Aaron W. Hughes

Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History


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Aaron Hughes (University of Rochester) has written a one-idea book that it largely stated in a polemical tone. That one idea concerns the adjective “Abrahamic,” as in “Abrahamic religion.” Hughes views the contemporary popular usage of the adjective as a service to a mythic unity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that constitutes a distortion of and threat to the quite distinctive character and practice of these faiths. He judges that this dialectic of history and myth, inclusivity and exclusivity, is the true progeny of Abraham, as the three monotheistic religions have sought to define themselves and their relationship to one another (1).

Popular usage has neglected that dialectic that requires history as well as myth, exclusivity as well as inclusivity. The disregard of such historical particularity and passionate exclusivity results in a gross perversion of the actual reality of the three traditions of faith.

Historian that he is, Hughes offers a review of the long-term interaction of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic interpreters, each of which contended that their particular version of Abraham was the correct version to the exclusion of other versions. Such a contestation over Abraham is evident in the arguments of Paul in Romans and Galatians. Subsequently the early followers of Muhammad followed the tradition of Abraham, who,
in that tradition, was seen to be a Muslim. The mounting of the early Crusades invited mutual polemics between Christians and Muslims concerning the legacy of Abraham. Abd-al-Jabbar, a contemporary of Pope Urban II, argued that Christians had distorted the tradition of Abraham. In the nineteenth century the polemics continued in the guise “world religions.” This long history of polemics of course smacked of supersessionism. But Hughes regards that supersessionism as preferable to the new “ecumenism.” At least in that long series of polemics one could identify and fight against such distorted preemptions, whereas in the new “ecumenism” matters are too “agreeable” to mount a serious contestation.

In recent time, however, there has been a transfer of energy and attention from supersessionism to “ecumenism.” This is the crux of Hughes’s contention. While that ecumenism pursues what is taken to be a shared legacy among the three religions and common features of tradition and faith, in fact that effort runs rough-shod over the defining religious particularities that matter decisively to each tradition. Thus contemporary ecumenism constitutes a greater threat to the particular faiths (perhaps most especially Judaism) than did the older supersessionism. The argument that the three religions have much in common may seem innocuous enough, but Hughes sees it as a cavalier disregard of the defining features of each.

Hughes posits 1995 as the moment of turn from supersessionism to ecumenism. In that year the Library of Congress introduced “Abrahamic religions” as an official heading in its catalogue, a recognition of a new interpretive effort that had gained considerable momentum. That move toward an accent on commonality had begun in theological circles but eventually was taken up in academic work and so given a kind of respectable credibility that added force to its attractiveness. Hughes focuses on Louis Massignon, a Catholic Orientalist (1883–1962) who fostered interfaith dialogue and who proposed Abrahamic linkages as “a symbol of peace and hope in the midst of internecine squabbling” (63). It does not require much imagination, given Massignon’s dates, to see that he is a harbinger of what was to come at Vatican II, an event that Hughes views as a major factor in advancing this mischievous ecumenism. Old-line liberals have long used the term “Judeo-Christian” as a phrasing of friendship and solidarity between Jews and Christians that permitted a soft sense of the past differences but did not dwell on those differences. With the emergence of Islam into general awareness, the term “Abrahamic” displaced “Judeo-Christian” in order to include Muslims. But in fact the new phrase performed the same sense of unity of sorts achieved by disregarding difference. What came to be articulated in Vatican II was that the Church stance concerning other religions came to the fore academically as well in the American Academy of Religion in the publication of “Trialogue of the Abrahamic faiths,” which asserted that in order to
achieve a lasting piece the members of the three Abrahamic faith communities needed to learn to come to terms with one another (72)

Hughes goes on to trace the emerging adoption of the concept of “trialogue” that has turned up in the Parliament of the World Religions. Of course, the post-9/11 social reality has given urgency to such efforts that have worked hard to defeat and discredit Samuel Huntington’s provocative notion of “The Clash of Civilizations.” Even an appointment of an Oxford Scholar to study the three traditions led to a comment that Hughes regards as romantic mush in the service of political correctness:

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all refer to Abraham as a friend of God, and I hope that the establishment of this important post will contribute to deepening friendship among these three religions focused especially on relations between the three religions. (95)

The result of such efforts, says Hughes, is nothing more than “ecumenical Esperanto.” The subtitle of the book is important: On the Uses and Abuses of History. Hughes regards recent ecumenical efforts as a-historical, completely indifferent to the historical reality of the communities of faith in their contextual complexity. His accent is on historical specificity that must be taken seriously and with great attentiveness. He offers two extended vignettes of such attentiveness, first concerning Muhammad’s Arabia and the second concerning Muslims in Spain. It is this kind of specific data that is crucial to honest engagement, the kind of historical data that is grossly neglected in current interfaces of a friendly kind:

Yet closer examination of the three generic religions that comprise the even more generic category “Abrahamic religions” reveals porous boundaries and much greater complexity than originally meets the eye or at least the eye accustomed to seeing three discrete “religions” interacting with one another. (119)

His accent is on “porous boundaries” and “greater complexity” than is currently recognized in any easy move to tolerance or coexistence that is, in effect, “an interfaith Abrahamic utopia” (133). In the end, Hughes will accept the possibility and importance of engagement, but only when it is grounded in informed history.

There is no doubt that Hughes makes a valid point. On two matters, however, I believe that his argument fails to carry weight. First, for all of his accent on history, his argument seems to be curiously a-historical. It does not recognize that the three religious traditions are not only complex, but they are dynamic and endlessly responsive to context, so that new articulations are continually emerging. He seems not to recognize that Judaism,
Christianity, and Islam are now all set in a new context where “new occasions teach news duties.” Of course each tradition has its defining distinctiveness, and most surely Judaism does, but that defining distinctiveness is to some great extent supple and responds to the requirements and opportunities of context. “History” cannot refer only to past reality, but “present history” is also a shaping context for faith in any of these traditions. This Hughes does not seem to acknowledge. Thus each faith now is in a world of immense violence and hate that requires some responsive effort.

Second, Hughes repeatedly uses the terms “ecumenical,” “liberal,” and “romantic” interchangeably. Other like terms in the same orbit might be inferred in his dismissive way, such as “glib, facile, reductionist, ignorant,” all propelled, he would seem to say, by a zeal for unity that has no interest in critical data. While there are no doubt practices that merit such dismissiveness, some of which he cites, I think he takes easy cases and neglects serious exchanges that do not press for unity but for mutual understanding and respect. His dismissive categories are unhelpful in the midst of those who grapple seriously with these issues with which he is concerned. He might well find out more about serious interfaith exchanges.

It is hard to imagine why supersession in the end would be preferred to serious ecumenical exchange. But of course Hughes doubts that most of the current exchanges are serious, and to that extent his polemic is an important one. The same argument made here has been traversed by Jon Levinson in his Inheriting Abraham (on which see my review in Christian Century 129/21 [October 3, 2012]: 39–41). I judge that Levinson’s discussion is a more helpful and nuanced one. But Hughes offers a sober warning against easy settlements. Serious ecumenism is hard sustained work, even if Hughes himself treats the process as deplorable. The urgency of our context requires exactly the study that Hughes champions. But it also requires that such exchanges not be kept in hock to old historical realities.