

Professor Aaron W. Hughes

Religious Others and the Shaping of Orthodoxy in the Early Islamic Period

The Qurʾān is a text that is relentlessly self-conscious of the fact that it exists in a world occupied by entrenched and rival religions. We see this, for example, in its constant acknowledgment that it constellates between Judaism and Christianity. Its verses offer words of recognition and praise to these two religions on the one hand, yet can often be highly disparaging on the other. If we situate Islam as a continuation of the late antique period, this means that its early framers inherited a social world that had been largely defined by previous empires in the region (i.e., Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian). Islam, thus, entered world history in a period that thought a lot about religion. As a new religion lacking an ancient pedigree, inevitable questions arose: What were those responsible for articulating Islam to do with these other—and, by definition, rival—religious traditions? How, for example, could older religions be situated within a much broader narrative landscape that naturally culminated in Islam's rise and florescence?

The self-perceived newness of Islam in the earliest centuries, including the necessity of establishing its doctrinal and theological intent, compounded with Muslim encounters with ancient and now rival religious competitors, inevitably and inexorably created a set of tensions and anxieties. Islam had to be imagined, but such an activity could only be done in counterpoint with the conception of rival religions. Islam, perhaps more than other religions, tended to be thought about and constructed comparatively from its very beginning. The subsequent articulation of orthodoxy was thus continuously contingent upon working out the differences with these other religions.

My proposed paper, emerging from the field of religious studies and early Islamic history, seeks to show how the early framers of Islam struggled with religious others, both external and internal, and how this struggle was ultimately responsible for the creation of what would emerge as (Sunnī) orthodoxy. It does this by focusing on a set of individuals—or, perhaps better, literary tropes—associated with Judaism and Christianity. They were often encapsulated in personifications, taking the form, for instance, of the “good” Jew (e.g., Kaʿb al-Aḥbār) or the “good” Christian (e.g., Baḥīra) or alternatively the “bad” Jew (e.g., ʿAbdallāh Ibn Saba) or the “bad” Christian (e.g., Paul).



Professor Aaron W. Hughes

University of Rochester

Aaron W. Hughes is the Dean's Professor of the Humanities and the Philip S. Bernstein Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Rochester. He has held visiting positions at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, McMaster University, the University of Oxford, and the Aga Khan University. His research has been supported by the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust (Jerusalem), the Killam Foundation, the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), and Fulbright Canada.