

An Introduction to Islam for Jews by Reuven Firestone.

Jewish Publication Society 2008.

There have been some redoubtable Jewish scholars of Islam and Muslim history over the decades, principally Bernard Lewis of Princeton University, but it is probably true to say that before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 few Jews knew or cared much about Islam, other than with regard to events in Israel. Since 9/11, and the many acts of Islamist terrorism that have occurred since, the profile of Islam has been raised so high that it cannot be ignored, and many Jews will have felt their lack of knowledge about the third Abrahamic faith most acutely.

These information lacunae may now be filled in by a plethora of books, from Islam for Dummies upwards, but with Reuven Firestone's latest book comes the first specifically written for Jews by a scholar of Islam who also happens to be a Reform Rabbi. Firestone's engagement with the subject is long and highly regarded, and he has written widely in the field in both books and articles and been engaged in Jewish-Muslim dialogue. He writes from a sympathetic position towards Islam, though that does not prevent him from commenting critically on certain aspects of the Muslim faith, as he would feel able to do with Judaism or Christianity.

An Introduction to Islam for Jews is divided into three parts: the first is entitled A Survey of Islamic History, the second, God, Qur'an and Islamic Law, and the third The Umma: Islam in Practice. There is much fascinating material in each section, although for me the real cream of the book is in the second and third part where Firestone breaks down and details the specifics of Muslim belief, theology and practice, as well as explaining the facts about such specific areas as personal observance, the Islamic calendar, the different schools of Islamic thought and what 'jihad' really is.

In all stages of the book Reuven Firestone links his material with Jews and Judaism in a way that promotes a sense of commonality between the two, and demystifies and demythologises in equal measure. In his epilogue he sets this study in the context of *tikkun olam*, a concept held by both Jews and Muslims in their respective ways, and offers it as a means of enhancing understanding and friendship and diminishing fear and demonization.

This is a superbly written and highly informative book, suitable for scholars and lay people alike, and a wonderful contribution to educated, ongoing inter-faith dialogue without which we will be in an even sorrier state.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh