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The Encyclopedic Impulse in Religious Studies

It is no mere coincidence that the ongoing revolution in information technology has coincided with an explosive increase of reference works, not the least in religious studies and biblical studies. The unprecedented production rate of such works today led one scholar to dub our times "a golden age of reference books," resulting in the challenge of "oversupply." This article reflects historically upon the basic impulse behind the conceptualizing, planning, and production of large encyclopedias in religious and biblical studies: the sense of information overload, and the desire to bring order to it.

AS AN INVETERATE contributor of articles to encyclopedias, handbooks, and guidebooks in religious studies, including some edited by three of the four other contributors to this special issue, I have also been involved over the past decade as a co-editor of the prospective thirty-volume *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (2009–), or *EBR*, whose twelfth volume will soon appear. Though published by De Gruyter in Berlin, *EBR* bridges that tensive San Andreas fault between the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), offering comprehensive coverage of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament, both of

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which fall mainly under the SBL's purview, and scriptural reception in the Jewish and Christian traditions; in new Christian Churches and Movements; in Islam; in other, non-monotheistic religions and new non-monotheistic religious movements; as well as in folklore, literature, visual arts, music, film, and dance. Although "reception" is now a burgeoning field within the SBL, the study of biblical influences in Judaism, Christianity, and the arts has long been a manifest activity within various sections and groups of the AAR, perhaps most obviously the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section.

In the recent, second issue of De Gruyter's new *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, I published an update on *EBR*, offering an account of the project's aims, history, current status, and future prospects.[1] Rather than repeat what I have written there, I wish here to reflect historically on the basic impulse that impels the conceptualizing, planning, and production of large encyclopedias in religious and biblical studies.[2]

Taming "the Vast Stores of Learning"

In his 1874 treatise *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche decried the "overproud European of the nineteenth century" as having gone "mad [*du rasest*!]" in the quest for knowledge: "Your knowledge does not complete nature but only kills your own…. Admittedly you claim the sunbeams of your knowledge upwards to heaven, but also downwards to chaos." What bothered Nietzsche was not the knowledge quest itself, but rather the loss of perspective that accompanied it, leading to a "madly thoughtless fragmentation and fraying of all foundations, their dissolution into an ever flowing and dispersing becoming, the tireless entangling and historicizing of all that has come to be by modern man, that great garden spider [*die grosse Kreuzspinne*] in the node of the world web."[3] Six decades

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[1] Eric Ziolkowski, "Dispatches from *EBR*: A Report on Volumes 1–10 (of 30), with a Special Focus on Reception-Related Matters," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 1, no. 2 (2014): 285–308.

[2] For a thorough and insightful survey of the history of encyclopedias, with a special focus on their conjunction with the study of religion, see Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Circumscribing Knowledge: Encyclopedias in Historical Perspective," *The Journal of Religion* 70, no. 3 (1990): 315–39.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, in *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta (1874; Munich: Carl Hanser, 1954–1956), 1: 267; Eng.: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 50.

later, Nietzsche's treatise was read with sympathy by Joachim Wach (1898–1955)—that "wonderful, mighty, learned man," as Charles Long characterizes him,[4] and a tireless champion of *Religionswissenschaft*. In 1937, after invoking Nietzsche's attack on "the indiscriminate amassing of information in service to a misconstrued ideal of education," which threatened our "creative power" (or, literally, plastic power: *plastische Kraft*), Wach—recently dismissed by the Nazis from his Leipzig professorship—worried that "the preservation and cultivation of the creative powers [*Kräfte*], which are in danger of becoming paralysed as an effect of the increase in factual information which the historical age has brought, demands concentration upon the essential and the necessary."[5] An irrepressible systematizer in his many writings, Wach tried to fend off the ever-mounting tsunamis of information available to scholars of religion by his time. He did so through, among other means, "thinking typologically";[6] deploying classificatory notions such as the "universal" and the "classical"; and consigning the excess gleanings from his seemingly preternatural erudition to the litanies of references that fill his fulsome, cascading footnotes.

Wach, with Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959), was one of the last of those whom Mircea Eliade characterized as the "encyclopedists" in the study of religion, "fashioners of a splendid tradition that had been initiated by Tylor and A. Lang and continued by Frazer, Soederblom, Clemen, Mauss, Coomaraswamy, and van der Leeuw."[7] Pettazzoni and other scholars of his generation—Carl Clemen, E. O. James, van der Leeuw, and, indeed, Wach and Eliade (though Eliade does not include Wach or himself in the list)—"aimed at the same goal of covering the entire domain of *allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*,"[8] the all-embracing history of religion. However, by 1959,

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[4] From interview with Davíd Carrasco, "The Imagination of Matter," disc 1 of the four-disc set *Codex Charles Long*, compiled by Carrasco.

[5] Joachim Wach, "Der Begriff des Klassischen in der Religionsgeschichte," in *Quantulacumque: Studies Presented to Kirsopp Lake by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Robert P. Casey, Silva Lake, and Agnes K. Lake (London: Christophers, 1937), 91, 92; Eng.: "The Concept of the 'Classical'," in *Types of Religious Experience: Christian and Non-Christian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 52, 53. On "die plastische Kraft," see Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, 1: 213; Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 10.

[6] This was a mantra that Wach's student and avowed "disciple," Joseph M. Kitagawa, routinely repeated to his own students.

[7] Mircea Eliade, "The History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912 and After," in *The Quest: History and Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 30.

[8] Ibid., 29.

the year of Pettazzoni's death, and several years after Wach's sudden and premature death, Joseph Kitagawa could lament the price paid for the growing emphasis on "specialized knowledge and competence": "The history of religions inherited the encyclopedic interest of the age of the Enlightenment," but "Today few, if any, can claim competence in all phases of the encyclopedic *Allgemeine* [sic] *Religionswissenschaft.*"[9]

Of course, there is nothing peculiarly modern or postmodern about the experience of "information overload," and the same is true of the encyclopedic impulse, of which the pursuit of *allgemeine Religionsgeschichte* (or *allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*) is but one of many exemplifications in the human sciences. As Ann M. Blair shows in her aptly titled study, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age*,[10] scholars have been producing reference tools for "information management" since antiquity, and these proliferated in early modern Europe, with encyclopedias emerging as but one among a wide variety of reference genres (bibliographies, lexicons, dictionaries, concordances, anthologies [=florilegia], and so forth). The "encyclopedic style" in ethnography is traced back by J. Z. Smith to classical antiquity, where it "offered a topical arrangement of cross-cultural material… culled from reading. It is the style of the 'armchair' anthropologist rather than the fieldworker," finding its roots in Hellanicus of Lesbos in the fifth century BCE, whose ethnographies (*Aegyptiaca*, *Persica*, and *Scythica*) and other collections (*On Peoples*, *On the Foundings of Cities and Peoples*, and *Foreign Customs*) gave rise to an encyclopedic tradition that later "became inextricably wedded to the quest for the exotic, the marvelous, the anomalous, the strange."[11] This extends from the encyclopedic compilations of the poet Callimachus of Cyrene (ca. 305–ca. 240 BCE; *Customs of Foreign Peoples, or Curiosities Collected All Over the World according to Place*), all the way up through Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the subject of Smith's Yale doctoral dissertation, in which Smith pronounced it "one of the most massive illustrations of a truly global concern for religious and cultural data on a scale

[9] Joseph M. Kitagawa, "The History of Religions in America," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 12.

[10] Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[11] Jonathan Z. Smith, "*Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit*," in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (1978; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 250, 251.

perhaps unequalled by any other figure save Eliade."[12] Frazer, it will be recalled, described *The Golden Bough* as "a voyage of discovery, in which we shall visit many strange lands, with strange foreign peoples, and still stranger customs."[13] In this respect, the encyclopedic impulse was directly related to the *cabinets de curiosités* that were so popular in the late Victorian era, as well as the so-called "encyclopedic museums," the concept of which emerged from the Age of Reason, reflecting the conviction that human progress and the future of rational society depended on the dissemination of knowledge and fostering of intellectual inquiry.[14] (Today, this vision can perhaps be re-experienced nowhere more vividly than by a stroll through the Enlightenment Gallery, formerly called the King's Library [built 1823–27, restored 2000–2003], in London's British Museum.) In the same connection, it is also worth noting that Chicago's 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, held three years after *The Golden Bough*'s first edition appeared in Edinburgh, was voyeuristically viewed by certain contemporary "scientists of religion" as a "hierological museum," an encyclopedic showcase of spokespersons for the world's religions—some of them never before represented on American soil.[15]

Writing in 1969, Smith opened his Frazer dissertation by observing: "We labor in a period of unprecedented research in the many aspects of religious studies. Books and articles pour out in staggering quantity requiring numerous new bibliographies that scarcely hint at their number." Despite the proliferation of new journals; new disciplines, methodologies, and discoveries; new departments and institutes for religious studies; and new rapprochements between the traditional disciplines of religious scholarship and other fields—despite all this, Smith noted, "there is no general feeling of triumph in the air, no sense of direction, no clarity that informs what we do."[16] Although the history of religions as a discipline was—as he put it—"only just beginning to successfully emancipate itself from its theological and apologetic past" (a claim Wach had made decades earlier, using the same rhetoric

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[12] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1969), 3–4.

[13] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Abridged ed. (London: Macmillan, 1922), 10.

[14] James Cuno, *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[15] See Eric Ziolkowski, *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*, American Academy of Religion, Classics in Religion (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

[16] Smith, "Glory, Jest and Riddle," 1.

of emancipation),[17] there seemed "a faltering of confidence, a failure of nerve on the part of many practitioners in the field."[18] For Smith, this malaise was the rationale for reexamining the history of his own discipline in search of examples, in this case Frazer, "that might aid us, not in the finding of quick and easy solutions, but… in more sharply formulating our questions."[19]

At other key moments in the discipline's history, the perception of "unprecedented research in… religious studies"—a perception that has recurred as a topos for well over a century—served as a kind of Kliegl searchlight into the sky, like the Bat-Signal cast up from Gotham City in times of distress over a superabundance of data, calling for the assemblage of an encyclopedia-to-the-rescue. Consider the first landmark example of this genre in religious studies, James Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, or *ERE*, whose thirteen huge volumes appeared over the years 1908 to 1926—no mean feat considering that this eighteen-year production period, following six years of preliminary preparation, encompassed the entire First World War. In his "Preface," Hastings states:

> There is at the present time an unusual demand for works of reference. It may be due partly to a higher general standard of education, increasing the number of readers, and compelling teachers,… to 'verify their references.' But it may be due also to the great increase of knowledge in our time. We must possess ourselves of dictionaries and encyclopaedias, because it is not possible otherwise to have at our command the vast stores of learning which have accumulated.[20]

To be sure, *ERE* was preceded by Johann Jakob Herzog's twenty-two volume *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*[21] and Frédéric Lichtenberger's thirteen-volume *Encyclopédie des sciences religieuses*.[22] But in contrast to those predominantly Christian theological undertakings, *ERE*'s "aim," Hastings announced, was "to give an account of Religion and Ethics

[17] See Eric Ziolkowski, "Wach, Religion, and 'The Emancipation of Art'," *Numen* 46, no. 4 (1999): 345–69.

[18] Smith, "Glory, Jest and Riddle," 2.

[19] Ibid., 3.

[20] James Hastings, "Preface," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908–1926), 1: v.

[21] Hamburg: Rudolf Besser, 1854–68.

[22] Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1877–1882.

in all ages and in all countries of the world." He continued: "It is true that the attempt has never been made before. For never before have Religion and Ethics held the place which they now hold in men's thoughts and interests."[23] So while there had "been no difficulty in fixing the [*Encyclopaedia*'s] scope… there [had] been great difficulty in estimating its probable extent. What is wanted," he continued, "is thoroughness. Every line will be watched to see that it is not wasted, but in the present temper of the students of Religion and Ethics *the book that is content with colourless epitomising is doomed to failure*."[24]

Overall, despite some "colourless epitomising," *ERE* was justly praised for its "quite remarkable breadth and depth of treatment, and [its] no less remarkable coherence of approach," achieved despite the "almost 9000 scholars involved in its production,"[25] long before our age of email and digital humanities. Subsequently, there were other major reference works in religious studies: the four successive editions of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*,[26] rendered in English as *Religion Past and Present*;[27] that vast Jesuit undertaking, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, published in forty-five volumes over six decades (1932–1995); and Alfonso Maria Di Nòla's six-volume *Enciclopedia delle religioni*.[28] But the closest thing to a "successor" to *ERE*, as Kitagawa noted,[29] was Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, which appeared in 1987—a year after Eliade's death. In his posthumous "Preface" to volume 1, Eliade too presents his work as responding to yet another flashing instance of the Bat-Signal-meme that there was too much too know. Echoing Hastings from eighty years earlier, Eliade wrote now about his own encyclopedia: "Such an encyclopedia has long been overdue. In all areas of religious studies… the 'information explosion' of recent decades has demanded a new presentation of

[23] James Hastings, "Notes of Recent Exposition," *The Expository Times* 19, no. 8 (1908): 337–38.

[24] Ibid., 339, emphasis mine.

[25] Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Open Court, 1987), 136.

[26] Tübingen: Mohr, 1909–1913; 2nd ed., 1927–1931; 3rd. ed., 1957–1965; 4th. ed., 1998–2005.

[27] 14 vols., ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007–2013).

[28] Florence: Vallecchi, 1970–76.

[29] See Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Foreword," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), I:xiii (hereafter *EOR1*. See also Sullivan, "Circumscribing Knowledge," 333; Eduard Irincinschi, "Mircea Eliade and the Making of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*," *ARCHAEUS: Studies in the History of Religions* 8, nos. 1–4 (2004): 365–84. For further discussion of Eliade's *Encyclopedia*, see the essays by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Lindsay Jones in the present special issue.

available materials."[30] Though perhaps not thinking of the self-deprecation by Samuel Johnson in his own 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, which defines the "writer of dictionaries" as "a harmless drudge,"[31] the wish of Eliade and his editorial colleagues was—in Kitagawa's words—"to produce not a dictionary but a genuine encyclopedia [of] … important ideas, practices, and persons in the religious experience of humankind from the Paleolithic past to our own day."[32]

Not a dictionary but a genuine encyclopedia. What did Kitagawa mean?[33] Surely he meant something that goes beyond "colourless epitomizing." But perhaps he also had in mind a resource that would facilitate what Wendy Doniger describes as the essential first-step labor required of any scholar working on a project "from the bottom up," as opposed to starting with a universalist theory, "from the top down."

> A scholar working from the bottom up leans more heavily on data… begin[ning] with a thorough historical study… Working from the bottom up forces a scholar to take into consideration many variants, many examples to induce a generalization, for the bottom-up argument is more numerological than logical, more inductive than deductive: it seeks to persuade by the sheer volume of its data rather than by the inevitability (or falsifiability) of the sequence of its assertions.[34]

Genuine encyclopedias, which in my experience as a teacher have always proved an immensely useful pedagogic tool, therefore enable their readers to engage in this "bootstrap operation" of "induction,… bolstered by meticulous, painstaking, fastidious scholarship."[35]

[30] Mircea Eliade, "Preface" to *EOR1* 1:ix.

[31] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), s.v. "Lexicographer."

[32] Kitagawa, "Foreword," xiii.

[33] As Diane Apostolos-Cappadona explains in her essay in this special issue, *as far as library indexing is concerned*, whether a given reference work is designated a dictionary or an encyclopedia is determined by the length of its entries. On the other hand, in his own essay in this issue, Robert A. Segal essentially denies the distinction, noting that he himself employs the terms "companion," "handbook," "guidebook," "dictionary," and "encyclopedia" interchangeably.

[34] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 66.

[35] Ibid., 66–67.

But there is still another, more crucial factor: the way the encyclopedia organizes and presents its materials. As Arthur Koestler once wrote, "the collecting of data is a discriminating activity, like the picking of flowers, and unlike the action of a lawn-mower; and the selection of flowers considered worth picking, as well as their arrangement into a bouquet, are [*sic*] ultimately matters of personal taste."[36] Among the tasks any large encyclopedia requires of its editors, one of the most challenging is this "discriminating activity" of which Koestler speaks: the process of selecting, picking, and arranging the proverbial flowers (= lemmata, keywords, cross-references, and so forth), and of resolving which of them possibly to cast aside. Significantly, albeit with no allusion to Koestler, Claude Conyers, the senior project editor of Eliade's *Encyclopedia*, analogized at length the process of editing that work to cultivating a garden.[37]

Conclusion

It is no mere coincidence that the ongoing revolution in information technology today has coincided with an explosive increase of reference works, not the least in religious studies and biblical studies. The unprecedented production rate of such works today led William M. Johnston to dub our times "a golden age of reference books," with the obvious resulting "challenge" being that of "oversupply."[38]

To conclude, with reference again to my own work with *EBR*, I simply observe that this challenge needs to be met head on by the editors of any reference work today. As it evolves, year by year, volume by volume, amid this maelstrom of other proliferating guidebooks, handbooks, and "companions" on biblical reception (not to mention the many more such reference works on the scriptures themselves),[39] *EBR* aspires to transcend the encyclopedic

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[36] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 233.

[37] Claude Conyers, "Introduction" to *EOR1* 1: xvii–xx.

[38] William M. Johnston, "Preface," in *Reference Books in Religion: A Guide for Students, Scholars, Researchers, Buyers and Readers*, Rev. ed. (1996; London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

[39] In biblical-reception studies, to cite but several of the more prominent English-language titles that come to mind from the past ten years, there are: the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2004–), a series of separate volumes devoted to each of the Bible's books, that advertizes itself as "the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible"; *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Malden: Blackwell, 2006); *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland (Malden: Wiley-

tendency toward "colourless epitomising" against which Hastings warned so long ago. The editors of *EBR* are confident that it will open up new areas of research into the Bible and its reception, and that—as a former colleague on the board, Bernard McGinn, was the first to state once at a meeting—*EBR* will help *to shape the future directions* of scholarship in those fields. To my mind, this points to the greatest potential value of any such reference tool. If done rightly, an encyclopedia can have the effect not only of "breaking new ground" and uncovering new sites to probe in the territories under its purview, but also of what Koestler described as

> mak[ing] familiar phenomena appear in a new, revealing light, seen through spectacles of a different colour. At the decisive turning points in the history of science, all the data in the field, unchanged in themselves, may fall into a new pattern, and be given a new interpretation, a new theoretical frame.[40]

Blackwell, 2009); and *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts, with consultant editor Christopher Rowland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[40] Koestler, *Act of Creation*, 233.