Eric Ziolkowski, "Introduction," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5, no. 2 (2015): 153–56.

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org
ISSN 1179–7231

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception 5, no. 2 (2015): 153–56

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Introduction

This special issue of *Relegere* finds its genesis in a session entitled "Editing Encyclopedias and Handbooks in Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Aims and Challenges," held under the sponsorship of the Publications Committee of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) on November 22, 2014 at the AAR's annual national meeting in San Diego. At this session, five papers were presented by five speakers, all of them editors or co-editors of, as well as contributing authors to, major reference works in religious studies and related fields. The conference program book spelled out the session's focus as follows:

> In the age of the Internet, Wikipedia, digitalization, and tightened library budgets, what purposes are served by large reference works, specifically encyclopedias and handbooks, in religious studies? What are their uses in research and teaching? What roles can, and do, they play in the production and advancement of knowledge? Who are their intended readers, and how are these readers—including their needs and experiences—changing?

Such remains the focus of this special issue of *Relegere*. Of the five papers presented at that AAR session, four have been adapted as essays here, joined by a fifth, freshly-composed essay by another author. The first essay, my own,

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"The Encyclopedic Impulse in Religious Studies," reflects historically upon what I suggest to be the basic impulse behind the conceptualizing, planning, and production of large encyclopedias in religious and biblical studies: the proverbial sense of information overload, and the desire to bring some form of order to it. The second essay, by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "The First Rule is *Never* Begin with the Letter A… Or, How I Learned to Love Writing Reference Books," serves in effect as the prototype for the same genre which the remaining three essays also represent, what might be called *apologia pro encyclopedia sua*. By this coinage I mean a narrative consisting of intellectual reflections on, and conveying pragmatic wisdom and practical advice derived from, the author's own experiences as an editor of encyclopedias, handbooks, and/or also dictionaries in religious studies. Whereas Apostolos-Cappadona draws upon her authorial, consulting, and editorial experiences with a whole array of different reference resources, including but not limited to Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), *The Dictionary of Art* (1996), *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (2005), and her own *Dictionary of Christian Art* (1994), the other three authors—who have equally extensive editorial experience with such projects—each focus their essays mainly on their work with one particular project: Robert A. Segal, with *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2006), in his essay by that same title; Lindsay Jones, with the 2005 second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, in "The *Encyclopedia of Religion* in a Digital Age: Entries Not Found, Treasures Not Mined"; and Frank Burch Brown, with the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (2014), in "Editing Encyclopedias and Handbooks in Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Aims and Challenges." With Jones's essay, there is the additional benefit of his appended "Summary Outline of the Contents and Organization of the Encyclopedia of Religion," an invaluable map to that entire fifteen-volume work, reminiscent of the celebrated "Système figuré des connoissances humaines" drawn up by Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Denis Diderot for their revolutionary twenty-eight-volume *Encyclopédie* of 1751–72 (not counting the five supplemental volumes of 1776–77 and two index volumes of 1780).

Scholars of religion notoriously disagree about the nature of their object of study, or even whether there is an object, and hence also about whether religious studies really constitutes a field or discipline at all. Likewise, the terms "encyclopedia" and "handbook," together with "dictionary," "guidebook," and "companion," emerge in our five essays as terms of surprisingly uncertain meanings. For example, when Brown agreed to edit the *Oxford*

Handbook of Religion and the Arts, he tells us, he thought of a handbook as a small, portable field guide of the sort used by bird watchers to furnish relevant information succinctly and reliably; he was therefore puzzled to be told by the Press that what it wanted was "a large volume made up of relatively lengthy chapters and representing state-of-the-art scholarship." Somewhat comparably, after completing her own *Dictionary of Christian Art*, Apostolos-Cappadona was surprised to find it indexed by the Library of Congress as an encyclopedia, because, she learned, the designation of a given reference work as a dictionary or an encyclopedia is determined by the length of the work's entries, and some of her entries exceeded the prescribed dictionary-length. At the same time, while Eliade and his co-editors wanted the *Encyclopedia of Religion* to be specifically—in Joseph Kitagawa's words, quoted in my essay—"not a dictionary but a genuine encyclopedia," Segal expressly disregards such distinctions, noting that he himself employs the terms "companion," "handbook," "guidebook," "dictionary," and "encyclopedia" interchangeably. (He is in good company, as it is often forgotten that the alternate title of the Diderot-d'Alembert *Encyclopédie* was *Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*.) And while some of us, as I mention in my essay, see producing an encyclopedia as an opportunity to help "to shape the future directions of scholarship" in the covered field, Segal regards the aim of a companion as "neither to advance the state of the field nor to question it" but rather "simply to convey it, approach by approach and topic by topic."

However, there is one point on which the five of us surely all agree. As Jones attests, despite the vision and ideas that go into the planning of a large reference work, the labor involved in actually making such a work requires perseverance and endurance even more than talent and insight, and resembles more the digging of ditches than the writing of poetry. To be sure, with Brown, the rest of us may share the conviction that encyclopedias, handbooks, and the like are "increasingly indispensable in a world in which much potentially valuable knowledge accumulates unnoticed and unconnected and in which pretensions to knowledge proliferate without critical inspection." Yet overhanging and to a large extent impelling the entire enterprise of compiling such works, from beginning to end, is an anxiety born of more than the aforementioned sense of information overload.

As odd and perhaps amusing as it may seem, the anxiety I am thinking of approximates that dreadful namesake emotion, angst, ascribed by Søren Kierkegaard to the individual caught in the existential dilemma between the choosing the eternal and choosing one's own self. As if to mimic or par-

ody that momentous choosing of one's self which the great Danish thinker found to transpire at the moment when time and eternity coincide, the angst-ridden, deadline-driven editors of encyclopedias and handbooks find themselves daily, monthly, and, indeed, yearly confronted by a dizzying myriad of mundane choices and decisions to make: for example, the choices involved in designating, naming, and defining keywords or lemmata; determining the length-limits of articles and the structures of composite entries; finding, inviting, securing, commissioning authors; reviewing, editing, revising, and proofreading drafts; and on and on. As Jones puts it, they are drawn along on "a too-fast ride and too-large challenge in… always hoping for more time to reach the academic standards [the editors have] in mind." Eventually, just as the Kierkegaardian individual's self-chosen, self-created self becomes subject to eternal judgment, so the completed encyclopedia or handbook is submitted to be judged by its readers and reviewers.

Admittedly, this analogy may seem overly theological. Yet it hardly exceeds the aura of profundity evoked by the dark mahogany plaque that, as chance has it, hangs on the wall opposite the door of our contributor Robert Segal's office in College Bounds, King's College, at the University of Aberdeen, commemorating one of that venerable institution's esteemed alumni, the editor of the four-volume *Dictionary of the Bible* (1898–1904) and the monumental thirteen-volume Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (1908–1926), not to mention *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (2 vols., 1906–1908) and *A Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (2 vols., 1915–18). On this plaque, beneath its implanted ivory relief-bust showing the profile of a bearded Edwardian gentleman, the inscription reads: "James Hastings M.A.—D.D.—Minister, Scholar, Editor. Died 15th Oct 1922. MAGNA EST VERITAS ET PRAEVALET"—that is, Truth is great and prevails. In the same spirit as that epigraph, though with a bit more levity, the five of us offer our essays on the editing of large reference works in religious studies.