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Defining Judaism: Accounting for "Religions" in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

Despite the wide scholarly recognition of and dissatisfaction with the first-order essentialism inherent in the academic study of individual "religions"

or "traditions," scholars have been far slower to develop nonessentialist models that take seriously both the plurality of religious communities that all identify as part of the same religion and the characteristics that allow these communities to see themselves as members of a single "religion." This article, building on earlier work by Jacob Neusner and Jonathan Z. Smith, attempts to develop a polythetic model for Judaism that has implications not only for the study and teaching of "Judaism" but more broadly also for how scholars might develop individual "traditions" as useful second-order categories of analysis.

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