

REVIEW

In Agents of God: Boundaries and Authority of Muslim and Christian Schools by Jeffrey Guhin, 2021. New York: Oxford University Press, £47.99, x + 279 pp. ISBN: 978-0-190-24474-3 (hbk).

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Jeffrey Guhin uses ethnographic research in his comparative analysis of two Sunni Muslim schools and two Evangelical Christian schools. The stated mission of all four schools is to provide students with a religious education that will shape how they view the world while still allowing for freedom of thought (200). Guhin shows that these schools work through this paradox by deferring primarily to external authorities, like the Bible or the Qur'an, as opposed to the teacher's authority (200). These external authorities function autonomously, as they are not the teachers' authority per se, to regulate moral behavior. Thus, teachers become "agents of God" as they guide students to the schools' desired religious commitments by pointing to the external authorities to inform students of the "boundaries" that should guide their behavior (206). This is the schools' method for organizing students' lives around specific moral commitments.

Guhin establishes a theoretical foundation for his study in Chapter One. He is concerned with three ideas: the issue of *force*, how *boundaries* are maintained, and the strength of *external authorities* (9). Force is related to how one makes decisions. Especially in the West, teachers do not force students to obey religious outcomes. Instead, students are to choose those outcomes freely. Boundaries, on the other hand, are how the schools separate themselves from the rest of the world to maintain their religious identity and resist conformity to the beliefs of secular culture. It is not the teacher's authority directly that upholds these boundaries but rather "external authorities" they appeal to like Scripture, prayer, and science that do so for them. For example, a teacher may want the student to conform to a religious boundary established by the school. Rather than using her position as a teacher to force the student to oblige, she may appeal to a verse in Scripture and give the student the option to obey or disobey (14).

Chapters Two through Four discuss how the schools distance themselves from the influence of American secular culture. In chapter two, Guhin demonstrates how these religious schools involve themselves in politics (44) and differentiate themselves from public schools (58). He shows that all four schools are politically engaged and that such religious education provides students with what is deemed to be politically essential. Muslims understand the way television, the radio, and social media spews out Islamophobia. These schools emphasize that Islamophobia prevents Muslims from becoming welcomed participants in American culture (35). Evangelicals, meanwhile, appear in *God's Agents* as living in the past and wary of secularism. They reminisce for when – in their estimation – America was a Christian

nation (43). They thus promote political positions that seek to restore a religious America and reestablish what they understand to be Judeo-Christian values.

All four schools that Guhin studies see the public school system as the primary dispenser of secular values (23). They must differentiate themselves from the values and secular education of these schools to best differentiate themselves from secularism itself. For this reason, these schools see religious education as the means to counter secularism.

Chapter Three discusses how schools differentiate gender. The religious schools see teaching “accurately” about gender as a mission. They seek to establish traditional gender roles and gender expectations. The Muslim schools emphasize maintaining proper interaction between genders by maintaining gender separation and requiring girls to wear the hijab (75). Meanwhile, evangelicals are more concerned with the “danger” of secular gender ideology (86). They respond to this perceived danger by denouncing feminism, which they interpret as an ideological movement that distorts a “proper” understanding of gender. Another element of a secular culture that causes fear in all four schools is the internet and the representations of sex available online, which they considered capable of undermining the authority of their respective religions on the matter (89). Thus, furthering the proper boundaries on how sexuality is understood was their primary focus, with the internet serving as an essential boundary marker, as it has the potential to expose the students to pornography (99).

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven elaborate on the functions of external authorities. In Chapter Five, Guhin shows how both faiths maintain that Scripture is a powerful artifact and emphasize reading, memorizing, and interpreting the Bible and the Qur’an. Muslims and Evangelicals see their scriptures as divinely inspired by God and thus intrinsically different from the works of mortals. Guhin observes that all four schools maintain that Scripture possesses a specific inherent power, irrespective of whether people read it or not (110). In both Evangelical and Muslim schools, scripture “is an agent with autonomous authority,” which means that teachers do not need to appeal directly to their authority to motivate students (119). Chapter Six presents prayer as an external authority with autonomy; prayer itself is capable of changing people and situations (149). Guhin discovers that that prayer for Muslim and Evangelical schools functions as both an agent and an intermediary between God and the person praying (154). More often than not, the focus is on the act of prayer – an independent entity – and not God (141).

In Chapter Seven, Guhin explores the possibility of science functioning as an external authority. Evangelicals consider opposing Darwinism to be fundamental to their faith (168). Nevertheless, they also view scientific a useful tool to provide evidence for proving evolution wrong, in effect designating science as another external authority (190). On the other hand, Muslims were less concerned with opposing Darwinism (180). At the same time, they were faithful to a broader creationist understanding of the world (185), “emphasizing three key strategies to counter evolution: the centrality of lab science, a pragmatic focus on the here and now, and intelligent design” (172). Guhin shows that for the schools to build their argument, it required them to distinguish between macroevolution and microevolution. Such a postulate allows them to recognize minor evolutionary changes within the species while also denying significant evolutionary changes, relegating them to unproven, unscientific theory.

God's Agent is a significant contribution to the fields of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. It constitutes a step towards the broader goal of enhancing our understanding of religion itself by studying orthoprax religions. I write this as one with graduate degrees in both Evangelical and Islamic institutions. Though I was already greatly familiar with the theology of both traditions before reading *God's Agent*, I gained a lens through which I could view the similarities and differences between the two forms of religious education by engaging with Guhin's study. Furthermore, this insight into these schools provides the reader with complete knowledge of the workings of these two faiths in general. For instance, Guhin astutely notes that, for Evangelicals, the Bible functions as both an authority and a marker, meaning that reading the Bible regularly is essential for being considered a faithful Christian (116). For the Muslim, though, regularly reading the Qur'an is not a necessary marker for faith. Instead, Muslims are expected to be consistent in performing their daily prayers (146). Guhin also demonstrates how the practice of prayer is understood differently by the two faiths. For Evangelical students, prayer, for the most part, equates speaking with God (146). Conversely, the Muslim students, he observed, understand the practice to be far more elaborate (144). Such observations by Guhin, which may be apparent for those within the tradition, provide the reader with critical points of departure in the broader context of religious education.