
Written by Jeremy Stolow, an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University, Orthodox by Design is a comprehensive, innovative, and groundbreaking study of the world's largest Orthodox Jewish publishing house, Artscroll, and its unrivaled influence in the English-speaking Jewish diaspora. Stolow’s study of Artscroll is accomplished through a carefully developed interdisciplinary methodology that combines media analysis with history, ethnographic inquiry, and scriptural interpretation, all informed by the diverse fields of media, religion, and social sciences. Situated in the middle of the most contested struggles for acknowledgment and legitimacy within contemporary Jewish public life, Jeremy Stolow insists that Artscroll's unquestionable success (beginning in 1976 with 500 copies of The Magillah: The Book of Esther, it eventually emerged as the most significant player in the Jewish publishing world with books on virtually all aspects of Orthodox Judaism) lies in the publisher's ability to balance Jewish orthodoxy of the strictest kind (Haredism) with business acumen and technological innovation in the printing process.

Undoubtedly, as far as religious interpretation is concerned, Artscroll's access to the multiple diasporic audiences is partially explained by its commitment to the transmission of authentic messages in a simple and easily understandable language, even for the newly initiated. For example, the prayer books are accompanied by numerous commentaries on classic sources that seek to deliver the religious message closer to the unqualified reader. Despite the fact that this approach is less attentive to local traditions and runs the risk of conflating historically diverse orthodox practices of Judaism, it is nonetheless appreciated as modern and ethical not only among those with little fluency in Hebrew but also in ultra-orthodox and conservative circles. In part, Artscroll's revolutionary influence is due to its ability to produce books in different genres—from Talmudic commentaries and Bibles to Rabbinic biographies, manuals on family life, novels, and cookbooks—that find popularity among audiences of varying age, gender, and taste. Moreover, all these books are produced with aesthetic care in a format and style that facilitates the unique deployment of the “fundamentalist religious authority” (p. 28) by design—that is, something that is equally conditioned by discourse and physical material. Finally, Artscroll's financial success is due to a flexible production model—in terms of structure, organization, marketing politics, editing, and translations—that allows the publisher to conform to the trends of the publishing industry and remain on top of technological innovation without compromising the religious expectations of its audience.

Jeremy Stolow’s book is a contribution to the emergent interdisciplinary area of research on the public sphere, whose highest theoretical and pragmatic stakes have recently revolved around debates on religious demands for visibility, recognition, and active participation in public discussion. In that aspect, the merit of Stolow’s work is that it attempts, through a combination of anthropological, media, and historical analy-
sis, to develop a counter-argument to the classics in the field (Habermas, 1962) whose skepticism regarding religion’s potential to be an impartial player—driven by rational argumentation and commitments to the common good—is well-documented and highly contested (see Benhabib 1992, Brown 2011, Butler 2011, Fraser 1992, 2005, 2007, Taylor 2004, & Warner 2005). In a sense, Stolow’s entire argument against the secular and secularizing character of modern public spheres suggests that actors such as Artscroll, while capitalizing on the vulnerable string of “religious fundamentalism,” (pp. 28-29) are yet capable of construing alternative public spaces on the basis of the modern print (and digital) medium. Needless to say, these spaces are governed by their own value dynamics—presumably “fundamentalist,” even though Stolow is reluctant to discuss values in detail—that are simultaneously parallel to and awkwardly intersecting with the other secular and Christian public spheres. This is central to the theoretical armature of the book’s thesis; however, it implies more development in at least three crucial directions.

First, despite the rich ethnographic evidence on the reception of Artscroll’s books in the diverse Haredi community of the English-speaking diaspora, there is little attention paid to how the appropriation of Artscroll’s message influences (if at all) the interaction of its recipients with the wider world beyond the limits of this well-defined and enclosed Jewish public sphere. Therefore, an important question that remains to be answered is whether Artscroll has the capacity (and the ambition) to transcend the boundaries of the diaspora and become an authoritative religious player in the political and social landscape of national “secular” public spheres. I assume a positive answer to this question by reading the account of the three landmark public events organized by Artscroll in 2005: the special dedication ceremony at the Library of Congress; the simultaneous celebrations of the final volume of the Talmud at Madison Square Garden in New York, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, and in Tel Aviv (a total of 120,000 participants); and finally, the gala supper at the New York Hilton Hotel for approximately 2,700 patrons. Therefore, is it possible to assume that Artscroll conditions not only the religious but also the political and social agency of its clients in ways that are not immediately available in the media and ethnographic analysis?

Second, the fact that Artscroll defines itself as a strictly religious institution in the Jewish English-speaking diaspora does not necessarily mean that it is a phenomenon that exists and could be conceptualized entirely beyond the logic of the secular. The very fact that it competes for audiences, invents profitable means for dissemination, and seeks innovative technologies for the transmission of its books already indicates that Artscroll is an institution that is aware of its own embedded place in the mundane structures of the world. Artscroll certainly derives its power from being regarded as an authoritative religious voice by a certain community of people, and yet this does not mean that there is a supreme “divine” power that authorizes the existence of this publisher. Artscroll’s struggle to be a powerful player in the diasporic world implicates it in the process of secularization—it has to compete for people’s worldly attention, not for their souls—and makes it an institution that is more secular than its self-styling strategy would want to admit.

Third, even if one agrees to treat Artscroll as an entirely religious institution, then,
in terms of the public sphere—always subject to certain political agendas—one important question is how the organization of the public sphere around a strict religious doctrine differs from that of a non-religious doctrine. In other words, does it mean that the successful model of Artscroll that Stolow describes is and should be applicable to Western public spheres that are, occasionally fashionably, regarded as tarnished by the “excesses” of secularism?

References


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