
BOOK REVIEW

Hughes, Aaron W. (ed.). 2017. *Theory in a Time of Excess: Beyond Reflection and Explanation in Religious Studies Scholarship*. Sheffield: Equinox. vi + 205pp. ISBN: 978-1-7817-9423-4 £60.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-7817-9424-1. £19.99 (pbk); ISBN: 978-1-7817-9511-8 (e-book) £19.99.

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Theory in a Time of Excess is an interesting book of four main parts consisting of a chapter by a scholar working in a “subfield” of Religious Studies on their view of “theory”, several chapters in response, and a concluding chapter by the initial scholar who responds to the responses; a structure that, intentional or not, effectively presents theory in action. In the introduction, editor Aaron W. Hughes implies that theory is supposed to be about “critical reflection, critique, and dismantling inherited discourses ... and reconstruction”, but that it now “risks becoming one of those terms that can mean all things to all people”, with “the majority of scholars of religion” now claiming “to be specialists in something called ‘theory and method’” (pp. 1–2).

The first major part begins with historian of religion Jason N. Blum, who realizes that theory is imperfect, and requires humility, empirical accountability, and falsifiability (pp. 21–24). A highlight, which asserts that theorizing should not be too divorced from reality: “The map may not be the territory, but a map that leads you to Knoxville when you’re trying to get to Denver is demonstrably inferior to one that brings you at least to the Colorado state line” (p. 25). Richard Newton agrees and expands, worrying that theory often results in pointless speculation (p. 40). Michael J. Altman, as if to confirm that these concerns are valid, suggests that “restraint is not only unnecessary but, frankly, irrelevant” (p. 32), and might inadvertently add another concern about the “So what?” factor, since theory is about “what the theorist has taken an interest in”, and why (p. 34). Almost predictably, if I may indulge in theory myself, Altman brings racism and imperialism into the discussion (p. 35). Tara Baldrick-Morrone’s response adds nothing substantial and seems quite confused, with Blum’s concluding reply brushing away various objections, and explaining that Baldrick-Morrone had simply misunderstood him (p. 54).

In the second major part of the book, a committed theorist takes centre stage, literary theorist K. Merinda Simmons, who is all for putting less focus on traditional objects of study and more on scholars focused on such. A kindred spirit is found in Martha Smith Roberts, who provides more questions than answers, and rants about social justice. Much like myself, Thomas J. Whitley studies “actual stuff” and feels “woefully out of place” here

(p. 74). He states the obvious in noting that not everyone will be interested in what theorists have to say, and alludes to theory's unimportance and absurdity in recognizing that theorists can further become objects of study by other theorists (pp. 77–78), as we can see with this very review. The more amenable Stephen L. Young seems to continue with this thought, playfully subjecting Simmons to the sort of theory she endorses (p. 84). One wonders if this endless navel-gazing is a way of justifying our field's existence. Simmons's reply to all this appears to justify scepticism about her sort of work, as her response asks questions; questions that she apparently has answers to, but refuses to share (p. 90).

Next we hear from Claire White, who specializes in Cognitive Science of Religion. As can be expected from someone deeply committed to a more materialistic outlook, White appears unimpressed that many scholars of religion are hesitant about CSR, despite its scientific uses and multidisciplinary approach, and the opportunity for methodological pluralism (p. 106). Brad Stoddard finds that CSR can be used to both invalidate and justify religion, but highlights the Templeton Foundation's role in funding some of this work. This is, of course, "doing theory" as he studies "the proponents of CSR" (p. 118). Matt Sheedy then plays the all-too-familiar game of wondering what religion is, preferring to focus on culture and politics, as if the supernatural aspects of traditional religion is completely irrelevant (pp. 124–26). White remains firm in her reply, however, calmly swatting away Stoddard's exaggerations about funding of CSR and other misunderstandings (pp. 129–30). To Sheedy, White provides the obvious retort to a silly objection: White is aiming to explain *some* aspects of religion, not *all* (p. 131). She leaves little question regarding her view of the importance of her—empirical—work and the futility of much that is called theory: "If we are wrong about what we thought of as the patterns designating religion, even better, because then knowledge has progressed on the basis of scientific discovery about how the world actually is rather than armchair reflection on how the world could be" (p. 134).

In the final major part of *Theory*, philosopher of religion Matthew C. Bagger wisely and fairly advocates for methodological pluralism, for a diversity of approaches; even for the oft-dreaded fact-heavy and hyper-logical analytic philosophy (p. 148). This prompts variegated responses, such as from Rebekka King, who opposes such pluralism; and James Dennis LoRusso, who doesn't care for Bagger's sort of work, indicates that we can never have enough theory (which suspiciously would keep scholars of religion busy in perpetuity, whether or not it produces valuable contributions to humanity's collective knowledge), and seems more interested in arguing that "'race' is a social construct" (pp. 162–63). Robyn Faith Walsh, whilst providing an intriguing example around the overeagerness of New Testament scholars to posit hypothetical sources behind the New Testament, which is something I make a big fuss about in my own work, also seems to object to Bagger's endorsement of pluralism. Bagger's concluding reply is, as can be expected, reasoned and forceful. On Walsh, Bagger notes that her example actually proves the usefulness of a diversity of approaches, cleverly and tactfully explaining that she is wrong by pointing to her expertise, which makes her able to call out such shoddy scholarship (p. 173). Bagger is similarly tactful with LoRusso, humorously pointing out "the intersubstitutability of race with another set [of referring expressions]" (pp. 175–76). Indeed, in my previous life as a health professional, I was trained to recognize the important biological differences between various ethnicities, which, among other things, can affect the metabolism of various drugs. To King, Bagger simply alludes to the vacuousness of opposing methodological pluralism without explaining what theories and methods "she has in mind" (p. 172).

While I have been happy to see the more materialistic-minded scholars take the theorists down a notch or three, theory is indeed a useful endeavour. It is laudable to be upfront

about our assumptions, and our motivations, and to question the motivations and assumptions of those who came before us. I do wonder, however, about the need for theory to effectively be its own sub-field, rather than simply a necessary element of good scholarship. For example, a good introduction to a book about “actual stuff” will generally consider the starting points of the authors and the scholars who they support or oppose. Still, agreeing with the materialists in the volume who endorse a plurality of approaches, I am content for theory to be on the plate, so long as it is not the whole meal. But I can go further and support dedicated theorists to take a seat at the table; we just need to ensure that others have a seat, too. This brings to mind a contributor to an earlier project Hughes was involved in, who plainly said that the truth “muddies the waters”. While self-reflection is useful, we should not allow objective facts about objects to be overlooked in favour of speculations about persons (often known in my area as *ad hominem* argumentation), and should definitely not relegate the search for truth to such an extent that it is considered abhorrent.