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Editing Encyclopedias and Handbooks in Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century Aims and Challenges

In the twenty-first century, the editing of encyclopedias and handbooks in religious studies grows ever more daunting, not least because of the sheer amount of knowledge now available and because of the greater need to attend to multiple religions and cultures. What makes the work so challenging is also, however, what makes it increasingly indispensable. The ideal of an encyclopedia or handbook as making for an expanded community of inquiry can be realized in new ways online, but only with proper attention to highlighting patterns and making connections—such as those that exist between the arts and religion.

IN approaching the topic of editing encyclopedias and handbooks in religious studies at the present time, the participants in this symposium have

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been asked to reflect on the aims and challenges of such editorial projects. We are to do so from the perspective of those projects in which we have each had the most experience. In the present context, I will be drawing primarily on my work with Oxford Handbooks and, to a lesser extent, my editorial role in connection with several encyclopedias of religion. The latter part of my comments will focus on the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (2014), which I edited and to which I contributed.¹ I have also been a contributor to other Handbooks published by Oxford University Press: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*,² and *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*.³ With respect to encyclopedias, I was, with Rainer Volp, one of the two original area editors in Religion, Arts, Media, and Culture for the fourth edition of the German encyclopedia of religion that in English bears the title *Religion Past and Present*.⁴ I contributed to the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by my co-participant in this symposium, Lindsay Jones.⁵ Currently I am Senior Editor in Religion and the Arts for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, which is in progress and is being published entirely online.⁶ The acquisitions editor for that project with Oxford is Julia Kostova, another contributor to this symposium.

Such projects remind me of Rudolf Otto's description of the phenomenon of the Holy. They both fascinate and terrify, in varying degrees. Daunting if not downright awe-inspiring in scale, they 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 in a post-Enlightenment scholarly world that has grown suspicious of any claims to being comprehensive or fully comprehending, even the most scholarly encyclopedias and handbooks in religion

¹ Frank Burch Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); hereafter *OHRA*.

² John Corrigan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ Russell Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, eds., *Religion Past and Present*, 13 volumes and index; translation of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998–2007).

⁵ Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15 vols. (Detroit, Mich: Thomson Gale-Macmillan Reference, 2005).

⁶ John Barton, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, available at: <http://religion.oxfordre.com/>

and the humanities are subject to a hermeneutic of suspicion to a degree that can be unnerving as well as properly humbling. At the same time, in practical terms, encyclopedias in particular tend to be so expensive to produce, and so time-consuming and labor-intensive, that their very publication can threaten the financial health of the unwary publisher.

In the past, especially, these works could take so many years to emerge in published form that scholarship that was fresh and timely when first submitted to the editors could be stale and outdated by the time the editor sent it to the publishing house, where it might age even longer before ever seeing the light of day. It is no exaggeration to say that those who contribute articles to such works sometimes forget what they have done or that they have done it.

It is not surprising, then, that contributors can begin to think sinister thoughts about editors and presses that beg them for their precious contributions and then proceed to bury their offerings unseen, like lost treasure, for a season or sometimes forever. Sadder than the sheer frustration of that circumstance is the sobering fact that authors and editors of major reference works sometimes do not live to see the final product. This is especially the case when one of the goals is to draw on the wisdom of senior scholars. Age sixty may now be the new fifty, but we who are relatively senior authors and editors are especially aware that we have an expiration date.

It makes sense that projects that are so ambitious can conjure up images not only of grand accomplishment and summation but also of finitude. That gives editors and contributors alike all the more reason to rejoice that, with the increasing possibilities of online publication today, there are no inherent limitations on the time something can stay “in print,” so to speak. Moreover, the time between submitting a contribution and seeing it published is typically shorter by far with online publications than with print publications. Typos can be corrected and inadequacies amended repeatedly, at least in principle. The magic of being able to prolong publication life and to correct things even after publication can make it seem that, with e-books and online editions, all things are possible, or could be. Yet we are also discovering new liabilities, some of which I will note later.

Instead of going on now to identify other generic problems and possibilities that others in this symposium may likewise discuss, I want at this point to come back specifically to the work I did in editing the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*. The point is to surface a level of particularity that may be both suggestive and representative.

Without promoting a particular press, it seems fitting to note, first of all,

that the process is intrinsically much more rewarding when one is working with an editor, or team of editors, with a real understanding of, and commitment to, the work in progress; who can both push things along in a timely way and be patient when the work needs more time to take shape and mature.

That said, I want to describe the genesis and nature of the Handbook I edited. When Theo Calderara of the New York office of Oxford University Press first contacted me to ask if I would consider editing the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, the year was 2003. He was therefore younger by ten years than he was last year when, at the joint national convention of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), he first handed me a published copy to see and to hold with the almost silly excitement that I hope I'm not the only one to feel on such an occasion. The online edition was still a few months away, but likewise assured.

At the time that Theo first approached me about the project, not many Oxford Handbooks had been published in the religion field, although a number of Handbooks had appeared in other fields such as philosophy. Today, in the field of religion alone, there are over forty Oxford Handbooks, and over 1,700 individual chapters, all of them both in print and available online.

Theo did not ask me what kind of Handbook I wanted to edit, apart from asking me to agree to the topic and to design an outline. Oxford had already decided on the basic features of the genre. It was not what I expected, however. In my mind, a Handbook would be highly portable and provide relevant information in a succinct and reliable way. It would be like a field guide that bird watchers use, for example, except that the subject would be religion and the arts, and there wouldn't be so many pictures and charts. I was puzzled, therefore, by what Oxford said it needed the Handbook to be: a large volume made up of relatively lengthy chapters and representing state-of-the-art scholarship on my given topic. Instead of presenting "just the facts," so to speak, and in a neutral, even-handed way, the contributors were asked to bring out important areas of dispute and to identify issues that were generating special interest. It was to be a Handbook *of* scholarship, and *on* scholarship, including advanced scholarship. Thus, for my Handbook, instead of there being a chapter on the history and characteristics of architecture in religion, or on religious music as such, the chapters on architecture or music were supposed to discuss the major scholarship, the leading issues, and questions and figures. I was asked to examine previous Handbooks as models of one sort or another. The *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, for example, consisted of over two dozen chapters, all on the topic of free will and

engaged in highly sophisticated analysis of how that has been understood and questioned in various times by various thinkers.⁷ Many of the contributors to that Handbook were part of a preexisting conversation and were familiar with each other's work. Terms of the trade such as "compatibilism" or "libertarianism" were simply assumed to be familiar and clear.

I agreed to edit the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, once my proposal was approved. But I suspected my Handbook would not closely resemble the *Oxford Handbook on Free Will*, even aside from the much narrower subject matter of the latter. The Handbook I was editing, which would be close to 600 pages, would need to be tailored to distinctive features of the study of the arts in the context of religious studies. I worked from my own observation that interest in the arts, aesthetics, and what is often called material culture, was becoming increasingly widespread among students of religion, and not confined to groups naming that as their focus. But in religious studies, when it comes to the arts, there is not nearly as much expertise as there is interest. And the interest even in the more familiar arts is uneven.

That observation affected my approach both as editor and as contributor. In my own chapter on music and religion, for example, I felt I would be mistaken to rely heavily on musical examples given in the form of printed music scores, which even scholars apparently can find intimidating if they are not also musicians. I also knew I would want to range beyond Western music, and certainly beyond so-called Western classical music, since the wealth of music in that broad category was, unfortunately, less and less familiar even to otherwise highly educated scholars of the arts. Such a need for breadth naturally raised anxieties about my own level of competence. It was urgent to reach widely, sometimes in ways that would surprise. However high my regard for colleagues in religious studies who specialize in the arts, I realized I could not rely only on them to provide the pool of contributors, especially when it came to music. It was impossible to ignore, for example, that, in the AAR, music has until recently received relatively little attention for an art that is so abundant in religious practice and so closely associated with religion in many of its forms.

Equally significant, I was aware that, although I myself would eventually write the chapter on music and religion, if I did so in a way that would fit the Handbook description employed by the publisher, my chapter on music and

⁷ Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

religion would have few if any readers and would serve little purpose. Specialists in music would seldom see themselves as scholars of religion and might not often think to consult this particular Handbook. Meanwhile, scholars of religion, even if they happened to be music-lovers, would likely be put off by a chapter focused on debates among music theorists and musicologists and by technical musical analysis. That does not mean there were not going to be any chapters on music in this Handbook that would get into technical matters, including the one by Guy Beck on Hinduism and music.⁸ But I could not take that approach in the more general chapter, which I called “Musical Ways of Being Religious.”

In fact, I made a core decision to include basic information about the respective arts not only in the music chapter but also in chapters on the other arts such as dance, and in the chapters that focused more narrowly on a certain art within a particular religious tradition, such as visual art and architecture in Islam. As editor, I simply could not ignore the fact that, by and large, students of religion reading a *Handbook of Religion and the Arts* would rarely be specialists in more than one art or, for that matter, in more than one religion. That realization reflected my fundamental desire to heighten awareness of the arts as often integral to religion in a variety of forms. It grew out of my own sense of ways in which we scholars need to reconceive how we understand and teach both religion and the arts, which are highly varied in their ways of being both together and apart.

Even within the arts, moreover, I had observed, as a composer of music, that the perceptions of a scholar who is not a practicing artist often differ markedly from makers of art in a given medium. Accordingly, I invited a learned woman who is a gifted poet and teacher of poetry and spiritual practices to write the chapter on religion and poetry, which is one of the most remarkable chapters of the thirty-six in the Handbook.⁹ I asked a dancer who is highly trained in Indic traditions of dance to write the chapter on religion and dance.¹⁰ With scholarly credentials, to be sure, they nevertheless were invited to produce chapters that would reflect how those arts are actually created and enacted. In these and other ways, without being dogmatic about it, I sought contributors able to exhibit the sorts of diversity we say

⁸ Guy L. Beck, “Hinduism and Music,” in *OHRA* 358–66.

⁹ Peggy Rosenthal, “Poetic Ways of Being Religious,” in *OHRA* 146–61.

¹⁰ Anne-Marie Gaston (Anjali), with Tony Gaston, “Dance as a Way of Being Religious,” in *OHRA* 182–202.

we value in the Academy. That is because, without that, scholarship risks reinforcing habits that too often distort and potentially oppress.

Overall, by gathering together multiple arts and multiple religious traditions, and by treating the religions and the arts as interrelated and overlapping, and by finding international scholars willing to join me in that endeavor, I was wanting as editor to help reinterpret a whole range of what is worth attending to when we study religion. It meant reshaping, to some extent, even what we mean by religion, which has so often been studied in the past as a matter of texts and words and verbal teachings.

Because I was able to draw not only on scholars working within the academy of religion but also on scholars in art history, musicology, cultural studies, film studies, gender studies, and so forth, I began to hope that this Handbook might also serve as a means of interdisciplinary dialogue and education in a way that very few classes can do, and very few monographs. In the process, I hoped, the interrelation between art and religion would develop new resonance, even as ideas of both art and religion must constantly be adjusted and questioned from one context to another, from one religion or art to another.

The online publication of such a Handbook alongside others makes it far easier to make such connections and innovations. It came as something of a shock, therefore, when I saw that my hopes for how this Handbook would function could be disrupted and circumvented by the very same online publication process that seems to promise so much by way of connecting diverse elements. The artful grouping and gathering of materials that, within the covers and structure of one book, can create an exceptionally rich conversation, is broken up online when the internet creates an individual download for each chapter separately, which can then be read without any sense of the whole. The result can be an unfortunate fragmentation rather than anything integrally related. Indeed, until I objected, the online edition of the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* actually left out completely my extensive introduction, which was meant to be an integral and unifying element, and which I had been expressly encouraged to design so as to function in that way. The tendency to fragment and disperse, despite the potential for the opposite, is something that warrants more careful attention (and technical innovation) in online enterprises.

I retain the ideal of an encyclopedia or handbook as a kind of gathering, creating a new community of interconnections (which is not the same, however, as merely harmonizing). But that vision can only be sustained and

developed online if publishers and their website designers pay specific attention to guiding readers toward more organic connections and more coherent patterns, which art and religion both need in order to be studied, imagined, and questioned adequately, whether separately or together.

When I look back now on the editing process, and look toward future work, I think of a review I recently came across of a new recording of symphonies by the modern Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, featuring two of his more daring and difficult compositions. In reference to the recording, the reviewer Daniel Jaffé sums it up this way: “This is by far the most stunning Shostakovich disc I have heard this year. Altogether it’s a grueling experience, but not one to be missed.”¹¹

¹¹ Daniel Jaffé, “Devastating Shostakovich,” review of Dmitri Shostakovich, Symphonies No. 6 and No. 14, London Philharmonic Orchestra, dir. Vladimir Jurowski (LPO–0080), *BBC Music* 23.2 (December 2014): 77.