

Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context.
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Book Review Essay: The Benefits and Pitfalls of Untheorizing Antisemitism and Islamophobia

Paul Hedges offers a critical and multidisciplinary contribution to the perennial questions regarding the whence, whither, wherefore, and whereby of religious hatred. That is, where does religious hatred come from? Where is it going? Why does it exist? How does it manifest? Hedges takes antisemitism and Islamophobia as his primary subjects precisely because we are witnessing a global increase in these religious (and racialized) hatreds. Furthermore, as Hedges suggests in the middle of the book, “very often the two prejudices are entwined and interconnected” (146). Hedges does a superb job of presenting these religious hatreds in a clear and accessible manner, giving historical (and some theological) background for them, and contextualizing them in various global contexts (USA, UK, Europe, India, Myanmar/Burma, India, Sri Lanka, and Singapore). However, sadly lacking is any engagement with the oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province, China. Significantly, he connects antisemitism and Islamophobia together as forms of bias and prejudice (partially explainable through social identity theory). For this, and more, the book is highly commendable.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia need not be mystified or left unexplainable; Hedges’ book does an admirable job therefore of demystifying and explaining these ideologies and dispositions of hate. However, when addressing these religious hatreds in a global context, Hedges frequently—but very quickly—reminds the reader that European and Christian notions of religious exclusivity, religious (and racial) supremacy, colonial projects, and the export of nationalisms and Nazi ideology, often at least facilitated, if not gave rise to, non-Western, modern forms of antisemitism and Islamophobia. In this way, he sometimes, though subtly, contravenes his own arguments (of which more anon). In any case, the book is important precisely because it explicitly brings the subjects of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and prejudice together for analysis. Hence, it contributes constructively to a discussion that frequently segregates these topics from each other.

Hedges seeks to “untheorize and unpack” antisemitism, Islamophobia, prejudice, and genocide. In doing so, he forgoes an “overarching grand explanation” (4) for them and instead begins his analysis with simple definitions: “antisemitism is prejudice against Jews, Islamophobia is prejudice against Muslims, and genocide is explained by human impulses to violence in particular social contexts” (4). Hedges employs prejudice as an analytical category that refers to various forms of human behavior; he connects it with social identity theory throughout. For Hedges, antisemitism and Islamophobia “are simply patterns of prejudice within human social contexts” (32). Here he is implicitly rejecting arguments that render these religious/racial hatreds unique or mysterious among forms of prejudice. In chapter two, he seeks to demystify and untheorize genocide: “there is no specific totalitarian ideology, distinct modern worldview, or anything else that links, historically or conceptually, all acts we may classify as genocide” (34). Early on Hedges admits that prejudice is not merely “social dislike.” Rather, it often becomes embedded in political and structural regimes. Hedges does not spend much time on structural and systemic prejudice. He does, however, illustrate the power of words: genocide—prejudice at its most violent—always begins with words: of hate, of othering, of dehumanization, and so on.

With these observations in mind, this book review essay engages the benefits and pitfalls of untheorizing antisemitism and Islamophobia. On the one hand, Hedges's project provides clear analysis of these forms of religious prejudice, thus helping us to understand them not as enigmatic hatreds but as manifestations of prejudice *tout court*. With this, we can understand them and work against them in teaching, scholarship, policies, and laws. On the other hand, Hedges's untheorizing often unintentionally glosses over some of his own critical points that find genealogical sources of *non-Western* antisemitism and Islamophobia in *the (Christian, colonizing) West*.

Chapters three, four, and five offer the historical background to contemporary antisemitism and Islamophobia. Hedges impressively weaves together a coherent narrative that draws from extensive scholarship on the topics of anti-Judaic theology, anti-Islamic theology, Christian-Muslim relations historically, and the formation of nationalisms and of the concept of citizenship during the Enlightenment and early modern period. This last topic expressly discusses the racialization of religion. These chapters could serve as succinct introductory texts for a course (or a unit therein) on these topics and are thus highly recommended. Hedges displays his penchant for “untheorizing and unpacking” in these chapters. For example, Hedges spends only a few pages on the theological concept of supersessionism (often termed “replacement theology”), a Christian idea that avers the “New Law” of Jesus Christ replaces and supersedes the “Old Law” of the Hebrew Bible. Christian scholars and theologians dwell much longer on this topic when discussing antisemitism (and modern racism against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). One wonders if Hedges does not want to make Christian supersessionism the “overarching grand explanation” of antisemitism and Islamophobia. On the one hand, theologians such as Willie J. Jennings, J. Kameron Carter, and Jeannine Hill Fletcher have often presented this idea as *the central* one that *shapes* later forms of antisemitism, racism, Islamophobia, and White Supremacy. Hedges briefly alludes to this in his interlude connecting Islamophobia and antisemitism (which “are the same yet different” [143]) wherein he cites Gil Anidjar, who “argues that the ‘racialised, blood identity of Christendom—of Europe—from the time of the crusades onwards’ is central to imagining others” (142). Hedges sees this perspective as critical but does not let it encompass and occlude his project of untheorizing antisemitism and Islamophobia. Here the question is open to ongoing scholarly debate.

In these chapters Hedges also uncritically replicates the idea that Islam is supersessionist in the same way that Christianity is supersessionist. This equivalency is made frequently in the literature, and it is worthy of scholarly debate. It is arguable that Islam is not so much supersessionist as “subordinationist,” in that consensus and classical Islamic theology of religions—from the Qur'an to hadith and commentarial legal, theological, and mystical traditions—considers other religions, especially the People of the Book, as subordinate to Islam but not *replaced* by it. Indeed, Hedges betrays his own arguments in some paragraphs wherein he wrestles with the historical evidence suggesting that, overall and generally (and with exceptions) Islamic treatment of non-Muslims (via the *dhimmi* system) was more tolerant than the Christian treatment of Jews and Muslims; it is likely because within classical and post-classical Islamic legal and theological discourses, there was a place for non-Muslims, even if it was as “second-class citizen.” Finally, I note how Hedges ends his historical overview of pre-Enlightenment Christian-Muslim relations: “Each has envisaged the other as an aggressive adversary. ‘The Turk,’ ‘the Saracen,’ and ‘the Arab’ as stereotypical tropes have become embedded in Christian minds, while ‘the crusader’ is a stereotypical trope in Muslim minds” (81). What Hedges does not explicitly point out is that the former were ethnic and racialized categories, while the latter is not.

Consequently, in the Western imaginary it is ethnic and racialized categories that become equivalent to “aggressive adversary,” with “Islam” and “Muslim” being a racial marker more than a religious marker (here I commend the work of Erik Love, Junaid Rana, and Moustafa Bayoumi).¹ This is a crucial distinction between the ways in which, on the one hand, Christians categorized Muslims (as racialized) and, on the other, Muslims categorized Christians (as “crusader” unmarked by ethnic or racial categories).²

In these chapters, there is only a very short treatment of the *limpieza de sangre* system of discrimination in the medieval and early modern Iberian context, which then arguably became embedded in our very modern socio-economic structures today. Hedges redresses some of these shortcomings in chapter five, “Religious hatred as racial hatred: Enlightenment, citizenship, and racialization,” in which he underscores the importance of the racialization of religion in informing contemporary antisemitism and Islamophobia. This chapter addresses key dynamics occurring in the Enlightenment and early modern period: “the differentiation of secularism and religion the birth of the nation state; citizenship; rights and freedom of belief; and public life” (90). All these shape the 19th-century “Jewish question,” which gave rise to antisemitic conspiracy theories, pogroms, antisemitic legal restrictions, and Nazi ideology, which of course produced the Shoah.

Chapters six and seven concern contemporary Western forms of antisemitism and Islamophobia. They are another impressive summary and analysis of the most recent literature on these topics. Regarding antisemitism (chapter six), Hedges tackles right-wing antisemitism, Christian antisemitism, perverse forms of Holocaust denial, the pervasive remnants of antisemitic conspiracy theories, left-wing antisemitism, and the ways in which critique of Israel and Zionism renders blurry the sharp contours of antisemitism. This is an outstanding chapter, but there is a lingering question. Hedges briefly speaks of “institutional antisemitism” and “structural antisemitism” (114–15) when discussing left-wing antisemitism and the BDS movement. For clarification, it would have been helpful to compare it to the more common notion of institutional/structural racism. How is “institutional” and “structural” being used here vis-à-vis notions of systemic racism in, say, the United States context? Hedges notes that the BDS movement stems from a far-left critique of Israel, viz., that it is a settler colonial state practicing a form of apartheid against Muslim and Christian Palestinians. He notes that this critique emerged in part during “Third world” revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s right at a time when Jews had become “racialized as ‘white’” and thus equated with White, Western colonial practices (115). Hedges carefully examines this complicated topic, ultimately suggesting that “when critiques move from specific issues, policies, or groups to being monolithic claims about Jewish/Israeli influence/character, or ‘the Jews’, in stereotypical ways, then they have become antisemitism” (118). The critique of Zionism, from Zionism per se and tout court to forms of Zionism, is similarly dissected (120). The reader knows Hedges is being as neutral as possible because right-leaning, left-leaning, and centrist readers will all find something to criticize in these sections.

¹ See, among their other works, the following: Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York University Press, 2017); Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” in *Souls*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2007), 148–61; Moustafa Bayoumi, “Racing Religion,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* vol. 6, no. 2 (2006), 267–93.

² Though, this is not to say that Muslims did not develop their own system of racialization and even anti-Black racism, only that it was not linked to concepts of supersessionism and supremacy as it was for Western, Christian forms of racism (here, I commend the work of John Wright’s *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* and, more recently, Kehinde Andrews’ *The New Age of Empire*).

More generally, a comparison with the relationship between anti-Asian hate and critique of the state of China would have helped clarify his analysis. Surely, criticizing the totalitarian policies of the Chinese government should not be equated with anti-Asian hate. When addressing the oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province, careful scholars do not give agency to “the Chinese” or even to China, but rather to the policies and actions of the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party (the analogy here is between critique of two different nation-states that are often racialized in the Euro-American context, *not* between the policies themselves, to be clear). This comparison may have shed some light on how language can shape behaviors and beliefs in ways that lead to prejudice—whether antisemitism or anti-Asian hate. The recent rise in anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic is evidence of this. In any case, Hedges does an impressive job in these sections, “Can ‘anti-racism’ be antisemitic?” and ‘Demonizing or criticizing Israel?’ (117-122).

Chapter seven proffers a succinct treatment of contemporary Islamophobia in the Euro-North American context. The interlude on relating antisemitism to Islamophobia concludes forcefully: “to invoke [Frantz] Fanon and Elie Wiesel, it may start with one prejudice but does not end with one prejudice; what they are saying about *them* should make us prick up our ears as they are almost certainly saying it about *us* too” (146). Indeed, the “Jewish Question” may have been replaced by the “Muslim Question” today; but more sharply, both relate to the “Christian Question” (145), as Gil Anidjar (*Blood: A Critique of Christianity*) points out. Indeed, that one question replaces the other could be a product of supersessionism or replacement theology itself, and we should not ignore that both antisemitism and Islamophobia (and all forms of racism) are interlocking and interconnected.

The last three chapters concern contemporary antisemitism and Islamophobia beyond the West, whence the “global context” in the title of the book. Chapter eight concerns Islamic/Muslim permutations of antisemitism, chapter nine Islamophobia in Buddhist contexts, and chapter ten Hindutva/Hindu nationalist forms of Islamophobia in India. These three chapters are excellent examinations of antisemitism and Islamophobia outside of the European and North American contexts. The following criticisms are *merely meant to complicate* Hedges own project of untheorizing and unpacking these religious/racial hatreds and *not to suggest* that the chapters do not perform critical work in analyzing global antisemitism and Islamophobia—they indeed do.

In chapter eight, Hedges rightfully points out that “Islamic antisemitism is seen to come from Western sources, in particular colonial and Nazi influences” (149). He further adds that “Islamic antisemitism is not as embedded in texts and traditions as Christian antisemitism is within that tradition” (150). This is not to suggest that the Islamic traditions—from the Qur’an to hadith and later sources—do not have kernels of anti-Jewish sentiment; indeed, they do. Nonetheless, “there has not been a scripturally informed Islamic antisemitism in the same way that there has been a Christian antisemitism, because Islamic attitudes to Jewish people are tied to notions of *ahl al-kitab* (‘People of the Book’) and *ahl al-dhimma* (‘Protected People’, often *dhimmis*) which also apply to Christians and others, with discrimination and prejudice against Jews per se having been exceptional rather than normalized” (151). This can be more explicitly put: early on in Christian theology, the dominant interpretation and expression of “the good news of Jesus Christ” was supersessionist and anti-Judaic, with explicit anti-Jewish ideas inscribed in the canonical Christian tradition (from gospels to epistles and early Church writings). Hedges then

dedicates two sections on the European colonial formations of Islamic antisemitism and the influence of Nazi ideology on Arab nationalists in their fight against French and British colonialism (152-156). “The influence of Nazism and German thought on modern Islamic antisemitism indeed helped racialize [the mufti of Jerusalem Hajji Amin Al-Husseini’s] interpretation of [antisemitism], so that claimed inherited character traits of ‘the Jew’ become part of it” (155). Later, Hedges reminds readers that “the Qur’an does not treat Jews as a racialized group. It is specific Jews who are spoken of, and there are good (believing) and bad (unbelieving) Jews, rather than there being any general trait of ‘the Jew’” (157-158). This is a far cry from the way “the Jews” are written about and interpreted in the Christian gospels (Matthew 27:25; John 8:44, 20:19) and the *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the Church Fathers (see 51-56). Hedges appears to wrestle or ambiguate with this historical data, especially when it comes to the treatment of *dhimmīs* (160). Yes, *dhimmīs* were sartorially marked with colors distinguishing them from Muslims, but “these structures were not always obeyed” or enforced, with Jews often wearing clothing indicative of high social status. Jews were mistreated and maligned under Muslim rule, but this “was the exception rather than the rule...despite occasional pogroms.” Overall, Jews lived “with a confidence and security not available in Christian-majority societies” and, at least until the end of the 19th century, “the historical memories that existed were of Jews being welcomed into Muslim empires” (160). It appears, then, that something *is unique* about Christian forms of antisemitism that distinguishes it from Islamic permutations. Here, the untheorizing helps, but it may mask the pernicious nature of Christian supersessionism (and European colonialism) that formed our modern world.

Chapter nine, “Killing for the Buddha: Islamophobia in the Buddhist world,” addresses Islamophobia in the Burmese, Thai, and Sri Lankan contexts. Once again, Hedges subtly displays some “grand theorizing” despite his best efforts. “To understand modern Buddhist manifestations of Islamophobia we need to look at the effects of European colonialism on Buddhism” (167). So begins the section on “the roots of modern Buddhist rage and the Buddhist just war.” He takes Sri Lanka as a strong case in which “colonial domination” relates to “a particular dynamic occurring that has come to be part of the discourse of Buddhist ethno-nationalist sentiment in a range of different countries, including both Myanmar and Thailand” (167). A passage is worth quoting in full:

Two key facets of [the Sri Lankan colonial period], the first of which had some continuity throughout the whole colonial period, and this was an exclusivist religious attitude fostered by European Christians. But the second, nationalist sentiments arose only in the nineteenth century under British rule. When Christian missionaries first arrived in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists took an inclusive stance, attending churches and listening to preaching, but they found this was not reciprocated. Christians were exclusive in that they would not attend the religious rites of another religion, and even preached that Buddhist teachings were false, if not demonic. Over time, the exclusive intolerance of the Christians became mirrored by the Buddhists, with monks forbidding lay Buddhists from attending rival religious places of worship and taking up harshly polemical rhetoric...Notably, at first, Buddhists engaged religious diversity very differently, but later took on attitudes that mirror Christian exclusivism (though harsh polemic against rivals had long been part of Buddhist practice) (168).

Hedges rightfully explains how “the concept of a nation state as the homeland of a particular racialized ethno-linguistic cultural grouping (see Chapter 5) was imported by the British and imbibed by an emerging Sinhalese nationalist movement” (169). Additionally, the Sinhalese movement adopted racialized expressions of ethnicities from the British, pitting the superior Sinhalese (of Aryan stock) against the Tamils (of inferior Dravidian stock, associated with darker skin tones, and considered indigenous to southern India) (see 169). Indeed, Dharmapala, a major figure in the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, “drew upon European imaginaries of antisemitism” in his negative portrayal of Muslims (175). Furthermore, violence against Muslims in this context is often justified to this day (e.g., treatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar) in terms of the “War on Terror” rhetoric of the United States of America and European nations (here, one should add the treatment of Uighur Muslims is likewise justified by the Chinese Communist Party through the “War on Terror” domestic and foreign policy of Western nations). In any case, “a largely peaceful history between the communities in both [Sri Lanka and Myanmar] is therefore eclipsed, to at least some degree, by a modern prejudice which sees itself enacted in militant violence against minority Muslim groups” (180). Once again, at the risk of overtheorizing, the genealogical sources of contemporary *non-Western* antisemitism and Islamophobia in this context remains found in *the (Christian, colonizing) West*—even if ingredients for religious hatred are obviously found in all religious traditions and in human affect, cognition, and social behavior as such.

In chapter ten, “Hindutva as hatred: Hindus, Muslims, and the fatherland,” Hedges presents another insightful and succinct summary of non-Western Islamophobia. After a short historical background on the relations among Muslims and Hindus in the South Asian context, from which irenic and violent narratives could be told, he presents a section that once again connects Western imaginaries and projects with contemporary religious/racial hate: “Hindu nationalism: A British legacy” (184ff). Here he locates the formation of Hindu nationalism, Hindu negative stereotypes of “the Muslim,” and also Muslim negative stereotypes of “the Hindu,” back to British representations of both and to British nationalist ideologies. Whereas in pre-colonial South Asia “there were...fluid and nuanced differentiations between those we would term Hindus and Muslims,” the British colonial project of creating “distinct communal identities” to facilitate governance (drawing on Foucault’s insights on power and knowledge) impacted Indian nationalist movements. He concludes that “British representations of the ‘jihadi’ Muslim no doubt fed into earlier Hindu perceptions lighting flames of suspicion between the communities” (185). Hedges nonetheless illustrates in this chapter that, of course, “Hindu antipathy and in-group and out-group identification against Muslims [and vice-versa] dates back to at least the eleventh century” (194). However, it must be noted, as Hedges does, that “Hindu nationalist Islamophobia...as a modern occurrence...is shaped by colonial and Western thought where ‘Hindu’ and ‘the Muslim’ have been created as binary polar identities” (194). Once again, the genealogical sources of Islamophobia in the Hindu and Indian contexts are in Western thought and the colonial project; furthermore, in this case it “exemplifies a global Islamophobia linked to a religiously affiliated populist ethno-nationalism in many countries” (194), viz., right-wing populism in the United States.

In this critical book review, I have underscored some of the pitfalls of untheorizing antisemitism and Islamophobia. It is not Hedges’ project to create a grand theory that connects global antisemitism and Islamophobia to the legacies of Western colonialism, Christian exclusivism and antisemitism, and Christian supersessionism (and thus Western supremacy).

However, as the critical assessment of these last three chapters in particular, and the book in general, suggests, Hedges' writing occasionally belies his own project to untheorize antisemitism and Islamophobia. The sources of contemporary non-Western antisemitism and Islamophobia may very well be in Western and Christian theologies, imaginaries, colonial projects, and nationalisms. Is this, then, an "overarching grand explanation"? And if so, is it at all helpful, or does it complicate matters more, as Hedges seems to argue.

This is why Hedges' project of untheorizing has its benefits. His final two sections of the book, Interlude Four ("Can we regulate religious hatred?") and the Epilogue ("The good news: Dialogue, civil rights, and peacebuilding"), illuminate why untheorizing is necessary. While it may be true from a theoretical standpoint that the historical dissemination of Western, Christian ideologies (including exclusivist theologies, racialization, and nationalism discourse) to the non-Euro-North American world may have formatively structured global antisemitism and Islamophobia, this does not necessarily assist in formulating practices on the ground to mitigate religious/racial hatred. Global, national, and legal regimes and policies attempting to regulate hate speech and prevent the violent expressions of antisemitism and Islamophobia globally *may not need to account for the legacies of Western, Christian imperial, colonial, and supersessionist/supremacist ideologies and projects that produced them*. This is precisely the benefit of Hedges' untheorizing: it points us to practical strategies for countering antisemitism and Islamophobia today. Yes, the answers to whence, whither, wherefore, and whereby of antisemitism and Islamophobia may be "because Western, Christian colonialism", but this may not assist national governments and international conventions in creating practical and enforceable laws to prevent vandalism, pogroms, violent mobs, hate speech, and genocides.

If anything—and speaking as a Catholic theologian myself—the project of relating antisemitism and Islamophobia to Western, Christian ideologies may have to be left to Christian communities and theologians themselves who are seeking to undo the harm caused by the legacies of their words and deeds. Although, insofar as our world is structured by neocolonial, racial capitalism, *some attention* to the legacies of the past may be necessary in restructuring our world to prevent antisemitism, Islamophobia, and all forms of racism today. Whether untheorizing antisemitism and Islamophobia is more beneficial than harmful is an open debate; certainly, it at least *risks disassociating* them—especially Islamophobia—from our contemporary neocolonial, racial capitalist system. Presumably, Hedges may argue that this, too, is an "overarching grand explanation" that, while it may be true, is not very helpful in terms of local and global legal regimes and policies. Unless, of course, the goal is to subvert and reimagine a whole new way of organizing our world.

Paul Hedges' book nonetheless remains an excellent resource. It could serve as a textbook in undergraduate or graduate courses on the topic of antisemitism, Islamophobia, or both, so long as it is supplemented with articles and research that examine the Christian supremacist, Western nationalist, and European colonialist (and neocolonial, racial capitalist) role in exporting antisemitism and Islamophobia to other contexts. Indeed, I'll be employing it in my own classes precisely because of how it opens us up to debate and critical exploration.

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