciechanowski, 2018, p. 85).

“The name means submission to the will of the god named Allah” (Trzebniak & Trzebniak, 2018, p. 68).

All quotations seem to send two important messages to the students: firstly, that Muslims believe in a different God, and secondly, that this God seems to be worse (for he does not even deserve an uppercase letter). Moreover, the first quotation is particularly striking in terms of how the word God is spelt. The Muslim one is written with a lowercase letter, whilst God’s message from the Holy Bible is written with a capital letter.

The tension between Christianity and Islam is presented from the Muslim perspective: namely, it was Muhammad who actively opposed Christian beliefs.

“However, according to Muhammad, Jews and Christians have falsified the content of God’s revelation. That is why God appointed Muhammad the last and most important prophet, to whom he gave the ultimate truths of faith” (Kowalewski et al., 2018, p. 97).

“Muslims believed that Jews and Christians did not fully follow the divine commands and they falsified them. Christians are accused of not being true monotheists because they believe in the Holy Trinity and worship images of divine beings” (Ustrzycki & Ustrzycki, 2019, p. 23).

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“Muhammad recognized the Old and New Testaments, but claimed that they contained errors. For example, he considered Jesus to be a prophet, not the son of God” (Małkowski, 2018, p. 91).

Just as the life of the Prophet Muhammad is hard to reconstruct based on contemporary data, the same is true of his relations with the Peoples of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*), to which Christians belong. Donner (2019) identified several challenges whilst trying to establish Muhammad's approach to Christianity. The first one is historical: whilst the Qur'an might provide some insights into Muslims' attitudes towards the Christians, Muslim traditions about the origin of Islam were written after Muhammad's death, and thus it is hard to establish how accurate they are. The second challenge refers to how Christians are defined in the Qur'an (which Christian denominations are meant). The third challenge is the references to the People of the Book in the Qur'an, which prove to be inconsistent: on the one hand, Christians are welcomed as a part of the community of Believers (since they believe in a monotheistic God); on the other hand, their beliefs and practices are criticised or even equated with denying the oneness of God.

These methodological challenges might fall beyond the scope of a textbook for primary school or high school pupils. Yet, they cast doubts as to whether Islam should be presented in terms of direct opposition to Christianity – as if that was the main goal of Muhammad. A similar approach is visible later in the chapters, where the organisation of the early Islamic state is presented. Here, the textbook authors usually mention taxes paid by non-Muslims, but some define them as taxes imposed on infidels, whilst others only mention Jews and Christians without labelling them infidels. The following examples illustrate the difference:

“(protection) It was paid by the non-Muslims, whilst the Arabs believed that all the land belonged to God and only the followers of Islam had the right to cultivate it. Therefore, infidels should pay a special tribute” (Trzebniak & Trzebniak, 2018, p. 68).

“Jews and Christians (monotheists) could maintain their religion. However, they had to pay a special tax for Muslim rulers” (Kowalewski et al., 2018, p. 100).

Just as in the case of Christianity being considered a false religion by Muslims according to the Prophet Muhammad, labelling Christians as infidels also clearly sets the boundaries between Christians and Muslims. Interestingly, the authors who do it seem to follow the narratives of contemporary Islamic hardliners. However, they do not speak for the majority of Muslims, nor do they reflect what Muhammad could have meant whilst dealing with Christians.

References to Christianity are also used to indicate the links between the monotheistic religions. The common root of the three main monotheistic religions can provide a valuable reference point to describe Islam, depending on how it is presented. With few exceptions (e.g. Wojciechowski, 2021, p. 109), Muhammad’s revelations are presented in relation to Judaism and Christianity. The two examples below illustrate these differences:

“Muhammad’s teachings alluded to the Bible – to the figures of Moses and Jesus, whom he regarded as prophets (but he did not treat Jesus as the Son of God)” (Kowalewski et al., 2018, p. 97).

“Muhammad concluded that he was the last prophet after Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (whom he did not treat as the Son of God), and it was his duty to convey to people what had been revealed to him in visions” (Faszczka et al., 2021, p. 135).

In the first example, it seems as if Muhammad had been chiefly inspired by the Bible. The textbook does not mention Jibril – the angel that delivered the revelation to Muhammad from God. In the second example, the common monotheistic root is stressed but is not clearly linked to Muhammad’s revelations.

Relating the Qur’an to other scriptures is a challenging task. David Cook (2019, p. 26) indicated at least three different types of influences:

Jewish, Syriac Christian and Ethiopian. According to him, there are some similarities in how stories about prophets are narrated across the Qur'an and Jewish or Christian scriptures, but not in the case of the New Testament and Jesus. As he concludes, "we should be looking for the sources of the Qur'ān among the travellers and traders of Syria-Palestine and the Hijāz, rather than among the scholars and texts" (Cook, 2019, p. 34).

Similarly, Christian influences are also visible whilst mosques are discussed. Usually, the mosque is presented as a Muslim temple, although some authors mention its other functions – that it is also used for discussions, giving alms, etc. Both the illustrations and the instructions for students are dominated by one type of mosque – modelled on the architecture of Christian buildings. Mosques were built in this way in Syria or Palestine, but with the territorial expansion of the Arab-Muslim empire, the form of the mosque changed. In the world of Islam, at least three types of mosques can be distinguished: hypostyle mosques, mosques with domes (basilica and multi-dome types) and mosques with *iwans* (a high portal constituting its entrance, modelled on former Iranian palace architecture; Danecki, 2003, p. 253).

### **Explaining the present**

Polish discourse about Islam and Muslims is transplanted from elsewhere; it does not relate to local Muslim communities, but focusses on what is going on in the Middle East or Western Europe (Górak-Sosnowska, 2011). This makes Polish public discourse particularly vulnerable to assimilating unverified and emotionally loaded information about Islam and Muslims, and it invites reflections based on stereotypes that underpin the globally transplanted Islamophobic discourse (Piela et al., 2023). Moreover, limited reliable resources on Islam and Muslims that vanish in a plethora of anti-Muslim information seem to make the work of textbook authors particularly challenging. Not only are they supposed to provide accurate information, but also a meaning behind it.

The birth of Islam provided such an occasion. Almost all textbook authors focussed on jihad. This complex notion is usually problematised

in martial terms, sometimes equated to a war against infidels or a holy war (this is particularly common in exercise books, in which students are asked about the name of “a holy war waged by Muslims” (Jurek, 2020, p. 5). The notion of jihad is discussed in almost every textbook. Some authors list it as an additional principle of Islam, whilst others dedicate a space in a subchapter on Arabic conquest. The term jihad is conceptualised in three ways: in a wider sense of the word, in a martial sense (but not the ultimate solution), and as a holy war.

The first conceptualisation is the rarest,<sup>4</sup> but at the same time the most accurate. Thus, Kępski et al. (2021, p. 201) describe jihad in a broader sense as a struggle, and indicate that this concept has been understood in various ways in the history of Islam: both as mobilisation to fight (lesser jihad) and a struggle with oneself or taking care of one’s family (greater jihad). Other definitions of jihad focus exclusively on the martial aspect. Some of them stress the martial aspect but also leave room for other approaches:

“spreading the faith, also through war” (Faszczka et al., 2021, p. 247);

“holy war to expand and defend a state based on Islam. However, [Muhammad] did not convert anyone by force” (Małkowski, 2021, p. 91).

Other authors do not even leave that slight unambivalence, identifying jihad as an ultimate war that is an obligation of every Muslim:

“In Medina, the prophet won many followers, and then called them to start a holy war with Mecca. The spread of Islam was, as the prophet taught, the duty of Muslims” (Ciechanowski, 2018, p. 86).

“After [the caliphs], the Arabs went to conquer the neighbouring countries. They were ordered to do so by jihad, i.e. the obligation

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<sup>4</sup> According to Oueslati et al. (2011, p. 14), such an approach is also rarely found in Canadian textbooks.



to strengthen their faith, understood by them as an armed struggle” (Wojciechowski, 2021, p. 111).

“Among other recommendations, there are strict moral norms (e.g. a ban on drinking alcohol or eating pork) and jihad – the duty to spread faith, including participation in the holy war waged against infidels (especially polytheists)” (Pawlak & Szweda, 2019, 149).

It is impossible to show the complexity of a concept such as jihad in a paragraph or a few sentences (Heck, 2004, p. 95). However, an attempt to build a coherent definition of this concept from bits and pieces leads to at least two simplifications: the first one is focussing solely on one type of jihad, and the second is equating it with a holy war. These two elements are nicely explained by Tyerman (2004, pp. 115–116):

“Unlike the crusade, according to classical Islamic theory traditionally dating from the seventh and eighth centuries but possibly later, the jihad takes two forms, the greater (*al-jihad al-akbar*), the internal struggle to achieve personal purity [...], and the lesser (*al-jihad al-asghar*), the military struggle against infidels. [...] Unlike the crusade and Christian holy war, to which the Islamic jihad appears to have owed nothing (and vice versa), jihad was fundamental to the Muslim faith, a sixth pillar. The essence of jihad remained as a spiritual exercise.”

Authors who study jihad very carefully navigate between the plethora of meanings given to this concept that has been changing the history or rather histories of Muslims. According to Cook (2005, p. 2) the early conquests of Muhammad could be called jihad, but the Prophet never formally declared one. Bonner (2006, pp. xvii, 5) navigates between the two concepts known from Christian history – that of just war and holy war – and points to their similarities and differences with jihad, stressing that the doctrine of jihad as we know it today was created only at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

It is evident that the notion of jihad as a holy war against infidels regained popularity with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and was further metastasised by Islamist activity. However, building the historical definition of this concept on what can be observed today can only substantiate the conviction that Islam was distinctly and unequivocally a violent religion, from its very beginning. Moreover, since waging a holy war is a religious obligation – as narrated in some textbooks – all Muslims are automatically suspected of engaging in war.

### Discussion

The birth of Islam – as narrated in history textbooks – is one of the few encounters Polish students ever have with the religion at school. It usually does not occupy more than one class during their whole school career, which makes this encounter rather brief. Whilst the textbooks provide a general overview of early Islam, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the pillars of the Islamic faith and the development of the early Islamic caliphate in great detail, it seems that they follow certain interpretations that either confuse the narrative or deliberately pursue a certain agenda. The three areas analysed above provide challenges to navigating the textbooks, for both non-Muslim and Muslim students.

The textbooks provide a narrative that seems coherent, yet also mixes up hard-to-find details from Muhammad's life with what is more or less acknowledged as his tradition. This might lead to content overload and students' inability to pick out important information from the abundance of hardly known details. For Muslim students, many of these underreported details might come as unfamiliar and thus confusing.

Many textbook authors implicitly or explicitly take a Christian perspective whilst describing Muhammad's revelation and Islam as a monotheistic religion. It seems to be a reasonable strategy that might serve non-Muslim students by making Islam a more familiar religion. However, Islam is often juxtaposed against Christianity, with Muslims being those who accused Christians of falsifying religion and being infidels. Such harsh

vocabulary seems only to strengthen existing boundaries and dichotomies between Islam and the West (to which Christian tradition belongs). Similarly, some textbooks indicate Christian influences on Islamic doctrine and architecture. Also, in this case such influences might serve as bridge-building or as proof of the superiority of one religion over the other. For Muslim students, the binary division of “us” vs “Muslims” can be particularly difficult.

For some reason, the concept of jihad is present in almost every textbook. Often the way it is presented seems to echo the activities of contemporary Islamists rather than how the concept could have been understood in early Islam. For many Muslim students fixation on jihad is not only irritating, but also a tough choice between believing the textbook and their faith – especially during exams, when they are asked about the Arabic word that indicates the “Islamic holy war” (Górak-Sosnowska, 2023).

The narrative challenges listed above are by no means evident only in Polish textbooks. They seem to occur more or less frequently across textbooks in other national and cultural contexts (Oueslati et al., 2011; Otterbeck, 2005; Estivalèzes, 2011). In Poland, however, due to the marginal presence of Muslims in the public sphere, these narratives call for a more balanced approach. Otherwise, they can only further alienate and otherise Muslim students in the classrooms – and Islam in mainstream society.

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