

Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: an Inquiry Into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-deception

ISLAM and the Tyranny of Authenticity is Aaron Hughes's third book devoted to a critique of the study of Islam within departments of religious studies in North America. The first two books, *Situating Islam* (2007) and *Theorizing Islam* (2012), reconstruct the disciplinary history, development, and shortcomings of what he calls 'Islamic religious studies,' which he defines here as 'this rather peculiar amalgam of apologetics, political correctness, religious studies, and Islamic studies' (1). The thrust of Hughes's critique is that practitioners of Islamic religious studies use their academic positions as cover for normative theological or apologetic projects and refuse to engage with, let alone adopt, the critical-historical methods common in other areas of religious studies. The focus of this book is 'the intimate intersection between Islamic religious studies and identity politics' (3), wherein Muslim insiders and their non-Muslim enablers are chiefly concerned to construct and sanction an Islam that aligns with their progressive ideals while dismissing other constructions as illegitimate. At the heart of his critique is this notion that Muslim apologists – converts in particular – have commandeered and monopolized the legitimate bounds of acceptable approaches to Islam in religious studies. This book, like the previous two, is intensely polemical and whether or not one finds Hughes's arguments convincing (or even recognizes the field as he reconstructs it) will largely depend on the reader's prior commitments and approaches, as I will suggest in more detail below.

Chapter one addresses the intertwined ideological currents that characterize Islamic religious studies: crypto-theology and Muslim identity politics. Hughes argues that because

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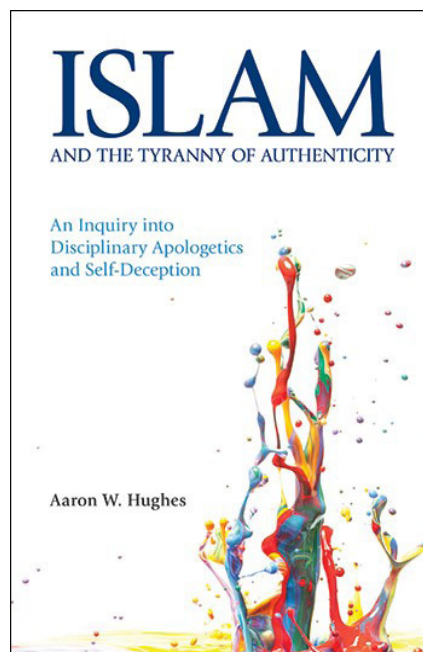
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of their theological commitments, Muslim scholars assiduously avoid critical-historical work to pursue normative, presentist, and apologetic projects instead. He traces this state of

affairs to the aftermath of 9/11, when the demographics of the field shifted from older white males 'interested in historical questions' to young Muslims, 'both male and female less interested in historical or textual problems and more interested in showing others that Islam was not violent and hostile to the West' (18). This demographic shift has produced what he calls 'the scholarship of self-aggrandizement,' in which the scholar's personal story is both data and analysis wrapped into one – and thus 'trumps that of his or her non-Muslim colleagues' (20).

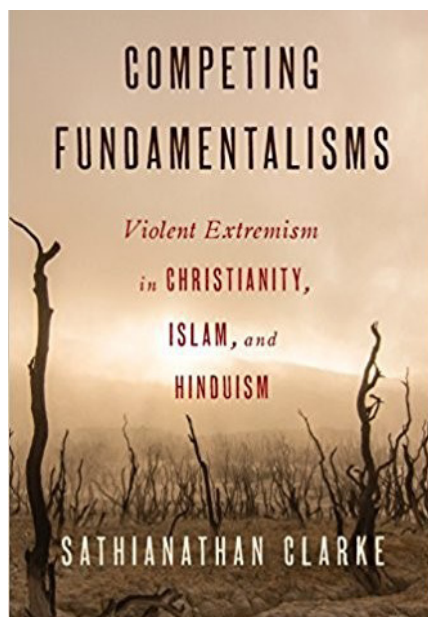
Chapter two analyses Islamic religious studies' purported lack of engagement with recent critical theory in religious studies. Hughes contends (as he did in more detail in *Situating Islam*) that Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has had a disastrous effect on the field by fostering a political environment in which traditional methods like philology and source criticism have been irretrievably tainted by their association with colonialism. He claims that Islamic religious studies has internalized Said's critique to the point that scholars 'have convinced themselves that it is their duty to produce "good" Islam as opposed to studying the manifold Islams...that exist both in the past and present' (40). As a result, these scholars are either unfamiliar with or ignore critical scholarship from the parent discipline. In fact, Hughes argues that the only theorist amenable to Islamic religious studies is Talal Asad, and only then because Asad 'has a personal narrative grounded in postcolonial dislocation,' while other theorists 'lack such credentials and, because of their names and not the force of their criticism, can be safely ignored' (53, emphasis in original).*

Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism

'RELIGIOUS fundamentalism' is a term that has for several decades been a staple of writing about the involvement of religion in politics. Often treated as a generic issue in the context of the world religions, 'religious fundamentalism' is often associated with conservative or right-wing understandings of the world, articulated by people who appear to believe that the world would be a better place if everybody lived by the word of God as articulated in their particular faith's holy scriptures.

Clarke is interested in identifying what 'religious fundamentalisms' have in common, as expressed through Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Clarke takes the reader through competing theories for what he terms 'violent (religious) extremism', including cultural, social, political, economic, and psychological explanations. None of these, he claims, includes a specific role for 'religion'. For Clarke, however, religion is central to explanations for and the content of (violent) religious fundamentalism, as each of the faiths he focuses on have holy scriptures that at times extol the virtues of using violence to 'deal with' enemies of the faith or backsliders within it.

Having established that Christian, Islamic, and Hindu religious fundamentalisms are centrally connected to what is to be found in their holy scriptures, Clarke devotes a chapter to each of the 'religious fundamentalisms' identified in the book's title. Chapter 2 examines 'Christian fundamentalism' in the United States, and 'uncovers the strong religious beliefs often hidden beneath the political logic and operation of one



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fundamentalism' beginning in Egypt in the 1920s with the Muslim Brotherhood. Chapter 4 turns to 'Hindu fundamentalism', with a focus on India.

In Chapter 5 Clarke identifies and explains what he sees as central components of these three religious fundamentalist expressions. According to Clarke, each of them 'highlights and interprets three theological themes': first, a conviction that God's will is revealed in the faith's sacred scriptures (what Clarke calls the word-vision); second, 'fixed and straightforward world-ways (mandated individual and group behaviour)'; and third, a shared desire to proselytize and 'dominate the rest of the world', 'an imperial global-order'. Globalization is a motor for these religious fundamentalisms, as one of its central characteristics, according to Clarke, is a 'spirit of fierce competition' (p. 5).

In the final chapter of this short book, Clarke asks what is to be done to counter violent religious fundamentalisms. He understandably concentrates on his own faith, Christianity, and argues that in order to counter violent religious fundamentalism within that faith, it is necessary to articulate and amplify its emollient and centre-ground-seeking tenets. While this is all well and good, I am very sceptical that this would be effective. While it is necessary, it is not, I suspect, enough to counter the views held by those convinced of the correctness and appropriateness of a fundamentalist worldview.*

of the most powerful nation-states in the world' (p. 5). Chapter 3 looks at the emergence and development of 'Muslim

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