

## RESENHAS

## Minding our categories

### Prestando atenção às nossas categorias

### Prestando atención a nuestras categorías

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HUGHES, A.W. **Abrahamic religions:** on the uses and abuses of history. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 191 p.

Aaron W. Hughes, a Canadian scholar of religion and Professor of Religious Studies at Rochester University, USA, argues that “‘Abrahamic religions’ is a category that performs very little or no analytical work” (p. 142). This is mainly because it reflects modern, interested views about the value of ecumenical understanding between Judaism, Christianity and Islam” “the ‘Abrahamic religions’ discourse ... produces the seeds of hope for future coexistence” (p. 143). Hughes warns us that the “academic study of religion has to resist the temptation to use untheorized terms and taxa taken from interfaith circles and then pretend that they name some historical reality” (p. 144). Instead, he recommends a close contextualized engagement with specific groups in their historical and cultural context, with an eye for the messiness of actual social relations, a messiness that tends to escape our attempts at superficial categorization. This is a valuable book because its focused examination of a single category in the study of religion – ‘Abrahamic religions’ – illustrates in detail the manner in which distorting assumptions can creep into scholarly terminology, and because its emphasis on nuanced conceptual work is a lesson that we can all learn from.

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of *Religion* and a prominent member of the North American Association for the Study of Religion. The former positions him well to write a book about the history of “Abrahamic religions” as a category used to lump together Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The latter marks him as one of a small group of scholars who study not just religious phenomena but the history and uses of the concepts and categories that are used by scholars of religion to carry out such studies.

It is no coincidence that Donald Wiebe and Russell McCutcheon both praise the book on its back cover. Wiebe (1984; 1999), along with Jonathan Z. Smith, was a pioneer in calling the academic study of religion to task for failing to sort out its intellectual toolbox. McCutcheon, along with Timothy Fitzgerald, is the most well known of the next generation of scholars to take up this task. Their work (MCCUTCHEON, 1997; 2001; FITZGERALD, 2000; 2007) makes the case that the category of “religion” itself is historically conditioned, socially constructed and ideologically loaded.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of his book (Ch. 1-4), Hughes contributes a detailed and careful analysis of the emergence, spread, influence and impact of one particular category, “Abrahamic religions.” For Hughes, “the category ‘Abrahamic religions’... functions simultaneously as a form of wish fulfillment and ecumenicism” (p. 3). It elides differences “in the quest for some sort of vaguely defined commonality, thereby ignoring the specifics of cultural interactions at particular historical moments for the sake of an artificially constructed universal” (p. 6).

The final two chapters of the book move the discussion to a very general philosophical and historiographic level, in order to characterize “the distortion that emerges from the collision of historical particulars and ahistorical categories” (p. 7). As such, the book as a whole is “a case study that examines the construction of categories within the academic study of religion, showing how the categories we employ can become more an impediment than an expedient to our ability to understand” (p. 2).

Hughes suggests that the ecumenical appeal of the term relates to the fact that Abraham is a mythical figure that “predates the specifically Israelite/Jewish revelation at Mount Sinai” (p. 18). This allows the figure of Abraham

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<sup>1</sup> The classic historical study (DESPLAND, 1979) and more recent important works (e.g., DUBUISSON, 2003; MASUZAWA, 2005; NONGBRI, 2013) also set the broad context for Hughes’ contribution to the conceptual historiography of the study of religion. For an overview, in Portuguese, of related currents in North American theory of religion see (ENGLER, 2004). See also my article on Fitzgerald, with his discussion and my response, in *Religion* vol. 40, no. 4 (ENGLER, 2011a; 2011b; FITZGERALD, 2011). My articles can be accessed at <http://stevenengler.ca>.

to evoke an originary unity of faith, values and belief that transcends divisions between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Despite the emphasize on a common past as the unifying factor between these three religions, “the ‘Abrahamic religions’ discourse is future directed”: “our generation locates in Abraham the antidote to the ‘clash of civilizations’ (143). Hughes’ core claim is that this discourse leads us to ignore important divisions *between* and *within* these religions.

After an overview, in chapter 1, of the impetus and implications of “Abraham” and “Abrahamic” as umbrella terms for three of the world’s major religions, Hughes spends three chapters tracing the history of uses of the category of “Abrahamic religions.”

The second chapter demonstrates that appeals to Abraham before the twentieth century were “anything but ecumenical”; rather they were “vehicles of exclusion based on the ideology of superiority” (p. 55). He illustrates this by brief discussions of St. Paul’s talk of the covenant, medieval Christian and Muslim writers, early modern Orientalist view of Islam, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian discussions of the “Abrahamic covenant,” especially in debates over infant baptism.

The third chapter makes a case that early- and mid-twentieth-century European scholars of Islam played a key role in shifting the usage of “Abrahamic” toward its current ecumenical emphasis. The key exhibit here is Orientalist Louis Massignon, especially given his impact on Vatican II. As Hughes notes,

In the decades after Vatican II, the term “Abrahamic” slowly begins to be used by some as a possible replacement for the term “Judeo-Christian.” The latter term had come into vogue in the 1940s to refer to a set of ethical interests that Jews and Christians were believed to hold in common. ... If President Eisenhower introduced the term “Judeo-Christian” into American political rhetoric in the 1950s, President Obama did the same for “Abrahamic” in the year 2009. (p. 71, 75-76)

The fourth chapter explores how “Abrahamic” has been used to categorize religions. The most common contrast has been with “Eastern” or “Asian” religions. The core development was a shift, in the late twentieth century, from exclusionary uses of the term to an ecumenical agenda: “In the 1990s, the term became increasingly used to propagate ‘trialogue’ among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (p. 83).

Hughes’s concern in this book is not with a term or concept but with “the ‘Abrahamic religion’ discourse” (p. 4, 7, 12, 57, 73, 79, 85, 118-120,

139, 141-142, 144, 159, 185) as an example of a more general point: “we must resist the temptation of assuming that communities simply constitute themselves around an essential core” (p. 139). The last two chapters develop this point at a philosophical and a historiographic level, respectively.

The fifth chapter suggests that the term “Abrahamic religions” is an example of a widespread problem in the academic study of religion, based in a common misunderstanding of the nature of words and definitions. The fact the all three religions have appealed to Abraham as a founding figure does not mean that they share a common image of Abraham, of their relation to Abraham, or any shared set of beliefs or values. The tendency to attribute this sort of unified core characteristics to these three religions is, for Hughes, a very basic mistake in thinking about the meaning of words. He criticizes

an unfortunate tendency to assume that words have fixed meanings that are believed to transcend cultural particulars.... There is a tendency in the academic study of religion ... to locate in words ... an essential core ... which does not exist in the observable world. ... [Words] are all assumed to be valid markers and vessels or containers of some sort of stable identity. (p. 101, 106, 107)

In contrast, he argues that this term and many others used in the study of religion are “modern constructs” (p. 134): “words do emerge from historical contexts. They are not timeless entities with predetermined meanings” (p. 101).

The sixth chapter considers two historical periods that are often held to have been Golden Ages of interfaith tolerance, Muhammad’s Arabia and Muslims Spain. Works that argue for this view are characterized by “the sacrifice of historical accuracy for the sake of interfaith and political optics” (p. 135). Hughes illustrates that each was much more complex than often portrayed, and far from ecumenical: “the ‘Abrahamic religion’ discourse ... rarely if even takes such historical and conceptual complexity seriously” (p. 120).

Hughes’ critique is not an end in itself. His book is intended to support a broad meta-theoretical conclusion with important methodological implications:

the goal of terms and categories [is] to make the natural world clearer and easier to sort out. ... The goal of our analysis should not be greater simplification, but an appreciation of complexity and the messiness that goes with it, and the creation of new taxonomic models to classify it adequately, if imperfectly. (p. 19-20)

Hughes’ positive recommendation is not that some other term(s) replace ‘Abrahamic religions’:

it is more helpful to imagine a set of fluid traditions within which certain subgroups – within and among these traditions – possess a number of shared characteristics. It then become our job to identify such characteristics – when are they used? by whom? how? – with the aim of mapping and classifying their manifold configurations. (144)

Hughes has done a great service to the field by analyzing in such detail how a particular category has smuggled modern ecumenical views into the vocabulary of the study of religion. His analysis of the history and presuppositions of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ discourse, in the first four chapters and the sixth, is an extremely valuable case study. And all students and scholars of religion should heed his recommendation to pay attention to the messy details of relations between specific groups – not “religions” at some global level – in their historical and social contexts.

The fifth chapter’s attempt to ground these issues philosophically is less successful, though this does not detract from his overall argument and conclusions in historiographic terms. Lack of clarity in that chapter leaves Hughes’ own position unclear.<sup>2</sup> He seeks a middle path between two contrasting approaches to the study of religion: a subjective approach, rooted in “motivations and methods ... invested in personal circumstance”; and an objective approach that seeks a “cold and disinterested distance afforded by some ill-defined sense of scientific objectivity” (p. 102). His own view appears to be a form of social constructionism, informed by “self-reflection and self-consciousness,” “nuanced analysis and disinterested observation,” an approach that allows us to “understand” and “make” sense” of “real complexity” (p. 103, 121, 113, 140). However, it is not clear how radical or relativistic a form of constructionism is intended. On the one hand, he holds that “there is no reality outside of language; it creates, structures, and ultimately distorts the world we inhabit” (p. 112). On the other hand, he sees language as something that stands between us and the world: “the goal of terms and categories [is] to make the natural world clearer and easier to sort out”; “our categories are little more than a series of attempts to fit or, perhaps better, force the world we encounter into a set of conceptual boxes that we have created for it” (p. 19, 114). The lack of a clearer account of where he stands on these matters hampers Hughes’ attempt to ground his case study semantically.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Mark Gardiner, once again, for discussion of these and related philosophical issues.

In sum, this is a very valuable book for two reasons. Its extended analysis of a single category illustrates the dangers of importing distorted, value-laded concepts into the academic study of religion. And its methodological recommendation to dive into the messy details of historically and culturally specific cases highlights a more appropriate path, where our goal is more appropriately scholarly description and analysis. The lack of a more coherent philosophical framework buttressing these points ultimately detracts little from their value.

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