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[Review of] Paul Hedges: Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context

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Book Reviews

Paul Hedges: *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 297 pp.

Why do we hate? This question is posed by Paul Hedges at the outset of his book on religious hatred. Professor Hedges (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU, Singapore) is a leading expert in interreligious studies and a prolific writer on interreligious encounters and dialogue, intercultural theology, and plural contexts. He takes a broad but pragmatic approach to his theme, starting with the assertion that neither are various forms of hostility and prejudice spurred by or directed towards religion new phenomena, nor are religions especially prone to or major causes of hatred between people. However, religion and hate often mix. Religious traditions have no agency of their own; only humans do. Hence, religious hatred is quintessentially one of many subsets of general human hatred, Hedges argues, asserting that religious hatred is a form of prejudice shaped by cognitive, psychological, sociological, and contextual factors, which can and do lead to discrimination, dehumanization, and brutality.

From this starting point Hedges sets out to ‘untheorize’ the study of religious hatred by unpacking some of the most central concepts in the field: genocide; Islamophobia; and antisemitism. Methodologically, this

entails the ambition to dismantle grand narratives and overarching theoretical explanations that portray such phenomena as unique, inexplicable, and almost metaphysical manifestations of hate that ‘haunt history as a ghost’. Instead, Hedges suggests, each fits into a larger framework of prejudice and violent human impulses that arise in certain social contexts. They are not singular forms of hatred but ‘part of a wider set of phenomena explained by patterns of human identity creation, prejudice, and violence’. Untheorizing therefore implies ‘showing interconnectedness and the local variable, and contingent factors, rather than supposing an ongoing essence which may be separately theorized’. (pp. 4–5). Hate and prejudice are thus generally shared human inclinations and experiences, but how they take form in the world and in interpersonal relations is situational and context-bound. This constant balancing between the universally human traits of prejudice and othering on the one hand and the very particular times, places, and situations in which religious hatred flourishes on the other is a rewarding aspect of Hedges’ study. While its theoretical contribution is significant for the research field in general, it still does not fall prey to unwarranted or overtly tidy generalizations. As such, it offers a balanced contribution to an often heated and polarized conversation.

The study is divided into ten chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, structured in four sections: 'Why do we hate?'; 'Bridges from the past'; 'Contemporary Western hatreds'; and 'Prejudice beyond the West'. Each section contains theoretically and conceptually driven research chapters, richly illustrated by both historical and contemporary ethnographic examples. Each ends with a more personally framed interlude, presenting well-argued views on the themes under study in the previous chapters from the author's perspective.

The book's first section sets the study's theoretical framework. It introduces classic and contemporary theories of stereotyping, prejudice, and dehumanization, starting with Gordon Allport's field-defining work of 1954, which today remains the crown jewel of the research field. Hedges also introduces social identity theory (in-groups and out-groups) and performative theories to show that prejudice entails deeply engrained cognitive and social structures that define how we feel, think, and act towards other human beings. As such, stereotyping and prejudice are natural; the only way our minds can cope with the overpowering multitude of the world around us is to lump things together in categories that we evaluate according to pre-set templates – usually those readily available to us in our close context. We do not always act on such prejudiced thinking, but time and time again in human history we see that discrimination, dehumanization,

exclusion, and violence can follow in their wake. While Hedges' theorization as such brings little new to the table, it is an important reminder of the deeply human mechanisms that can lead from hateful words to genocide. A novel contribution to this well-established framework is the stress on prejudice as contextual and intersectional, which adds to the value of the discussion.

Hedges moves on to untheorize genocide, describing it as an extreme form of violence made possible by the mechanism of prejudice and hatred available to humans in extreme situations, a de-essentialized and complex social phenomenon. Similarly, Hedges is critical of an essentialized categorization of the term 'religion' (as proposed e.g. by the World Religions Paradigm) and thus maintains that religious hatred, which is the book's focus, must be understood to signify 'both hatred stemming from religion and hatred provoked by (a specific) religion(s)' (p. 43). Moving on to the contextual discussions of anti-semitism and Islamophobia in the following two sections, a specialist on these religions may feel there is a lack of detail and a need to dig more deeply elsewhere to clarify the particularities of specific events and arguments. However, I find that this book's important point and explicit contribution is precisely to provide an overview of religious hatred in its various forms to elucidate the shared mechanisms – why we hate, and what perceptions of our own and others' religions have to

do with all this. This is a generalist work, which supports a novel understanding at the conceptual level. An interest in pursuing further research into the particularities of the contexts and times of interest to the specific reader will certainly be fuelled by Hedges' open and probing conversation.

That said, I am impressed by the broad and deep learning displayed on these pages. Hedges provides insightful readings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologies and philosophies and can discuss antisemitism and Islamophobia in various historical periods in a substantial and meaningful way. Hedges also meaningfully connects the discussion with contemporary research on racism and broadens the view from a purely Western, Europe-centred discussion of contemporary hatred of Jews and Muslims to a more global perspective. The fourth section on prejudice beyond the West introduces important discussions of Islamophobia in the Buddhist and the Hindu world that are often invisible to students at European universities.

The book is written in straightforward and jargon-free language that makes it suitable for a course book but also relevant for senior scholars and the general public. It is carefully worded with elegant alliterative sentences, inviting the reader to stop and reflect: 'Texts, traditions, and teachings are tricky things tending to transformation' (p. 46).

At the end of the book Hedges returns to an important question,

posed in the introduction and re-engaged in the final words: can you study hate at a convenient analytical distance, or will the theme necessarily force you to take a stand? The lines between academic study, advocacy, and activism are not always as clear cut as we might wish them to be, and autobiography always feeds into the research we pursue and the conclusions we draw, Hedges asserts: 'Prejudice and violence happen to people. While studied here as interesting social phenomena, they occur in the world we belong to no matter how distant the events [...] may seem' (p. 182). They affect our world, people we know, where we live, and the stories we are told. Hedges therefore contends, with Frans Fanon and Elie Wiesel as his interlocutors, that it is important to see that all forms of prejudice are interconnected. This usually starts with words but may end with violence. The good news is that religious hatred is something human beings do to each other. We may also choose to do differently and foster dialogue, plurality, and interconnectedness.

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