

REVIEW

Stereotyping Religion: Comparing Clichés, ed. Brad Stoddard and Craig Martin, 2017. London & New York, Bloomsbury, 183 pp., \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-4742-9219-1 (pbk).

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Stereotyping Religion is a collection of chapters aimed at dispelling popular clichés about religion in America arising primarily from the legacy of European liberalism, American Protestantism, and New Atheism. The primary intended audience is religious studies students in America (as well as religious studies professors looking for course readings). The goal of the book is to assist students and professors challenge assumptions about religion that they may have unquestioningly brought to the classroom with them – for instance, “religions are belief systems”, “religions are intrinsically violent”, or “religion makes people moral”. Each chapter is named after a cliché, making navigating the book easy. In a typical chapter, the author explains why the cliché is simplistic, how that cliché is used socially or politically, and the historical roots of the cliché. In practice, many of the themes (such as “religion is a private matter”) run through multiple chapters. While some chapters are more convincing than others, each chapter is at least likely to make the reader question their own assumptions and spur meaningful discussion.

Overall, the book is written in a conversational, readable tone. Since the book addresses clichés about religion in America, it is natural that it integrates aspects of American popular culture – such as Bill Maher, *Star Trek*, Santa Claus, and Elf on the Shelf – as well as characteristically American notions of and attitudes towards religion, such as a tolerance towards religious conversion. The authors are united in emphasizing the relatively modern definitions of what a religion actually is, and the roots of those notions in colonialist-era biases. They emphasize that it is near-impossible to make a blanket statement about what religion actually is, given the diversity of human practice, and that not all languages have a word for “religion” in the same way that modern English does. They also note that people espouse the clichés which are most suited to their agendas; for instance, an atheist would be most likely to insist that “religion is bullshit”.

Now, to the clichés. “Religions are belief systems” (by Sean McCloud) challenges the assumption that the primary defining factor of a religion should be belief, and that belief is what always leads to action, rather than vice versa. The author also presents situations where Americans formally or informally blend spiritual beliefs of varying origins, even if they identify as Christians. Next comes “Religions are intrinsically violent” (Matt Sheedy), in which the author argues that the claim that all religions are intrinsically violent is relatively new. This is followed by “Religion makes people moral” (Jennifer Eyl); the conclusion here is somewhat softer, in that, while problematizing the cliché, Eyl concedes that religion can

foster moral discourse through providing a framework for moral exploration (examples she cites are the *Tao Te Ching*, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Buddhist Silas) or through motivating people to adhere to a social code by making them feel watched by a non-visible entity.

After that comes “Religion concerns the transcendent” (by Leslie Dorrrough Smith), in which the author makes a case that religion actually deals with many measurables, particularly those related to group identity, and it is precisely *because* religion has tangible effects on the physical world that it is considered worthy of study. This is followed by “Religion is a private matter” (by Robyn Faith Walsh), which goes into greater detail about the historical roots and political role of this cliché. In “Religions are mutually exclusive” (by Steven W. Ramey), the author argues that the idea that a person is expected to adhere to one religion at a time is a legacy of the Abrahamic religions which has been imposed onto the global context, both theoretically as well as practically; for instance, the author argues that, prior to British rule of India, the lines between religious groups were blurrier. In “I’m spiritual but not religious” (by Andie R. Alexander and Russell T. McCutcheon), the authors instil in the reader the notion that personal declarations – such as “I’m spiritual but not religious” – do not arise *ex nihilo* but rather as part of pre-learned discourse and in the context of social interaction. “Learning about religion leads to tolerance” (by Tenzan Eaghll) problematizes the theoretical underpinnings of the actual endeavour of teaching about religion in hopes of fostering tolerance. In “Everyone has a faith” (by James Dennis LoRusso), the author unpacks the idea that everyone has some sort of intrinsic faith, raises the question as to whether it is appropriate to call non-religious ideologies such as atheism “faiths”, and looks at how this cliché shapes the outer world. Lastly, in the final chapter, “Religion is bullshit” (by Rebekka King), the author explores what it might mean for religion to be “bullshit” and one might apply the word to religion. The author comes up with three main implied critiques: falsity, ethical wrongness, and deplorability.

The main strengths of the book are its ease of use, particularly in a pedagogical context; its clear focus; and its potential to lead to broader discussion. One has the sense that the editors (Brad Stoddard and Craig Martin) were rather enthusiastic about and dedicated to this project and really wished to generate something useful and new – which, in fact, they have. However, there are some possible points for critique that could be considered. First, while it is reasonable to discuss theory in a book for religious studies students, some of the chapters would have benefitted from more discussion of what actually happens in practice. *A priori* discussions pale in the face of real-life crises such as a hate crime. Second, the treatment of religious syncretism sometimes seems to be stretched; for instance, given how many ghosts haunt the cathedrals of Europe, it is difficult for me to take belief in ghosts as an example of American Christians picking and mixing between religious traditions. Also, given that religious syncretism happens most everywhere, rather than looking for examples of religious syncretism, the authors could have asked instead why it *shouldn’t* happen – certainly no organized religion has grown up in a vacuum. Third, some pieces might have been more nuanced if there had been a policy not to describe an abstract (a religion) with an adjective suitable for humans (such as “violent”). For instance, before mulling over whether religions are intrinsically violent, it is worth asking whether that is even a meaningful premise; to date, Christianity itself has never picked up a gun. Lastly, while the editors do situate the ideological and methodological roots of their project in the introduction, it

wouldn't be inappropriate in a book on stereotypes to reflect back on the how ideologies common in today's contemporary American academic culture are or are not the best lens for understanding religion or the human condition. None of these points is a severe criticism; rather, they could be food for thought when reading and discussing the material.

Since that this is an Islamic studies journal, a few words are in order about the book's presentation of Islam. Given the dismal portrayal of Islam in the contemporary US mass media, it is natural that Islam would feature in a book about religious stereotyping in America. The authors themselves are not advocating any stereotypes about Islam and use examples of Islam or Muslims to challenge clichés about religion. However, in practice, the names that they drop about Islam leave the reader with a slanted, stereotypical image of Islam. That is, one reads about ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram; terrorism, FGM, and apostasy; and Salman Rushdie, Maajid Nawaz, and (the vociferously ex-Muslim) Ayaan Hirsi. While it is perfectly legitimate to discuss any of these on their own, most Muslims would not consider these names or issues to be representative of most Muslims. (In contrast, in discussions of Christianity, one finds more expected names such as Martin Luther and Augustine.) I don't think this was intentional on the part of the authors but rather was simply due to integrating today's popular views in the US about who or what is "Islamic". In any case, this would be another excellent topic for discussion.