Article

Interfaith Actor Reception of Islamic Covenants: How ‘New’ Religious Knowledge Influences Views on Interreligious Relations in Islam

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Abstract: The historicity of early Islamic diplomatic documents, referred to as the covenants of Prophet Muhammad, has received considerable scholarly attention over the past decade. This article is the first to present a critical examination of the reception of the Prophet’s covenants among interfaith actors. An educative intervention instrument was used to examine how research on the historicity of the Prophet’s covenants influences participants’ thinking about interreligious relations in Islam. With reference to Stuart Hall’s audience reception theory, the study found that most participants adopted the ‘preferred’ reading of the educative intervention material, while minorities adopted ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ readings. This article discusses these findings, highlighting that participants’ openness to new religious knowledge, prior views on interreligious relations in Islam, and knowledge of primary Islamic sources influence reception of the Prophet’s covenants.

Keywords: Islam; Qur’an; Prophet Muhammad; hadith; covenants; peacebuilding; interfaith dialogue; interreligious relations; audience reception theory

1. Introduction

The concept of covenant (‘ahd and mithaq in Arabic) is central to the Qur’anic narrative of human existence and coexistence. Historically, covenants and treaties were foundational to interreligious relations in Islam (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b). While a theory of covenants in Islam was not developed historically nor in modern times, there has been some scholarly research conducted over the past decade on covenants in the Qur’an as well as the historicity of documents referred to as the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). The latter includes written pledges of protection that, in accordance with the Qur’an (e.g., Q2:256; Q10:99), preclude religious compulsion, forced conversion, and discrimination against non-Muslims. According to a number of scholars, such early agreements, covenants, and treaties had a positive influence on early Islam’s interreligious relations (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b; Penn 2015; Morrow 2013). However, in the centuries after Muhammad’s death, various factors, including demographic, social and political changes, negatively impacted on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to a number of scholars, such early agreements, covenants, and treaties had a positive influence on early Islam’s interreligious relations (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b; Penn 2015; Morrow 2013). Although an overriding Islamic principle of protecting non-Muslim religious minorities was generally maintained, discriminatory conditions and restrictions on religious freedom became integrated into Islamic thought and laws in some Muslim lands around the 9th century (Levy-Rubin 2011). The ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861), for instance, issued a number of ordinances placing restrictions on protected non-Muslim people (referenced to
as *ahl al-dhimma*), which were recorded by a few classical Islamic scholars including the famous historian al-Ṭabarî (d. 923). The so-called *dhimmi* code or system that some Muslim rulers applied to their non-Muslims subjects was also represented in an apocryphal ‘treaty’ known as the Pact of ‘Umar, falsely attributed to the second caliph, ‘Umar bin al-Khattab (d. 644) (Levy-Rubin 2011). Restrictions on religious freedom and discriminatory conditions of the kind found in al-Mutawakkil’s ordinances, the Pact of ‘Umar, and certain later manuals of Islamic law came to be seen by some modern scholars as the ‘Islamic’ position concerning the rights and status of non-Muslims in Islam (see, for example, Ye’er 1985). The covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, however, convey that, in its earliest form, Islam advocated peaceful, respectful and tolerant relations with non-Muslims in contrast to what developed in the centuries after the Prophet’s death.

Unlike the *Constitution of Medina* and the *Treaty of Hudaybiyya*, which are found in Muslim sources, namely the *sira* (biographical) and *hadith* literature, and thereby well-established in Muslim discourses about the life of the Prophet and Islam, the covenants of the Prophet are far less known among Muslims and non-Muslims in general. Awareness of these covenants has increased in recent years and they have received considerable attention from some Islamic studies scholars and institutions. As will be discussed below, recent scholarly examination of the Prophet’s covenants point in the direction of their historicity. However, there remains a lacuna concerning awareness of the covenants and whether they are more widely accepted as authentic. Moreover, if the scholarly research on the historicity of the Prophet’s covenants is accepted, there remains a gap in knowledge concerning their *reception* among Muslims and non-Muslims, and their implications for understanding interreligious relations in Islam.

The aim of this study is to critically examine the *reception* of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad among interfaith actors. Interfaith actors are important stakeholders concerning the reception of the Prophet’s covenants as they play a key role in interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding (Iweze 2021; Kadayîfci-Orellana 2013; Neufeldt 2011). As such, interfaith actors are an ideal starting point for studying how ‘new’ religious knowledge about Islamic covenants influences existing thought and worldviews concerning Islam and interreligious relations. This article begins with an overview of covenants in the Qur’an and covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, followed by the study’s methodology and main findings. The article makes reference to Stuart Hall’s (1980) theory of audience reception, presenting a qualitative analysis of 36 interfaith actors’ responses to the educative intervention material on the covenants of Prophet Muhammad, in relation to the participants’ openness to new religious knowledge as well as prior and subsequent views on interreligious relations in Islam.

2. Covenants in Islam

2.1. The Qur’an

Any discussion of Islam must begin with the Qur’an, the core, preeminent scripture of Islam. Muslims believe the Qur’an was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad over a two-decade period between 610 and 632. Though some revisionist historians have argued the Qur’an was compiled sometime after Muhammad’s death, empirical research based on examination of early Qur’an manuscripts locates its origins in his lifetime (Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012).

Very old manuscripts of the Qur’an found in the Great Mosque of Sanaa, Yemen, in 1972, have provided answers to crucial questions concerning the origins, compilation and stability of the Qur’an over time. San’a 1 (DAM 01-27.1), a palimpsest or manuscript of which the original text (lower writing) was erased by scraping or washing and then written over (upper text), is of particular importance. Using techniques involving ultraviolet light, both the upper and lower texts were studied and compared. Both are codices of the Qur’an, the lower being “the only manuscript that is known to be non-‘Uthmanic, that is, from a textual tradition other than the standard one” (Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012, p. 8), which the authors refer to as C-1. Sadeghi and Goudarzi (2012, pp. 19–20) note that the “C-1 type
shares a number of variants with those reported for the codices of [two companions of the Prophet Muhammad] ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd and Ubayy b. Ka‘b’, which were non-‘Uthmanic Qur’ans previously known only through descriptions in the literary sources. Radio-carbon dating assigns the lower codex to the period before 671 with a probability of 99 per cent, before 661 with the probability of 95.5 per cent, and before 646 with a probability of 75 per cent. Sadeghi and Goudarzi (2012, pp. 22–23) sum up their findings as follows:

Analysis resolves a fundamental question about the early history of the Qur’ān: who joined the existing verses to form the surās (chapters) and when? Many scholars and some early reports hold that this was accomplished after the death of the Prophet by the committee that ‘Uthmān charged with the task of standardizing the Qur’ān. Some other early reports however indicate that this was done already by the Prophet himself. This last view is now found to be better supported...

With only a few exceptions, the differences among the codices are at the level of morphemes, words, and phrases—not at the level of sentences or verses.

Other researchers have confirmed the carbon dating of the San‘a’ 1 palimpsest (DAM 01-27.1) to between 606 and 649 (Marx and Jocham 2019), also noting that the Ḥīḍrī script of this palimpsest attests to it being the oldest manuscript they examined and also featuring certain variations consistent with “the reports about non-canonical variant reading in Muslim exegetical sources” (p. 214), as discussed by Sadeghi and Goudarzi (2012).

In addition to the empirical evidence in support of the traditional Muslim account that locates the origins of the Qur’ān in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, there are other rational reasons to accept this account. The intra-Muslim political and theological rivalries that emerged in the decades and centuries after the death of the Prophet are well known. Had the Qur’ān been produced after the death of the Prophet, it would certainly reflect these rivalries, which are apparent in the hadīth literature, for example. That the Qur’ān is free of verses that endorse particular companions of the Prophet or support the political aspirations of one side or the other in relation to later Muslim political and theological disputes, gives reason to be confident that the Qur’ān is from the time of the Prophet as purported by the traditional Muslim account.

The Arabic terms ‘ahd and mīthaq are used in the Qur’ān in reference to a covenant, treaty, pledge or commitment between two parties (Lumbard 2015; Safi 2008). Almost all Qur’ānic references to ‘ahd and mīthaq concern covenants between God (Allah in Arabic) and human beings. Covenants in the Qur’ān convey a narrative of human existence and coexistence but remain understudied and underrepresented in discourses about Islam in general. The fulfilment of the covenant with God and upholding oaths, pledges and treaties are central tenets repeated throughout the Qur’ān alongside well-known religious obligations including daily prayers and charity to the poor and needy (e.g., Q2:177; Q23:2–9). Covenants in the Qur’ān have received some scholarly attention over the past two decades. This literature finds covenants to be of central importance to the Qur’ānic narrative, yet a theory of covenants did not develop in Islam historically nor in modern times (Jaffer 2017; Lumbard 2015; Gwynne 2014). Joseph Lumbard (2015) remarks that in comparison to the study of covenants in the Bible and New Testament, there is relatively little examination of covenants in the Qur’ān and a covenant theology has not been articulated in Islam, particularly in the modern era. Tariq Jaffer (2017) draws on classical Islamic exegeses and earlier academic scholarship to also conclude that a fully-fledged theory of covenants was not developed in Islam.

Most studies of covenants in the Qur’ān focus on verse Q7:172, generally referred to as the primordial covenant. It should be noted that the terms ‘ahd or mīthaq are not specifically mentioned, but understood to be referred to, in this verse. Wadad al-Qadi (2003, p. 332) observes that from the first century of Islam, this verse was the subject of an “enormous” amount of exegetical material among Muslim scholars and received “widely varying interpretations”. Rosalind Gwynne (2014, pp. 1–2) identifies Q7:172 as the “pivotal covenant-passage”, central to the God-humanity relationship, and “the logical key to the entire structure of the Qur’ānic argument”. Louay Safi’s (2008, p. 167) examination of
the Qur’anic narrative contends that covenants and contracts are “the most fundamental principles governing relationships among people.”

There are 80 references in the Qur’an to the terms ‘āhd and mīthāq in various grammatical forms. The triliteral root ‘ayn hā dāl is used 46 times in the Qur’an: 29 times as the noun ‘āhd; six times as the form I verb ‘āhida; and 11 times as the form III verb ‘āhada.1 The triliteral root waw thā qaf is used 34 times in the Qur’an: 25 times as the noun mīthāq, once as the form III verb wathāqa, once as the form IV verb yuthiqu, three times as the noun mawthiq, twice as the noun wathāq, and twice as the adjective wuthqā.2 The term dhimma (covenant of protection) is used twice in the Qur’an.

The Qur’an’s covenantal verses relate to four main relationship categories, referring to covenants between: (1) God and humanity (e.g., Q.2:27; Q.7:172–74; Q.36:60); (2) God and the Prophets (e.g., Q.2:124–125; Q.3:81; Q.20:115; Q.33:7); (3) God and People of Scripture i.e., Jews and Christians (e.g., Q.2:40; Q.2:63; Q.2:83–84; Q.2:93; 3:187; Q.4:154–155; Q.5:12–14; Q.5:70; Q.7:169; Q.20:86); and (4) God and Prophet Muhammad with people of his time (e.g., Q.48:10), including believers (mu’mineen) (e.g., Q.4:92; Q.5:7; Q.33:23; Q.57:8), hypocrites (munāfiqeen) (e.g., Q.4:90; Q.9:75; Q.33:15), and polytheists (mushrikeen) (e.g., Q.8:56; Q.8:72; Q.9:4; Q.9:7–8; Q.9:10; Q.9:12). Two additional contexts in which the covenantal terms mīthāq and mawthiq appear in the Qur’an concern spousal (Q.4:21) and parent-child relationships (Q12:66; Q12:80) respectively.

Certain references to covenants and treaties in the Qur’an concern conditions of armed conflict. The Qur’an prohibits fighting against those with whom a treaty exists (e.g., Q.4:90; Q.8:72; Q.9:4; Q.9:7). It recognizes intra-group diversity of beliefs and opinions, and distinguishes between parties that break their covenants from those that keep them as seen in verses concerning People of Scripture (e.g., Q.5:51; Q.5:82), hypocrites (e.g., Q.4:90; Q.9:75) and polytheists (e.g., Q.9:4; Q.9:7). Covenantal verses in the Qur’an call for protection and security (e.g., Q.4:90; Q.8:61; Q.9:8; Q.9:10), the right of people to live on earth in fulfillment of the primordial covenant (Q.2:40; Q.2:63; Q.5:7; Q.5:13; Q.5:14; Q.7:172–74; Q.16:91; Q.19:57:8), and attainment of righteousness for success in the afterlife (e.g., Q.2:27; Q.3:76–77; Q.5:12; Q.7:169; Q.13:20; Q.13:25; Q.17:34; Q.23:8; Q.70:32). Fighting (jihād, qītal) is not permitted because of a people’s disbelief in the message conveyed by Muhammad, as there is no compulsion in religion (Q.2:256; Q.10:99). Rather, fighting is permitted in self-defence when no treaty exists (e.g., Q.22:39) and in response to the violation of a peace treaty (Q.8:56; Q.9:4; Q.9:7; Q.9:12). Various studies have addressed the use of armed force in Islam and argued that the Qur’anic conception of jihād and qītal is defensive and not permitted merely on the basis of religious disbelief (Al-Dawoody 2011; Rane 2009).

The Qur’an states that those who believe, and the Jews, Christians, Sabeans, and Magians as well as the polytheists will all be judged by God on the Day of Resurrection (Q.22:17). It is noteworthy that in Surah al-Hajj, we find a specific verse that calls on the Muslims to protect the places of worship of Christians and Jews:

> And were it not that God checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of God is much mentioned [i.e., praised]. And God will surely support those who support Him [i.e., His cause]. Indeed, God is Powerful and Exalted in Might” (Q.22:40).

This verse specifically mentions monasteries (sawāmi’), churches (biya’), synagogues (saraqib), and mosques (masājid) as places in which God is worshipped that would be destroyed if not protected by the Muslims. As will be discussed below, the protection of Christian and other non-Muslim places of worship is a central provision of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad. In the Qur’an, however, there are no verses that refer to a covenant between the Prophet Muhammad and Christians specifically, such as the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai or Covenant with the Christians of Najran. However, there are direct and indirect reference to these and other covenants of the Prophet in other Muslim and non-Muslim sources as will be discussed below.
2.2. Covenants of Prophet Muhammad

In the hadith and biographical (sira) literature, we find details of the Prophet Muhammad establishing the Constitution of Medina, a document that set out rights and responsibilities for the city’s Arab and Jewish, Muslim and non-Muslim, inhabitants for a peaceful and secure “multireligious and pluralist social order” (Safi 2008, p. 170). The hadith and sira literature also refer to the Treaty of Hudaybiyya, a peace treaty with the Quraysh tribe, which also illustrates the diplomacy of Prophet Muhammad in establishing peace and security among different religious groups, including polytheists. The Constitution of Medina and Treaty of Hudaybiyya have received considerable scholarly examination (Denny 1977; al-Umari 1991; Görke 2000; Lecker 1984) and are generally accepted as authentic documents of early Islam, although the originals are not known to have survived.

There are many narrations in the hadith literature of covenants or pledges of protection (dhimma) by the Prophet Muhammad with People of Scripture (ahl al-kitab), a reference to Jews, Christians, and other communities that received divine revelation prior to Muhammad’s prophethood. For example, ul-Qadri (2010) cites the following reference to the Prophet’s Covenant with the Christians of Najran, noting that numerous classical Islamic jurists, such as Abu Yusuf (d. 798), Abu Ubayd (d. 838), Ibn Sa’d (d. 845), and al-Baladhuri (d. 892), also recorded the narration:

Indeed, Najran and her allies are under the protection [dhimma] of God and the guarantee [dhimma] of the Messenger of God. They are to be protected in their wealth, lives, lands and religion. This includes their priests, monks, those who are present amongst them and those who are absent and others amongst them, and their delegations and the like. They shall not be forced to change that (faith) which they are upon and no right of theirs is to be forfeited. No monk, priest or attendant amongst them should lose that which is in his possession, be it plentiful or scarce, and no fear or danger will threaten them. (ul-Qadri 2010, p. 143)

Another such pledge, the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, is also found in Muslim and non-Muslim sources. Specifically, this covenant was recorded in a book of official political documents from the time of the Prophet to the Ottoman sultans, Mecmu-a-yi Mün ');seat üs-Sel');in (‘The Correspondence of the Sultans’), compiled by Feridun Beg (d. 1583), who was Head of the Ottoman Chancery under Sultan Murad III. This covenant is also preserved in multiple copies found at the Saint Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai. Like the Covenant with the Christians of Najran, the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai pledges protection and peaceful interreligious relations:

… for those who profess Christianity as their creed, in East and West, near or far, Arabs or non-Arabs, known or unknown, as a Covenant of protection. If anyone breaks the Covenant herein proclaimed, or contravenes or transgresses its commands, he has broken the Covenant of God, breaks his bond, makes a mockery of his religion, deserves the curse [of God], whether he is a sultan or another among the believing Muslims . . . . Moreover, no building from among their churches shall be destroyed, nor shall the money from their churches be used for the building of mosques or houses for the Muslims. Whoever does such a thing violates the Covenant of God and of His messenger . . . (Beg 1858, p. 31)

Over the past decade, scholarly interest in covenants of the Prophet Muhammad has grown. In addition to John Andrew Morrow’s (2013) book, The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World, a recent book, The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad: From Shared Historical Memory to Peaceful Co-Existence, by Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil (Zein and El-Wakil 2022a) also provides extensive details and analysis concerning the historicity of the Prophet’s covenants. These add to an expanding number of articles on or in reference to the covenants of Prophet Muhammad published in leading academic journal, including: Religions (Morrow 2021; Abulmajd 2021; Mkrtumyan 2021; Zein and El-Wakil 2021; Rane 2019; El-Wakil 2019a; Considine 2016); Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (El-Wakil 2019b); Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies (Zein and El-Wakil 2020a, 2022b;
El-Wakil 2016); and Al-Shajarah (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b). These publications present arguments and evidence in support of the authenticity and historicity of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad.

The provisions of the Prophet’s covenants align with specific verses of the Quran (Rane 2019), including that there be no compulsion in religion (Q2:256), and that the Prophet Muhammad’s mission was to convey the message of God and not compel people to believe (Q10:99–100). Considine (2016, p. 1) contends that the covenants “demonstrate how Muhammad desired a pluralistic society in which citizenship and equal rights were granted to all people regardless of religious beliefs and practices” and “are crucial in light of current debates about Muslim-Christian relations.” In recent years, the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad have also attracted interest outside of academia and have been directly referenced by the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

In a case heard by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2018, the Prophet’s Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai informed the acquittal of a Christian Pakistani woman, Aasiya Noreen (Asia Bibi), charged with blasphemy. Since the late 1970s, Pakistan has implemented what it refers to as shariah or Islamic laws and has experienced growing influence of its religious clerics (ulama) on society and politics, which has contributed to interreligious conflict (Mehfooz 2021; Fair 2015). Aasiya was accused of blasphemy in 2009, convicted in 2010, and sentenced to death by hanging under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which pertains to “Use of derogatory remarks, etc. in respect of the Holy Prophet [Muhammad]” (Supreme Court of Pakistan 2018, p. 9). Upon declaring the allegations against Aasiya to be “false”, Justice Khosa remarked that “the Muslim witnesses in this case had violated a covenant of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) with those professing the Christian faith” (Supreme Court of Pakistan 2018, p. 54). Referring to the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai (Saint Catherine Monastery), Justice Khosa stated:

The promise made was eternal and universal and was not limited to St. Catherine alone. The rights conferred by the charter are inalienable and the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) had declared that Christians, all of them, were his allies and he equated ill treatment of Christians with violating God’s covenant. It is noticeable that the charter imposed no conditions on Christians for enjoying its privileges and it was enough that they were Christians. They were not required to alter their beliefs, they did not have to make any payments and they did not have any obligations. The charter was of rights without any duties and it clearly protected the right to property, freedom of religion, freedom of work, and security of person. (Supreme Court of Pakistan 2018, pp. 54–55)

From the above discussion, it can be seen that covenants receive significant attention in the Qur’an and are central to the Qur’anic narrative of human existence and coexistence. Along with the Constitution of Medina and Treaty of Hudaybiyya, references to covenants the Prophet Muhammad issued to Christian and other non-Muslim communities of his time are present in the hadith literature and were recorded in major works of Islamic political documents such as Memnu-ye Münsevat iis-Selâttûn (‘The Correspondence of the Sultans’). However, reference to covenants such as the Prophet’s Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai or his Covenant with the Christians of Najran are not found in the Qur’an. References to, but not complete copies of, the Prophet’s covenants are found hadith literature. Moreover, an original or early copy of such covenants is yet to be found.

Copies of the Prophet’s Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai indicate the original was written on 7 July 623 (3 Muharram 2 AH), while copies of his Covenant with the Christians of Najran indicate it was written on 7 October 625 (29 Rabî’ al-Thanî 4 AH) (Zein and El-Wakil 2022a). However, the earliest known copies of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai and Christians of Najran are dated hundreds of years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, while the date of other copies are unknown (Morrow 2013). While this had led many scholars to doubt the historicity of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, Covenant with the Christians of Najran, and other such covenants, recent research has
produced compelling evidence in support of their historicity (Zein and El-Wakil 2022a, 2022b; Mkrtumyan 2021; Zein and El-Wakil 2020a, 2020b; El-Wakil 2019b, 2016; Morrow 2013). Concerning the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai specifically, Morrow (2013) observes that “the venerable Greek Orthodox Church and generations of Muslim scholars from all schools of law have insisted upon its authenticity (p. 65). He adds, however, that this covenant “is virtually unknown to most Muslims and has historically received greater circulation and recognition among Arabic, Latin, and English-speaking Christians” (p. 65).

Copies of the covenants have been preserved in archives, manuscripts, monasteries and other places of worship of those to whom the originals were issued—Christians, Jews and other communities (Zein and El-Wakil 2022a; El-Wakil 2016, 2019b; Morrow 2013). Muslim and non-Muslim sources attest to and describe the appearance of the original documents (Levy-Rubin 2011). Their contents and provisions are recorded by Muslim and Christian historians, religious scholars and authorities, conveying a shared historical memory of the covenants (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b, 2022a; Penn 2015). Scholars that argue for historicity of the Prophet’s covenants have presented detailed evidence including textual and linguistic analysis, comparative analysis of various recensions with each other and other documents known to have been issued by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, date-matching calculations, identification of textual parallelisms, as well as analysis of contemporaneous historical writings, historic testimonies, recognition by religious officials, archaeological evidence, and historic scribal conventions (Zein and El-Wakil 2022a, 2022b; Mkrtumyan 2021; Zein and El-Wakil 2020a, 2020b; El-Wakil 2016, 2019b; Morrow 2013). However, little is known about how this ‘new’ religious knowledge is received, specifically whether it is accepted, how it is negotiated, and if it is rejected or opposed by relevant stakeholders. Towards addressing this gap, this study examines the reception of the Prophet’s covenants among interfaith actors.

3. Methodology

An online educative intervention instrument (EII) was used to critically examine the reception of (responses to) covenants of the Prophet Muhammad among 36 interfaith actors. Participants were recruited from various interfaith groups and organisations, including the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (Singapore), Christianity and Islam Interfaith Forum, Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, Interfaith Youth Circle, Interfaith Youth Core, Parliament of the World Religions Discussion Group, The Christian-Muslim Interfaith Bridge, Together For Humanity, and World Council of Interfaith Communities. Administrators and leaders of interfaith groups and organisations were contacted via email and through social media platforms, and invited to share the link to the study with their members. The invitation to participate in the study specified that participants from any faith/religious background were welcome but must have at least some experience in interfaith work.

Using an EII allowed the study to establish participants’ baseline beliefs, knowledge, and views prior to introducing the educative intervention material about the covenants, and then, after sufficient time for participant contemplation, examine influences and impacts of the ‘new’ knowledge on religious thought and worldviews. Participants were able to log on to the online platform (LimeSurvey), engage with the educative intervention material, and return to complete the questionnaire at a later time, which could be hours, days, or even weeks. The EII remained open and accessible for three months, from 28 April until 3 August 2022.

Discoveries of historic documents that add new knowledge about a religious tradition and/or redefine its interreligious relations are rare but not unprecedented. For instance, Collins (2011) examined the ‘reception history’ of the Dead Sea Scrolls in academic scholarship and its impact on popular culture. Drawing on Hall’s (1980) work on how audiences decode information as active participants in the communication process, this study examined the spectrum of ‘preferred’, ‘negotiated’, and ‘oppositional’ readings in relation to the covenants of Prophet Muhammad. In reference to Hall (1980), differential readings
involve differences in the way receivers decode messages from how they were encoded by the sender. A ‘preferred’ reading is when the receiver accepts and understands the message as intended by the sender. A ‘negotiated’ reading involves the receiver accepting certain aspects of the message as the sender intended but giving an alternative perspective in other respects based on the receiver’s own subjectivities. An ‘oppositional’ reading is when the receiver rejects or adopts an opposing understanding of the message from that intended by the sender.

This study expands on the application of educative intervention instruments (EII). EIs are often used in social science research, including public health studies. Some of which involve religious participants (Krupic 2020; Nisbet 2005). A few, such as Badrinathan (2021), concern religion and knowledge integration.

Following the initial demographic and other questions about religion, Islam, interreligious relations, and awareness of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad, participants were presented with the following educative intervention material:

- A 677-word English translation of the short version of the *Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai*. Multiple copies of this version are found in the archives of Saint Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai as well as in the book *Munsha‘at al-Salatın* (*The Correspondence of the Sultans*) by Feridün Beg (d. 1583). This is arguably the most well-known of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad (Morrow 2013).

- A journal article, Remembering the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad: Shared Historical Memory of Good Governance and Peaceful Co-existence, authored by Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil (Zein and El-Wakil 2020b), published in *Al-Shajarah*, the journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). This 43-page article contends that the covenants in the possession of Christian, Jewish and other non-Muslim communities, that purport to be pledges of peace and security issued by the Prophet Muhammad, share parallels to those that exist in Muslim sources. The authors find that the textual parallelisms between the documents found in non-Muslim and Muslim sources share a common historical memory pointing to good governance and peaceful co-existence as the foundational principles of early Islamic polity.

- A 40-min video presentation on the covenants of Prophet Muhammad delivered by Professor Ibrahim Zein (Haman Bin Khalifa University, Doha) as a keynote address to the Australian Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies conference on 14 September 2021. The presentation covered recent research and analysis concerning the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, evidence supporting their historicity, and implications for understanding interreligious relations in early Islam.

All participants were requested to read the English translation of the *Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai* and then to either read the journal article or watch the video before responding to another series of questions concerning Islam, interreligious relations, and the covenants of Prophet Muhammad.

4. Participants

A total of 36 participants completed the educative intervention instrument (EII) including 20 males, 15 females, and one ‘other’. They were aged between 34 and 80 years, with an average age of 53 years. The nationalities of the participants were Australian (n = 12), American (United States) (n = 9), Pakistani (n = 3), Iranian (n = 2), Malaysia (n = 2), as well as one participant each from Canada, Greece, Indonesia, Palestine, Singapore, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Most participants resided in Australia (n = 13) and the United States (n = 9), with the remainder residing in Brunei, Canada, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Twenty-four participants were Muslim, including eight that identified as Sunni and two as Shia. Among the 12 non-Muslim participants, 10 were Christians, including three Catholics, two Protestants, a Mormon, an Evangelical, a Quaker, and a Unitarian Christian. Two participants were Jewish, including one Orthodox and one Reform Jew. Fourteen par-
ticipants had studied religion formally, including nine at university and five in a seminar, while 11 others had learnt their religion through family or community-based education, seven were self-taught, one studied religion at secondary school, and three in “other” contexts. The majority of participants self-identified as “devoutly” following the tenets of their faith/religion (n = 22), while 11 participants self-identified as “mostly” following the tenets of their faith/religion, one participant self-identified as “seldom” following the tenets of their faith/religion, and two participants selected “other”.

The participants were all highly educated, with 13 having attained a PhD, 18 post-graduates, and five with an undergraduate degree. Most participants had obtained their highest level qualification in arts, humanities or social sciences (n = 21), while others were from the fields of business, economics, finance, or accounting (n = 5), education or teaching (n = 2), information technology (n = 2), law (n = 1), Islamic studies (n = 2), science (n = 1), and other (n = 1). Their experience in interfaith work ranged from 40 to less than one year, with an overall average of 18 years.

5. Findings

Before introducing participants to the educative intervention material, they were first asked a series of demographic questions (see above) as well as questions that enabled the researcher to establish a baseline for comparison concerning participants’ views on religion, openness to new religious knowledge, perspectives on Islam, Muslims, and interreligious relations, whether they were already aware of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad and their understanding of these covenants.

5.1. Views on Religion

The majority of participants had an inclusivist view of religion, with 25 selecting the option that “all other religions share some truths with us and we share some common ground with the followers of other religions”. Seven participants selected “some other religions share truths with us and we share common ground with them and their followers but not others”. One participant selected “all other religions are false and we have little or nothing in common with the followers of other religions”, and two selected “other”.

5.2. Openness to New Religious Knowledge

The majority of participants tended towards openness to accepting new knowledge about their religion and Islam. Participants were asked how open they are (on a scale of ‘0’ to ‘10’, with ‘0’ meaning completely closed and ‘10’ meaning completely open) to accepting new sources of knowledge that might impact on the general understanding of their religion. Most of the 12 non-Muslim participants tended towards openness (n = 9), with three selecting ‘10’ (Christian, Reform Jew, Catholic), two selecting ‘9’ (Mormon, Quaker), three selecting ‘8’ (Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical), and one selecting ‘6’ (Protestant). One selected ‘5’ (Unitarian), and two were more closed, selecting ‘3’ (Orthodox Jew, Catholic).

Muslim participants were asked how open they are (on a scale of ‘0’ to ‘10’, with ‘0’ meaning completely closed and ‘10’ meaning completely open) to accepting new sources of knowledge that might impact on the general understanding of Islam. Among the 24 Muslim participants, a large majority (n = 20) were open, with 16 selected ‘10’ (inc. 4 Sunnis and 1 Shia), one selected ‘9’, and three selected ‘8’ (inc. 1 Sunni and 1 Shia). Four Muslims were closed to accepting new sources of knowledge about Islam, with one Sunni Muslim selecting ‘3’, two selecting ‘1’ (inc. 1 Sunni), and one Sunni Muslim selecting ‘0’.

The 12 non-Muslim participants were also asked how open they are to accepting new sources of knowledge that might impact on the general understanding of Islam, to which a majority (n = 10) were open: four selected ‘10’ (Christian, Reform Jew, Catholic, Evangelical), three selected ‘9’ (Mormon, Quaker, Orthodox Jew), two selected ‘8’ (Catholic and Protestant), and one selected ‘6’ (Protestant). One Unitarian Christian fell in between, selecting ‘5’. One Catholic participant was completely closed to accepting new knowledge about Islam, selecting ‘0’.
5.3. Perspectives on Islam and Muslims

Regarding their views on interreligious relations in Islam, a large majority of participants considered Islam to be tolerant and peaceful. Of the 36 participants, 26 selected the option “in general, Islam is tolerant of other religions and advocates peaceful interreligious relations”. Three participants (male, Australian, Protestant, 55; female, Australian, Catholic, 34; and female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73) selected the option that “in general, Islam is intolerant of other religions and opposed to interreligious relations”. Two participants (male, Iranian, Shia Muslim, 37; and male, Australian, Catholic, 68) selected the option “in general, Islam is indifferent to other religions and neutral in regard to interreligious relation”. Five participants selected “other”. Among the latter five participants, comments included that “Islam is as tolerant as Muslims make it” (other, American, Muslim, 42) and “varies by sect and individual” (female, American, Christian, 67).

When asked about their understanding of how Muslims, in general, feel about interreligious relations, participants were slightly less convinced that Muslims have tolerant and peaceful intentions. Of the 36 participants, 16 selected the option “Most Muslims are tolerant and seek peaceful interreligious relations”, eight selected “Most Muslims are indifferent to other religions and are neutral in regard to interreligious relations”, six selected “Most Muslim are intolerant of other religions and do not seek peaceful interreligious relations”, and six selected “other”. Among the latter, comments included: “most moslems [sic] are not well educated in what other religions believe” (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73); “most Muslims are tolerant of other religions as long as their child doesn’t marry someone from another religion” (female, American, Muslim, 59); and “the Muslims I know are tolerant and seek peaceful interreligious relations” (female, American, Quaker, 80).

5.4. Interreligious Relations

Participants tended to express a view that problems currently exist in interreligious relations. When asked to choose from a list of options concerning what they think about interreligious relations today in a global context, 13 participants selected the option “positive but experiencing problems”, nine selected “negative and getting worse”, five selected “negative but improving”, four selected “positive and improving”, and four selected “other”. Among the latter, participants’ comments included: “each countries [sic] local experience, laws, policies all varies greatly” (other, American, Muslim, 42); “positive at the clergy and institutional level (e.g., al-Azhar Mufti and the Pope meeting), but at the community level it is terrible with the politicization of religion” (female, American, Muslim, 59); and “positive among those who are knowledgeable, but negative among those negatively indoctrinated” (female, Malaysian, Muslim, 57).

Participants were also asked for their main suggestions for improving interreligious relations in a global context. Many participants emphasized dialogue, education, and understanding:

Need to understand the roots of negative perceptions about religions among different groups – secularists, academics, media personalities and how to tackle them—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 78.

Understanding the message of Quran could help the followers of other religions understand Islam better—male, Australian, Muslim, 49.

More seminar and inter faith dialogue should be organized—male, Malaysia, Sunni Muslim, 63.

Comparative religion classes in all schools—female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73.

Better education about other religions [and] more face-to-face facilitated encounters between believers—male, Australian, Catholic, 68.

Need more open discussions among groups, communities, societies, even countries—male, Canadian, Muslim, 50.
Other participants emphasized respect and interpersonal engagement:

Deliberate formation of groups in each community in which members are from different faiths—male, Australian, Protestant Christian, 55.

Meaningful, positive contact between adherents as well as clergy—male, Australian, Orthodox Jew, 52.

Stop preaching hate of other religions, stop preaching superiority of your own religion over another, and allow for interfaith marriages without conversions—female, American, Muslim, 59.

One participant was particularly pejorative and singled out Islam as the main problem:

Islam is a clear and present danger to western values, standards, social cohesion and civilisation. I have no wish to or interest in improving relations with Islam, globally, nationally, or locally— they are the enemy within—female, Australian, Catholic, 34.

5.5. Initial Views on the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad

Of the 36 participants, a large majority (n = 27) had heard of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad before participating in the study. Nine participants had not heard of the Prophet Muhammad’s covenants, including three Muslims, two Protestants, a Reform Jew, a Catholic, a Christian and a Quaker. When asked what they understand the covenants of Prophet Muhammad to be about, most of the 27 participants who had heard of the covenants referred to them, in their own words, as documents or agreements issued by Prophet Muhammad to protect non-Muslim communities, for example:

Protection of the rights of non-Muslims particularly Christians—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 78.

A document claimed to be authored by Mohammed (who was claimed to be illiterate) that promised protection to Christians—female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73.

Agreements by the Prophet Muhammad to various non-Muslim communities offering them principles of protections and rights—female, Australian, Muslim, 45.

Agreements with other faith communities—female, American, Muslim, 43.

Documents claiming to be from the Prophet Muhammad on how to treat others, mostly in reference to Christians—male, Australian, Catholic, 68.

It is a pact Prophet Muhammad made with a Christian priest for the protection they gave to the new Muslim converts, and in return Muslims will protect Christians, and their places of worship ‘until the end of time’—female, American, Muslim, 59.

A few participants identified the covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Constitution of Medina:

Covenant between the prophet Muhammad and the Madinah communities to building one ummah in citizenship—female, Indonesian, Muslim, 40.

My understanding is that this is related to the constitution of Medina which the Prophet brokered—male, American, Mormon Christian, 53.

Some (Muslim) participants expressed their doubts about the authenticity of the covenants:

About treaties but there is a huge authentication problem—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35.

... it is not historically accurate information—other, American, Muslim, 42.

A fake document created by Christians to protect their interests—female, Greek, Muslim, 43.
All three of the above-mentioned participants remained unconvinced of the authenticity of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, even after receiving the educative intervention material.

The 27 participants who had heard of the covenants were asked whether they think the covenants of Prophet Muhammad are authentic, i.e., that there existed historic documents issued by the Prophet Muhammad to Christian and other communities of his time. In response, just over half (n = 14) of the participants, including 13 Muslims and one Mormon Christian, selected the option “Yes, I think such documents existed and the copies we have today are probably close replicas of the originals”. Two participants (male, American, Evangelical Christian, 69; and male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35) selected “Yes, I think such documents existed but the copies we have today are not close replicas of the originals”. Three participants (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73; female, Greek, Muslim, 43; and other, American, Muslim, 42) selected “No, I don’t think such documents ever existed and the copies we have today are probably forgeries”. Four participants (male, Australian, Catholic, 68; female, Australian, Catholic, 34; male, Australian, Muslim, 49; and male, Australian, Orthodox Jew, 52) were “unsure” as to the authenticity of the covenants. Four (Muslim) participants selected “other”. Their comments were as follows:

Yes, I think such documents existed but the copies we have today are not close replicas of the originals, and some wordings were altered or re-formulated in other political contexts—male, Swiss, Muslim, 34.

Have the documents been proven to be fake?—female, American, Muslim, 59.

Although I do believe that such documents existed . . . the evidence from the Quran and the Charter of Madinah is enough to prove the principles enunciated in the Covenants—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 78.

Covenant to Christians of Najran is recorded widely and its terms are in conformity with Islamic teachings—male, Pakistani, Muslim, 62.

The responses of the nine participants who had not heard of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad before participating in the study will be examined in more detail in the Analysis and discussion section below.

5.6. General Summaries of the Educative Intervention Material

Following the initial demographic and other questions about religion, interreligious relations, Islam, and the covenants of Prophet Muhammad, participants were presented with the educative intervention material and asked to read the English translation of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai and then either read the journal article or watch the video presentation on the covenants. Of the 36 participants, 26 read the journal article (10 did not) and 22 watched the video presentation (14 did not). Nineteen participants read the journal article and watched the video presentation.

Participants were asked to provide a brief summary of either the journal article or the video presentation. Some participants (n = 10) wrote one or more paragraphs ranging from 60 to over 200 words. Most wrote one to a few sentences (n = 26). Participant summaries generally focused on the evidence presented in the article and/or video concerning the authenticity/historicity of the covenants as well as the main purpose or objective of the covenants to protect non-Muslim communities. Some participants also mentioned the significance of the covenants for interreligious relations today. Overall, the reception of the journal article and video was positive, indicating a preferred reading, while a minority of participants expressed negotiated or oppositional readings.

Some participants were quite detailed and specific in their summaries regarding the analysis and evidence in support of the authenticity/historicity of the covenants, for example:

Both in their own way were a very convincing presentation of a 4-year common research project on these various documents from both Muslim and non-Muslim sources. Historical problems were not swept under the carpet (like the fact that Mu’awiyah’s covenant’s
date would have him write this before he became Muslim, and some of the witnesses present could not have been present). But the methodology of finding common values among the various documents and using the heuristic notion of “shared historical memory” makes a lot of sense to me (though I’m not a trained historian). Also, the scholars paid attention to scribal conventions, common phrases, and much more in terms of literary evidence. I was also struck by very positive views – and consistently so – of the Christian writers, whether Nestorian or Armenian or other backgrounds. They all felt protected and praised the justice and benefits of being under the Pax Islamica. Finally, it was important to hear/read that these common values were clearly not always followed in practice. We do know historically that dhimmis were not always treated well, that religion freedom was not always respected, etc. But that these values were so consistently articulated over several centuries and in so many different genres of writing is significant for today. We do have much common groundwork upon which we can build today in protecting religious minorities, whether in the west or in Muslim-majority nations. This can also be publicized in western nations where Islamophobia is such a pressing problem.—male, American, Evangelical Christian, 69.

While the originals of the covenants have not been found, there is ample evidence of their existence and veracity from many other sources including: existence of copies; date matching; parallelism; and references in other historical documents. We should therefore accept these covenants as valid. The covenants uphold the values of: peaceful coexistence of various faith communities; no coercion in conversion; no exorbitant taxing of other faith communities; no destruction of places of worship of other faith communities; and the universal applicability of these values through time and place. This has very positive implications for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.—male, Australian, Protestant Christian, 55.

Other participants were more succinct but still mentioned the peaceful intent of the covenants in their summary:

The crux is how prophet set out a documents in which all religions were respected and protected. Islam is not an intolerant of other religion and pretty much believes in co-existent.—female, Australian, Muslim, 45.

The article and video tells about the historical agreements of Prophet Muhammad and his predecessors with non-Muslims of the time. These indicate that when early Muslims were in political power they made efforts to live peacefully with other religions.—male, Pakistani, Shia Muslim, 40.

The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad particularly when read in the context of other near contemporaneous documents from both Muslim and non-Muslim sources can provide a resonant historical resource for strengthening a positive interfaith understanding within the Muslim community, and can serve to recover an attitude that however much it was or was not implemented in practice was part of the cultural imagination of earlier communities.—male, Irish, Catholic Christian, 62.

A few participants expressed an oppositional reading, doubting the authenticity of the Prophet’s covenants and also demonstrating a lack of awareness of covenants in the Qur’an and hadith, for example:

In my opinion, whatever prophet Mohammad said, is included in hadith collection. I do not believe in anything outside the Quran and Hadith.—male, Australian, Muslim, 49.

While the summaries gave an indication of how closely participants read the article and/or watched the video, and whether they adopted an ‘preferred’, ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ response, more detailed questions were asked in order to identify participants’ responses to the educative intervention material.
5.7. Responses to Specific Statements

Participants were asked to indicate their response to a series of statements on a scale of ‘0’ to ‘10’ (with ‘0’ meaning ‘not at all convinced’ and ‘10’ meaning ‘completely convinced’). To the statement that “Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims”, the majority (n = 31) were convinced, with 23 participants selecting ‘10’, five selecting ‘9’, two selecting ‘8’, and one selecting ‘7’. However, some participants were less or not at all convinced, with one selecting ‘4’ (male, Iranian, Shia Muslim, 37), one selecting ‘2’ (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73), and three selecting ‘0’ (female, Australian, Catholic, 34; other, American, Muslim, 42; and female, Greek, Muslim, 43). It is noteworthy that both Muslims and non-Muslims are among those completely convinced and not at all convinced.

To the statement, that “Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims”, the majority (n = 28) of participants were convinced, with 20 Muslim and non-Muslim participants selecting ‘10’, three selecting ‘9’, four selecting ‘8’, and one selecting ‘6’. On the other side of the spectrum, one (male, Pakistani, Muslim, 62) selected ‘5’, one (male, Iranian, Shia Muslim, 37) selected ‘4’, one (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73) selected ‘3’, two (male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35; and male, Australian, Muslim, 45) selected ‘1’, and three (female, Australian, Catholic, 34; other, American, Muslim, 42; and female, Greek, Muslim, 43) selected ‘0’.

To the statement that “Prophet Muhammad pledged to protect non-Muslim communities”, again most participants (n = 31), Muslims and non-Muslims, tended towards conviction, with 23 selecting ‘10’, three selecting ‘9’, four selecting ‘8’, and one selecting ‘7’. Doubts were also expressed in response to this statement by a few Muslim and non-Muslim participants, with one (Shia Muslim) selecting ‘4’, one (Unitarian Christian) selecting ‘3’, and three (female, Australian, Catholic, 34; other, American, Muslim, 42; and female, Greek, Muslim, 43) selecting ‘0’.

Participants were also asked whether they think “Prophet Muhammad pledged to protect non-Muslim places of worship such as monasteries, churches, and synagogues. Again, the majority of both Muslim and non-Muslim participants (n = 29) expressed conviction with 22 selecting ‘10’, four (one Sunni Muslim, one Muslim, and one Quaker) selecting ‘9’, and five (two Catholics, one Protestant, one Catholic, and one Sunni Muslim) selecting ‘8’. A few Muslim and non-Muslim participants expressed their doubts with one (Shia Muslim) selecting ‘4’, one (Unitarian Christian) selecting ‘3’, and three (two Muslims and one Catholic) selecting ‘0’. A large majority (n = 30) also expressed conviction with the statement that “Prophet Muhammad made it obligatory for Muslims to protect the places of worship of non-Muslims with whom he made a covenant”, with 22 Muslim and non-Muslim participants selected ‘10’, four (Sunni, Muslim, Orthodox Jew, Quaker) selected ‘9’, three (one Sunni Muslim, one Muslim, and one Quaker) selected ‘8’, and one (Catholic) selected ‘7’. Again, doubts were expressed by a few Muslim and non-Muslim participants, including one (Muslim) selecting ‘5’, one (Shia Muslim) selecting ‘4’, one (Unitarian Christian) selecting ‘3’, and three (two Muslims and one Catholic) selecting ‘0’. It is noteworthy that Muslims were among the participants who were unconvinced regarding the protection of non-Muslim places of worship despite there being a corresponding Qur’anic verse (Q22:40). This may indicate a lack of awareness of the Qur’anic provision but was not addressed in the study.

To the statement, that “non-Muslims with whom Prophet Muhammad made a covenant or treaty were free to keep their own faith/religion (i.e., they were not asked to convert to Islam)”, responses similarly tended towards conviction for most Muslim and non-Muslim participants (n = 29). Twenty-two selected ‘10’, three (one Sunni Muslim, one Muslim, and one Quaker) selected ‘9’, three (one Catholic, one Protestant, and one Christian) selected ‘8’, and one (Catholic) selected ‘7’. Others, however, expressed doubt, with one (Muslim) selecting ‘5’, one (Shia Muslim), selecting ‘4’, one (Unitarian Christian) selecting ‘3’, one (Muslim) selecting ‘1’, and three (two Muslims and one Catholic) selecting ‘0’.

To the statement that “Prophet Muhammad actually made covenants with Christians in the form of a written pledge with very similar wording to the translation of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai that you read”, conviction was slightly less strong than with
the other statements (n = 28). Seventeen Muslim and non-Muslim participants selected ‘10’, three selected ‘9’, six selected ‘8’, one selected ‘7’, and one selected ‘6’. One (Muslim) selected ‘5’. On the other side of the spectrum, two (Shia and Catholic) selected ‘4’, one (Unitarian) selected ‘2’, one (Muslim) selected ‘1’, and three (two Muslims and one Catholic) selected ‘0’. Overall, a large majority of participants, Muslim and non-Muslim, expressed a view that the Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims of his time, formalized by a written pledge of security and protection regarding their faith and places of worship.

5.8. Most Convincing Evidence

Participants were asked what evidence and/or analysis concerning the research on the covenants they found most convincing. Some participants referred to the multiple linguistic, textual, date-matching and other evidence presented in the journal article and video presentation, for instance:

*The multiple ways the presenter showed that the documents matched the way the Prophet spoke and did not match the ways the receiving communities wrote, dates, references in histories, etc.*—female, Australian, Protestant Christian, 75.

*The historical memory based on similar wordings in so many different documents, both Muslims and non-Muslim.*—male, American, Evangelical Christian, 69.

Other participants focused on the alignment of the covenants with verses of the Qur’an, the Charter/Constitution of Medina, and hadith, for example:

*Some historical references, common language with Quran and Charter of Madinah, actual historical behavior of Muslims despite some laws and regulations that went against them at some points in Muslim history when Islam became a dominant imperial power.*—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 78.

The Covenants compliments and is an actual implementation of the teachings of the Quran verse 2:256 and other verses such as being a Muslim means to believe in the earlier books revealed, and that ‘this is not a new religion’.—female, American, Muslim, 59.

*There are two things which convince me of their authenticity—first, the fact that the various Covenants are referred to by other written accounts from the time, and second, that they are completely consistent with the Qur’an and Hadeeth concerning how followers of other faiths should be treated.*—male, American, Mormon Christian, 53.

The shared historical memory provides strong argument for the authenticity by relating 3 aspects. The most convincing, for me, however has to be the parallels with the Charter of Medina. As a Muslim, I have never doubted its authenticity and have accepted it without questioning. The fact that there are so many parallels to the covenants (not just in terms of principles, but lack of mention in hadith literature) is very convincing argument.—female, Australian, Muslim, 45.

A few expressed their conviction based on the academic research conducted, for example:

*I trust the review and extensive research of academics on the authenticity and historical origins of the Covenants, to some extent, even more than that of religious scholars (because they have more of a conflict of interest/bias).*—female, Singaporean, Muslim, 35.

One example of a ‘negotiated’ reading of the research is as follows:

*As a Muslim, I have to be skeptical with Muslim sources, since Muslims were involved in socio-political and cultural changes and there must have been plenty incentives to argue for some kind of political or religious ideology (how the sunni-shia conflict emerged). So the ‘outside’ view of Christians attesting that there were documents of these formats were very convincing for me. But on the other hand, I haven’t checked the sources myself. What if the outsider-view were forged themselves? The Ottoman empire even tried to invent new hadith collections . . . But with the given evidence so far and the transparency*
of the methods and constraints, it is very convincing after a short period of time.—male, Swiss, Muslim, 34.

A few participants expressed an ‘oppositional’ reading, for instance:

Besides the spirit of knowing about the Prophet, the covenants are not authentic and many ulama are aware of this.—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35.

I have not seen any evidence, and since Mohammed is said to be illiterate, how can anything written be helpful.—female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73.

Faith based opinion based on documents that cannot be confirmed as factual.—other, American, Muslim, 42.

5.9. Additional Evidence Needed?

Participants were also asked what other or additional evidence or analysis they think is needed to confirm the authenticity of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad. Although many participants responded by saying current evidence is sufficient or the case has been proven already, others did make suggestions, some of which have been undertaken by researchers. A few participants opined, for instance, that “it would be great to find an original rather than a copy” (female, Australian, Protestant Christian, 75) and “to locate the existence of an actual covenant, rather than a copy” (female, Australian, Muslim, 45). While other participants also highlighted the value of finding an original document, they expressed conviction based on the extant evidence:

Finding the originals would be the icing on the cake, but even without this, there seems to be enough evidence to show the covenant’s authenticity.—male, Australian, Protestant Christian, 55.

More independent sources and also finding the original documents or parts of them, which date back to the according time. With regard to the content of the Covenants, I think there is little to be skeptical about, as I can identify a lot if not all of the rules and conditions as derivable from the Qur’an itself.—male, Swiss, Muslim, 34.

Other (mainly Muslim) participants, however, stated that more evidence is needed from the Qur’an and hadith, for instance:

To analyze the sources of Quran and Hadith.—male, Pakistani, Shia Muslim, 40.

I’m convinced. I think others might need to see something like a “chain of evidence” or “chain of possession” to prove the Covenants existed going back to the time the Prophet was alive.—male, American, Mormon Christian, 53.

Quran and Hadith needs to be referred.—male, Australian, Muslim, 49.

No record of Sinai Covenant in Islamic basic history; Hadith.—male, Pakistani, Muslim, 62.

Other suggestions included more sophisticated scientific analysis, for example:

Carbon testing, handwriting analysis, and other scientific methods.—female, American, Muslim, 59.

At least one participant was staunchly opposed to accepting any evidence regarding the covenants, or even the possibility of Islam advocating peaceful interreligious relations:

I don’t care, it doesn’t change the fact that current Islam is destroying western civilization. E.g., Sharia, terrorism, misogyny, grooming gangs, bestiality, FGM, incest, honor killings, forced marriage, pedophilia, homophobia, antisemitism, anti-Christianity, anti-white racism, no-go zones, treatment of apostates, refusal to integrate, refusal to accept western society, halal, voter fraud, drug dealing, etc. Islam is incompatible with western society.—female, Australian, Catholic, 34.
5.10. Importance of Religious Authorities, Leaders and Groups for Accepting the Covenants

In their open-ended responses, a few Muslim participants suggested that Muslim religious authorities (ulama) are needed to establish wider acceptance of the covenants. To examine this in more detail, a list of religious authorities, leaders and groups was presented. Participants were asked to rate their importance for members of their own religious community/faith group to accept the authenticity of the covenants. A scale of '0' to '10' was provided, with '0' meaning ‘not at all important’ and ‘10’ meaning ‘essential’.

Participants placed the highest importance on “leading Islamic religious authorities (e.g., ulama/imams councils)” with 24 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, two selecting ‘5’, and 10 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’. A similar degree of importance was placed on “leading Islamic institutions of higher learning (e.g., Al-Azhar University, University of Medina, International Islamic University, etc.)”, with 23 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, five selecting ‘5’, and 8 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’.

This was closely followed by the importance participants placed on “academic scholars (e.g., professors of religious studies, Islamic studies, historians, etc.)”, with 23 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, three selecting ‘5’, and 10 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’. Participants placed the same degree of importance on the “consensus of Muslims in general”, with 23 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, three selecting ‘5’, and 10 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’.

In regard to “religious authorities (e.g., bishop, priest, father, rabbi, imam, sheikh, etc.)” more generally, responses also tending towards their importance, with 21 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, two selecting ‘5’, and 13 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’. Participants placed less importance on “Church authorities (e.g., Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, etc.)” accepting the authenticity of the covenants, with 16 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, two selecting ‘5’, and 18 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’. A somewhat higher degree of importance was placed on “leading theologians (Christian, Islamic, Jewish, etc.)”, with 20 selecting between ‘10’ and ‘6’, four selecting ‘5’, and 11 selecting between ‘4’ and ‘0’.

5.11. Changes to Views on Interreligious Relations in Islam

Participants were asked how the information they have received about the covenants has influenced what they think about Islam in regard to interreligious relations. The responses show that for a large majority of participants, their view that Islam promotes peaceful interreligious relations was strengthened or they are now more inclined to think so. Of the 36 participants, 20 selected the response option stating “My view that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations has been strengthened”. Five participants selected the option “I am now more inclined to think that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations”. Only two participants selected “My view remains that Islam does not promote peaceful interreligious relations” (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73; and female, Australian, Catholic, 34). Nine participants chose “other”, indicating that the information they received had not changed their views about interreligious relations in Islam. For most of these participants, but not all, their views were initially neutral or positive, for example:

I have always known that some Sects promote Peace.—female, American, Christian, 67.

My view has always been that Islam is a unique religion that promotes diversity of thought, of faith and non-faith. These covenants are historical evidence in a documentation form.—female, American, Muslim, 59.

My opinion is about the same that Islam does promote some levels of peaceful interreligious relations.—male, American, Sunni Muslim, 43.

Some of these participants indicated a ‘negotiated’ position with regard to the educative intervention material and the issue of interreligious relations in Islam by referring to the actions of Muslims, for example:
I strongly believe that Islam believes in peace and promotes peace. It is the Muslim community which remains fail to display the true face of Islam.—male, Pakistani, Muslim, 62.

No major religion in power was peaceful with other religions who were less. Here authority, rule, governance and control play important role than religious philosophy itself.—male, Canadian, Muslim, 50.

Islam is a religion, just like any other religion, it is people who promote peace or pervert faith for no peaceful actions.—other, American, Muslim, 42.

The following two participants held more oppositional views, when read in relation to their responses more generally:

My view is unaltered.—female, Greek, Muslim, 43.

I already believe that Islam promotes dialogue.—male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35.

6. Analysis and Discussion

Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall (1980) pioneered audience reception analysis, emphasizing the role of audiences (message receivers) as active participants in the communication process. Hall theorized that audiences would adopt different ‘readings’ of a ‘text’ depending on such characteristics as their culture, education, and identity. He categorized audience responses as ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’, ‘negotiated’, and ‘oppositional’ readings. These three broad categories of responses to information about the covenants of Prophet Muhammad were identified in this study. The participants in this study had all been involved in interfaith work, and most had many years of experience, which might be expected to foster more positive views about the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in respect to peaceful interreligious relations. While this was found to be the case among a majority of participants, negotiated and oppositional readings of the educative intervention material were also apparent.

All of the participants identified with a particular religion or faith group, the majority had an inclusivist view of religion, and were open to new religious knowledge about their own faith and Islam. The dominant view among participants, prior to the introduction of the educative intervention material, was that Islam is tolerant of non-Muslims and advocates peaceful interreligious relations. Three-quarters of the participants had previously heard of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, while one-quarter had not.

A large majority (n = 26) of the 36 participants accepted the evidence about the covenants as confirmation of their authenticity, and recognized that the purpose of the covenants was to promote peace and security between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. To use Hall’s (1980) terminology, this is the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ reading. A minority (n = 4) displayed a ‘negotiated’ reading, which involved questioning some of the evidence or weighing the information presented against other information or knowledge familiar to or already accepted (or rejected) by the participant. For some Muslim participants that adopted a negotiated reading, skepticism as to whether the Prophet Muhammad actually issued written pledges of protection to Christian and other religious communities stemmed from a lack of awareness of covenants in the authoritative Islamic sources and possibly to a lack of reference to covenants in discourses about Islam more generally. Another minority of participants (n = 6) displayed an ‘oppositional’ reading by which the evidence presented was largely or completely rejected. Among such non-Muslim participants, this was accompanied by a pre-existing opposition to Islam, particularly views of Islam as intolerant and hostile towards non-Muslims.

6.1. Prior Knowledge of the Prophet’s Covenants

Of the 27 participants who had heard of the covenants prior to the study, just over half (n = 14), including 13 Muslims and one Mormon Christian, thought such documents existed and the copies we have today are probably close replicas of the originals. After receiving the educative intervention material, the views of these participants concerning
the authenticity of the Prophet’s covenants and that Islam advocates peaceful interreligious relations were strengthened. However, three Muslim participants (male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35; other, American, Muslim, 42; and female, Greek, Muslim, 43), who had heard of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, expressed initial doubts about their authenticity, and remained unconvinced of their authenticity of even after being presented with the educative intervention material.

Two participants (male, American, Evangelical Christian, 69; and male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35), who had also heard of the covenants prior to the study, thought such documents existed but that the copies we have today are not close replicas of the originals. After receiving the educative intervention material, both participants expressed the view that Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims. However, while the Evangelical Christian accepted the view that Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims, the Sunni Muslim rejected this assertion. While the Evangelical Christian’s view that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations had been strengthened, the Sunni Muslim’s view of interreligious relations in Islam depended upon what the religious authorities he followed say on the matter.

This Sunni Muslim participant’s reading involved accepting the premise that Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful interreligious relation but he rejected the proposition that this was formalized through written covenants of protection. His view was formed in relation to his pre-existing knowledge of Islam, which seemingly did not include knowledge about covenants in the Qur’an and hadith literature. As noted in the introduction of this article, in spite of their significance and centrality to the Qur’anic narrative, covenants have been understudied and underrepresented in discourses about Islam. This Sunni Muslim participant was completely closed to accepting ‘new’ knowledge about Islam and only relied on information from trusted religious authorities—who may also have limited knowledge of covenants in the Qur’an and diplomacy of the Prophet Muhammad. To the question, “what other evidence or analysis do you think is needed to confirm the authenticity of the covenants”, the participant responded: “Dialogue with real ulama class” (male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35). While this participant believed in the peaceful nature of Islam and the protection of non-Muslim communities and places of worship, he was not at all convinced that Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims. He required acceptance of the covenants by leading Islamic religious authorities (e.g., ulama/imams councils) and leading Islamic institutions of higher learning before he would accept them himself. Further research is needed on awareness and reception of knowledge about covenants in Islam among Muslim religious authorities.

Three participants (female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73; female, Greek, Muslim, 43; and other, American, Muslim, 42) selected “No, I don’t think such documents ever existed and the copies we have today are probably forgeries”. These three participants maintained their view that the covenants of Prophet Muhammad are not authentic even after receiving the educative intervention material. They also rejected the statement that Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims. These participants also maintained a view that Islam does not promote peaceful interreligious relations.

Four participants (male, Australian, Catholic, 68; female, Australian, Catholic, 34; male, Australian, Muslim, 49; and male, Australian, Orthodox Jew, 52) were initially “unsure” as to the authenticity of the covenants. After receiving the educative intervention material, three of these participants (male, Australian, Catholic, 68; male, Australian, Muslim, 49; and male, Australian, Orthodox Jew, 52) expressed their conviction that Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims and that Islam advocates peaceful interreligious relations. Two of these participants (male, Australian, Catholic, 68; and male, Australian, Orthodox Jew, 52) also expressed the view that Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims. However, the other two participants (male, Australian, Muslim, 49; and female, Australian, Catholic, 34) rejected the view that Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims.
Nine participants (female, Australian, Muslim, 45; female, British, Muslim, 58; male, Canadian, Muslim, 50; male, Australian, Protestant, 55; female, Australian, Protestant, 75; female, Australian, Quaker, 80; female, American, Christian, 67; male, Irish, Catholic, 62; and female, American, Reform Jew, 53) had not heard of the Prophet Muhammad’s covenants prior to the study. All of these participants indicated their openness to accepting new knowledge about their religion/Islam. All considered Islam to advocate tolerance and peaceful interreligious relations, except one (male, Australian, Protestant, 55), and two who selected “other” (female, Australian, Quaker, 80; and female, American, Christian, 67).

After receiving the educative intervention material, all nine of these participants indicated their conviction that Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims, that he made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims, and pledged to protect non-Muslim places of worship such as monasteries, churches, and synagogues. These nine participants most commonly identified the linguistic analysis and textual parallelisms, including coherence of the Prophet’s covenants with verses of the Qur’an, as the evidence they found most convincing. Four of these nine participants selected the option that “My view that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations has been strengthened”. Two selected the option “I am now more inclined to think that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations”. Three selected “other”. One of these participants commented: “I have always known that some Sects promote Peace” (female, American, Christian, 67). One of the Muslim participants commented: “No major religion in power was peaceful with other religions who were less. Here authority, rule, governance and control play important role than religious philosophy itself” (male, Canadian, Muslim, 50).

In this latter response, we see the influence of political developments among Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad on views about Islam, specifically the conflation of the religion of Islam conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad with Muslim politics after his time. Separating the message of the Qur’an and conduct of the Prophet Muhammad from the policies (and politics) and rulings developed by later Muslim political and legal authorities seems to be a challenge for how some Muslims and non-Muslims understand what is Islam. The following definition provided by renowned scholar of Islam, Jasser Auda (2017) is instructive:

the true reference to what is Islamic is nothing other than the Word of God, the original source and the founding document of Islam, the Quran, and the example or Sunnah of His Prophet (p. 21).

This definition is important to consider in respect to views about interreligious relations in Islam. The findings of this study indicate that both Muslims and non-Muslims conflate the policies and rulings of Muslim rulers and jurists, that are not necessarily consistent with the Qur’an or the Sunnah, with Islam.

6.2. Openness to ‘New’ Religious Knowledge

The majority of participants were open to accepting new knowledge about their own religion and Islam. Six participants (male, Australian, Sunni Muslim, 35; male, Australian, Muslim, 49; male, American, Sunni Muslim, 43; male, Malaysian, Sunni Muslim, 63; female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73; and female, Australian, Catholic, 34) were closed to accepting new religious knowledge about Islam. The American and Malaysian Sunni Muslims already held the view that the Prophet’s covenants existed and the copies we have today are probably close replicas of the originals. After receiving the educative intervention material, the former expressed that “My opinion is about the same that Islam does promote some levels of peaceful interreligious relations” (male, American, Sunni Muslim, 43), while the latter selected the option that “My view that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations has been strengthened” (male, Malaysian, Sunni Muslim, 63).

The male, Australian, Muslim, aged 49, who was initially closed to new knowledge about Islam, continued to maintain this position, stating “In my opinion, whatever prophet Mohammad said, is included in hadith collection. I do not believe in anything outside the
Quran and Hadith”. However, as discussed above, covenants are referred to extensively in the Qur’an and the hadith literature, including Qur’anic references to protecting non-Muslim places of worship (Q22:40) and references in hadith to the covenants with the Christians of Najran (ul-Qadri 2010). The response of this and a few other participants reflects the point noted in the literature review of this article, that covenants in Islam have not received sufficient attention from Islamic studies scholars and religious authorities and that covenants remain underdeveloped in discourses about Islam. This corresponds to a lack of familiarity among many Muslims (and non-Muslims) with covenants in Islam more generally. It is noteworthy that this participant (male, Australian, Muslim, 49) answered ‘No’ to the questions asking if he read the journal article or watched the video presentation, highlighting the importance of openness to new knowledge.

The Sunni Muslim Australian male aged 35 and the two Christian females aged 34 and 73, who were also closed to accepting new knowledge about Islam, remained opposed to accepting the authenticity of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad. Although, the Sunni Muslim stated later in the study that “I already believe that Islam promotes dialogue”, like the above-mentioned Australian Catholic and American Unitarian participants, he did not accept that Islam promotes peaceful interreligious relations. The Catholic and Unitarian participants both expressed the view that “Islam does not promote peaceful interreligious relations”. It is noteworthy that all three participants answered ‘No’ to the questions asking if they had read the journal article or watched the video presentation. This suggests that openness to new knowledge is necessary in order for participants to engage with educative intervention material.

6.3. Changing Views about Interreligious Relations in Islam

The majority of participants (n = 26) already had a view, prior to the study, that Islam is tolerant of other religions and advocates peaceful interreligious relations. There were three participants (male, Australian, Protestant, 55; female, Australian, Catholic, 34; and female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73) that initially selected the option “in general, Islam is intolerant of other religions and opposed to interreligious relations”. Two of these participants (female, Australian, Catholic, 34; and female, American, Unitarian Christian, 73) maintained that “My view remains that Islam does not promote peaceful interreligious relations”. However, after receiving the intervention material, one of these participants (male, Australian, Protestant, 55) changed his view. It is noteworthy that he, unlike the other two participants, had not previously heard of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad and was somewhat open to new religious knowledge about Islam (with a score of ‘6’ on a 10-point scale). After reading the translation and journal article, and watching the video, he expressed his conviction (with scores of ‘8’ on a 10-point scale) that “Prophet Muhammad sought peaceful relations with non-Muslims”, “made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims”, “pledged to protect non-Muslim communities”, “pledged to protect non-Muslim places of worship such as monasteries, churches, and synagogues”, “that non-Muslims with whom Prophet Muhammad made a covenant or treaty to were free to keep their own faith/religion (i.e., they were not asked to convert to Islam)”, and that “Prophet Muhammad actually made covenants with Christians in the form of a written pledge with very similar wording to the translation of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai”. This participant also selected the option that “I am now more inclined to think that Islam does promote peaceful interreligious relations”. These findings suggest that preexisting views can obstruct engagement with new information and prevent one accepting new knowledge but openness to new knowledge correlates with a positive change of opinion concerning interreligious relations in Islam.

7. Conclusions

Over the past decade, there has been growing scholarly interest in Islamic covenants, particularly the historicity of documents known as the covenants of Prophet Muhammad. This study sought to critically examine the reception of the Prophet’s covenants among
interfaith actors by using an educative intervention instrument that included a translation of the Prophet’s Covenants with the Monks of Mount Sinai, a journal article and a video presentation on the research conducted to-date. Of the 36 participants, a large majority adopted a ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ reading of the educative material. These participants accepted the view that Islam advocates peaceful interreligious relations and that Prophet Muhammad made covenants with non-Muslims in the form of a written pledge with very similar wording to the translation of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai.

It should be reiterated that as this study’s participants were all interfaith actors, as a group they could reasonably be expected to be more predisposed to adopting the preferred reading of the educative intervention material and accepting the historicity of the Prophet Muhammad’s covenants than the general population. However, negotiated and oppositional views were also found among the study’s participants. Most participants, prior to the study, already viewed Islam as tolerant and were open to new religious knowledge about Islam. The educative intervention material they received tended to strengthen their views concerning peaceful interreligious relations in Islam and the historicity of the Prophet’s covenants. The evidence that most participants found particularly convincing was the textual and linguistic analysis and the consistency of the Prophet’s covenants with verses of the Qur’an and other documents of early Islam, namely the Constitution of Medina.

A minority of participants adopted a ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ reading of the educative intervention material. Closedness to new religious knowledge was found to be particularly important in this regard. Of the six participants who were closed to receiving new knowledge about Islam, only two adopted the ‘preferred’ reading of the educative intervention material. The other four participants adopted either a ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ reading. Participants that adopted a ‘negotiated’ reading, by which they accepted that Islam is tolerant of other religions and advocates peaceful interreligious relations but rejected that Prophet Muhammad made formal written agreements (i.e., covenants and treaties) with non-Muslims, indicated a lack of awareness of covenants in the Islamic sources in general and reliance on what they had learnt from religious authorities. One outcome of this study is a recommendation that further research on the reception of covenants in Islam is needed in relation to Muslim religious authorities.

Participants with an ‘oppositional’ reading maintained a preconceived view of Islam as intolerant of other religions and opposed to peaceful interreligious relations, and were unwilling to engage with ‘new’ knowledge. Responses of these participants indicate that the conduct of Muslim political authorities after the death of the Prophet Muhammad is conflated with Islam and negatively influences views about interreligious relations in Islam. This study also identified that an under-recognition of covenants in the Qur’an and covenants in the diplomacy of the Prophet Muhammad in discourses about Islam may contribute to some participants adopting negotiated and oppositional readings of the educative intervention material presented.

Overall, this study finds that the educative intervention material concerning the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad reinforces views of Islam as tolerant and peaceful towards non-Muslims and that Prophet Muhammad made formal written pledges to protect the lives, property and places of worship of non-Muslims. The study also found some evidence that information about the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad can contribute to changing perspectives on Islam, including the formation of views that Islam advocates for peaceful interreligious relations. However, educative intervention material was found to be ineffective among participants closed to new knowledge with entrenched oppositional views. The study found that oppositional views could be changed through the educative intervention material provided participants were at least somewhat open to receiving new knowledge.

Funding: This research was funded by a university Arts, Education and Law grant. The research was conducted with ethical approval of the university (Ref No.: 2022/011).
Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted with the ethical approval of Griffith University (Ethics approval ID 2022/011).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting the results of this study is maintained by Griffith University in accordance with university ethics protocol and may be accessed with approval from the Griffith University Office for Research.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil for their support with this research and for providing the translation of the Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes
3. The author thanks Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil for providing this translation of the Prophet’s Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai.

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