

Book Reviews

Aaron W. Hughes: *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2015, 143 pp.

Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception is one of several studies in which Aaron W. Hughes points out the flaws and weaknesses in the contemporary study of Islam, especially in a North American context. Anyone who has read his earlier studies on this topic will not be surprised that he does so in the present case as well. Hughes's way of putting an argument is familiar, and those he criticises are generally the usual suspects, namely scholars such as Omid Safi, Amina Wadud, and Kecia A. Ali.

The book under review includes an introduction, five chapters and a concluding discussion that ties the study together. According to Hughes the problem with normativity in the North American context and the general tendency to shy away from critical questions (especially regarding the formative history of Islam and the redaction of the Koran) is related on the one hand to Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (that is, the study of Oriental languages, cultures, and religions) and on the other to the impact of 9/11. According to Said Oriental Studies were primarily a tool in the hands of the colonial powers that supported Western

hegemony. Because of these associations, Hughes maintains, 'Oriental Studies' (especially historical and textual studies) has become a pejorative term. However, contemporary questions have also placed a new demand on scholars who work on Middle Eastern and Islamic topics. For example, in the wake of the terror attacks on the US in September 2001 many scholars felt a need to defend Islam against both internal attacks (by those who promoted the use of violence in the name of Islam) and external attacks (by those who treated Islam as a *sui generis* concept responsible for them). However, normative claims and hypersensitivity acting as a barrier to discussion, according to Hughes, may also be related to the rise of identity politics. Thus, instead of engaging in critical studies of sources that include analyses of power, authority, and legitimacy, some of the scholars named above feel it necessary to defend Islam and to promote interpretations that are appropriate to an open democratic society. Although it is admirable that scholars of Islam wish to present interpretations of the religion that offer new lines of reasoning, doing so does not necessarily constitute a scientific enterprise paying serious attention to the sources dealing with Islam and Muslims. Instead of dismissing sources that do not live up to present-day standards (democracy, human rights, and equality, regardless of gender

or sexual preference), academics should examine the internal conflicts and contrasting positions related to power struggles, questions of legitimacy, and the various political and social contexts that have influenced interpretations of the religion and its history.

I agree with Hughes's analysis and his way of describing the problems in the North American context. The claim to speak for a so-called authentic or genuine Islam can only be a theological and normative enterprise that has little to do with the academic study of religions. An example is studies that can be tested empirically and that examine claims about super-human agents as arguments going beyond scientific reasoning. However, although I share most of the concerns Hughes addresses, I am not sure that the situation he describes applies to northern Europe. Normative or speculative Islamic theology is not usually part of the agenda dominating departments of religious studies or the history of religions in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, or Finland. That said, it is clear some of the concerns Hughes expresses are more pressing when it comes to the study of Christianity, and some theologians in the Nordic countries have problems in differentiating between personal opinions and scientific reasoning. Furthermore, the scholars whom Hughes discusses in this book are also read, for example, in Swedish universities, but they are usually used as empirical data to illustrate

Muslim positions, not as independent and testable scientific studies of the history of Islam and Muslims.

Besides this appraisal of Hughes's work, I think that Hughes misses an important point in his analysis. The worlds of higher education and research have always been battlegrounds, and scholars have constantly tried to promote their agendas and convince the general public, students, and university boards alike that their approach is the most valid. Instead of complaining about this situation it is more fruitful to discuss different views of science – to put it differently, what is science, how do we attain scientific proof, and what is academia's role and function? Both universities and university publishing houses have always provided space for normativity and ethical and even theological speculations about God. This is, of course, something one can have strong opinions about, but instead of saying that this is good or bad science we should critically consider the outcomes of our research activities. What does it imply if one scholar argues that his goal is to 'save ourselves and the vibrancy of Islamic traditions', as Safi claims, and what does he mean when he speaks about a 'humanity of Muslims' (both quotations are from Hughes p. 32)? In analysing these and similar statements it is also important to remember that while the North American liberal arts tradition often, if not always, promotes an education intended to mould good and decent citizens (i.e.

it is a kind of citizens' education), this is not automatically the agenda of most European universities, which are less inclined to engage in these questions. Although I do not have any empirical basis for this conclusion, I do believe that this is an important reason the North American context differs so markedly from most European contexts. However, before I pat my own back and jump to the conclusion that everything is perfect in Europe, a warning is necessary. What we are seeing in the US may also become the future of the European study of Islam and religious studies more generally. If identity politics and various forms of theological thinking remotely resembling what is outlined in *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity* gain a stronghold within European academia, we will probably face similar problems to those Hughes describes.

However, as the observant reader will note, this conclusion indicates first, that I support Hughes's critical gaze, and second, that my view leads me to stress that personal opinions, or even worse, wishful thinking (whether positive or negative towards religion as a social phenomenon) should be left outside the university. An appropriate conclusion to this review is therefore the following normative statement: the scientific study of religions (including Islam) should be based on open questions, empirical studies, and inter-subjectively testable hypotheses, not on normative or wishful thinking about something

we call religion. If these criteria are abandoned or compromised, the academic study of religion will have ceased to exist, and it will be time to look for other activities.

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