Since its founding the early Seventh Century, Islam has maintained a complex relationship to the Jewish and Christian traditions that preceded it. On the one hand, religious figures and texts consciously built upon their monotheistic foundations, linking Muslims to Jews and Christians in worship of the same God, tracing Muhammad’s genealogical ancestry to Abraham, and alluding in the Qur’ān to stories and messages from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels. On the other hand, as a successor religion, Islam differentiates itself from the prior traditions in order to provide its adherents with a unique and superseding message. This tension finds expression in the different and differing attitudes towards Jews and Christians—known as ‘Peoples of the Book’ and ‘protected minorities’—in Muslim society. Their experience has ranged widely, including periods of productive harmony, considerable toleration and harsh persecution. Likewise, Jews and Christians adapted variously to their Islamic surroundings, contributing to their societies in the fields of philosophy, science, trade, culture and more. In this course, we will survey the major themes of Jewish and Christian lives in the Islamic world from its origins to the present day, with a hope towards understanding better the challenges and realities of the contemporary Middle East.

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