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The First Rule is *Never* Begin with the Letter A…

Or, How I Learned to Love Writing Reference Books

This autobiographical reflection relates the origin of one scholar's interest in research books and her engagement in the writing and editing of reference works. Her journey from researcher to contributor to editor is detailed in light of her engagement with multidisciplinary scholarship from the history of religions, art history, cultural history, American studies, to women's and gender studies. Highlighted with examples of varied multidisciplinary dictionary and encyclopedia projects, the pitfalls and rewards of writing and editing reference works are related. Brief descriptions of the experiential differences in the editing and writing for print versus online reference publications are recorded.

I am probably what one might identify as a reference/research junkie. From childhood my favorite books were the many volumes of the *World Book Encyclopedia* that occupied a full shelf on the bookcase in the family room

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of my parents' house. Of course, I was a little perturbed when I tried to find out about igneous rocks for a primary school report and discovered that the entry under the category "Rock" read "see Igneous Rock"; and then the entry under "Igneous Rock" read "see Rock." Who knows? Maybe that was the moment I secretly decided to write a better reference work in which cross references were carefully completed and readers were directed to an organized structure at both the beginning and the end of a book.

However, if it wasn't because of the "igneous rock" episode, then it must have been when I realized that the core book for my first undergraduate course in Christian iconography was limited to only one historical era and only one major museum collection while the span of Christianity was international, then almost two thousand years old, and works of Christian art were found in almost every museum as well as ecclesiastical building throughout the world. Although I am now confident that my interest in symbolism and iconology probably began when as a young child I colored all over the secret symbolic codes on the pages of my grandfather's Masonic Bible. Yet, I was determined to write a better introductory handbook for the use of interested students, museum staff, and those individuals whom publishers refer to as "the educated general reader."

Working as I do in a multidisciplinary mode ranging from comparative religion, history of Christianity, cultural history, art history, women's and gender studies, and more, reference books—dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and the like—have proved to be a necessary part of both my life and my research. While I may have some training in a variety of these diverse disciplinary vocabularies and methodologies, I do not have refined graduate training in all these academic areas and topics. For this reason, I have developed my own idiosyncratic methodology that includes my regular dependence upon reference books from the classic late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century encyclopedias such as the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908–1926) edited by James Hastings to the more contemporary practice of searching out online resources via a variety of reference search engines listed on the Georgetown University Library website including the Index of Christian Art, JSTOR, Humanities Index, and Ref Works. My most important undergraduate mentor—whose office walls and floor were lined with books, art images, and papers in those careful piles of clutter found everywhere now in my office when I am researching and writing a new essay or book—always told me that the most important concern was not with knowing everything but rather with knowing where to look to find out what you needed to know.

The Journey from Contributor to Editor

As reference sources were such a significant element in my own intellectual and methodological development, one can imagine that I had a silent, even reverent respect for the experts who authored entries, whether long or short, let alone the supervising editor(s) who perhaps both initiated and presided over the larger project, whether with a single- or multi-volume scope. So you can imagine how honored I was when I received my first invitation in 1987 to contribute an entry, albeit a relatively short one, for *The New Dictionary of Theology* (1987).[1] Instead of being the person who learned from reading the work of an expert, I was now being identified as an expert!

As my scholarly proficiency expanded outside of the borders of religious studies and art history to include cultural history, women's and gender studies, and beyond, I found myself being invited to contribute to a variety of reference sources from dictionaries and handbooks to encyclopedias including *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (1995), *The Dictionary of Art* (1996), the 1996 *Supplement* (vol. 19) of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, the *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (1999), the *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (2001), and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women* (2013).[2]

As my own ongoing research projects proliferated, I also began to volunteer when a call for contributors was issued. The end result was a perpetual activity of continued learning and of working toward a greater understanding of multidisciplinary work, as for example with the entries I wrote for the *American National Biography* (1999)[3] and the *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography* (1998).[4] The former entry was a biographical sketch, but needed to be as comprehensive as possible, noting not only Louisine Have-

[1] Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington: Michale Glazier, 1987).

[2] Jonathan Z. Smith, William Scott Green, Jorunn Jacobus Buckley, et al., *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995); Jane Shoaf Turner, ed., *The Dictionary of Art*, 34 vols. (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996); *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 19: Supplement 1989–1995, prepared by an editorial staff at the Catholic University of America (Palatine: J. Heraty, 1996); Serenity Young, ed.- in-chief, *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religions*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999); George T. Kurian et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, 4 vols. (New York: Grolier Educational, 2001); Natana J. Delong-Bas, ed.-in-chief, *Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds. *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24 volumes.

[4] Helene E. Roberts, ed., *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998).

meyer's biographical information but also the cultural and societal significance of her patronage of Impressionist artists, her role in the Havemeyer family participation in the establishment of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and how these coalesced into her later efforts toward women's suffrage. In contrast, the entries for the latter multi-volume work were thematic and iconological in nature, crossing cultural, geographic, and historical divides as well as artistic media and religious traditions. Therefore my entries on "Beheading/Decapitation," "Toilet Scenes," and "Virgin/Virginity" evolved as much from visual images as from myths, along with legendary, scriptural, and devotional texts, and popular culture.

The writing of brief (i.e., under 250 words) topical entries appeared to have carefully delineated frameworks that I initially believed would be easier to write than more complex lengthier (5,000 to 10,000 word) essay contributions. History, however, would prove that the preparation and writing of a compact short piece can be more difficult, as the author has both to condense and to simplify data into a concise but informative *and* readable piece, such as the many short art-related entries I wrote for the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*.

So as an author, and even more as an editor, one has to consider judiciously who one's potential readers might be, and to adjust the nomenclature (and as an editor, the individual contributors) accordingly. If the readership involves a large audience from a specific field of study, such as religious studies, and one is writing a piece on art, either about an individual artist, an iconographic motif, or a stylistic movement, then the contributor needs to ruminate on what a scholar of religion needs to know about such art terms. Further, what would an art historian or curator need to explain for a readership schooled in the vocabulary of religious studies but not in the hermeneutics of art-historical scholarship? Are there specific critical terms that require definition within the entry? Given the editorial edict as to word limit, is there room for such definitions without blurring the clarity of the entry's specific topic? Of course, there is the obvious requirement of opening the entry in such a manner as to "grab" the reader's attention and yet present factual information in a definitive style. Often a template of how each entry is to be styled is supplied along with the word count and a contributor's guidelines by the supervising editor appointed by the publisher. Sometimes these directions are more structured than not in order create a carefully orchestrated order of entries.

Another crucial question: exactly what am I as a reader/researcher looking for when I open up a reference book that is ostensibly in alphabetical or-

der? I am seeking a descriptive passage that provides a judicious but neutral definition of the term(s), written by a reliable expert in the field and perhaps even vetted by other experts. Clarity of prose makes for clarity of ideas and an absence of unnecessary details and/or asides. Thus the entry becomes a trusted source of clearly presented information and factual data. Some background material is always helpful, both for the explanatory nature of the basic comments in situating the person, motif, or concept in their larger cultural and historical matrix, and for the potential of connections to other motifs, concepts, or persons in my own world of intellectual exchange. While an illustration or two is always a benefit, it is especially advantageous for someone like me who thinks "visually." However, the final and critical elements for dependable and reliably prepared reference entries are the entries in the bibliography. If space permits, meticulous cross-references and illustrations are extremely useful. These provide directional pointers for connections and future research on a topic.

As fate would have it, as my academic sojourn continued so did the expansion of invitations not simply to contribute entries or essays for reference works but to enter onto the higher plane of serving as a consulting editor, a member of editorial boards, and even a commissioning editor. The transition was almost seamless as my vision of such fields as art history, cultural history, religious studies, and women's and gender studies proceeded to coalesce and to flourish. To my surprise, I found that my role as a contributor did not recede but increased in what was initially a conundrum to me but one that had an obvious explanation.

The Perilous Position of Being an Editor

My first experience on the upper level of a reference project was one of those unasked-for accidents. I had been to the annual meeting of the College Art Association and met the publisher for *The Dictionary of Art*.[5] At the display booth, she had a multi-volume nomenclature for this ambitious new project that would span the globe, the centuries, and all forms of art from the traditional "high arts" of painting, prints and engravings, sculpture, and architecture to the "low arts" of untrained artists and folk and popular cultures. Several years had been spent by leading, internationally renowned art and architecture historians seeking to create a comprehensive guide to the

[5] Cited in n. 2 above.

many styles, movements, and media as well as artists, architects, designers, and sculptors throughout history.

As Jane Turner explained this extraordinary undertaking that was to replace the *Encyclopedia of World Art*[6] (1959–68), and we traversed the hundreds of pages of the nomenclature, she realized that many of the "unspoken-for entries" related to world religious traditions. As this took place in the mid-1980s, before the advent of e-mail, she asked if she could send me a listing of those entries to see if I might be able to write some myself or to suggest potential authors. Thus began my step up the ladder of reference publications from "simple" contributor to consulting editor. Fortunately, as *The Dictionary of Art* was a massive undertaking by Macmillan in London, there was already a professional editorial support staff in place. So mine was to be the simple task of identifying potential authors among my colleagues in the field of world religions. Perhaps the most significant part of this experience was that my eyes were opened to a clearer recognition of the many bridges that needed to be built between the academic study of art history and religious studies. In my own undergraduate and graduate studies, the art history professors were more schooled in the significance of religious history and/or theology than my religious studies professors were in art and architecture. While the field of religion and literature, or, at that time, theology and literature, was a recognized area of study, that of religion and art was relatively unknown. Over the past twenty years, however, there has been an expanding interest in the visual among students and scholars of religious studies.

Nonetheless, I learned a great deal about how such a project is initiated, revised, and even recreated as world events provide new reasons to reorganize and expand the entries. Just as *The Dictionary of Art* was about to go into print, the presses had to be stopped and a complete reorganization and expansion of entries were justified by the fall of the Soviet Union. The category of "Soviet art" was now subsumed under "Russia" and also mentioned peripherally in the new entries for the former Soviet Bloc countries. The discovery of the Chinese tombs filled with funerary art, especially the soldiers of the Imperial army, caused another disruption. Similarly there were lengthy debates in which I was included relating to the many women artists who had been discovered since the original nomenclature had been created. So I came to learn about how editorial decisions could be made relating to who goes

[6] Bernard Samuel Myers, ed.-in-chief, *Encyclopedia of World Art*, 6 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959–68).

in, and who doesn't, what topic deserves an entry, how long an entry should be, and so forth.

Several years later, when I was invited to become a consulting editor for the second, 2005 edition of Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987)[7] and the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (2005),[8] I was asked to support the development of the nomenclature for entries on religion and the arts, to suggest authors, to invite authors and to respond to their queries, and to evaluate their entries. It was an exciting opportunity to review the lists of entries created by the senior editorial board. Of course, both of these multivolume projects were updates to, or revisions of, earlier celebrated reference works and had two totally different readerships.

I thus learned that an editor had to review the plan proposed by the editorial board, review the previous publications for pertinent entries, decide what entries required updates and/or replacements, and propose entries that served newer modes of scholarship in the field. For me, the work on the *Encyclopedia of Religion* flowed more quickly as I had used that source regularly since the publication of its first edition and was familiar with the entries in the field of religion and the arts. As this field of study had grown geometrically in the previous twenty years, however, it was necessary to consider a massive expansion in word count to accommodate the new topical areas and entries.

The overall word count for the new edition was proposed by the publisher and then the senior editorial board "divvied" up the words for the differing categories of study, from history of religions to major figures in the study of religions and so forth. A consulting editor like me was then given a word count to work with and needed to decide how best to allot those words. Over the years, my own research has benefited from longer entries in which the contributor is given the space to write a judicious but short essay. Such an essay, albeit pared of unnecessary details and asides, can provide the reader with sufficient knowledge to pursue engaged research on the particular topic.

In order to assist the proposed contributor with the development of her entry, the consulting editor needs to prepare a scope: that is, an abstract which provides a clear sense of what the entry should entail but leaves the contributor with enough "space" to shape the final entry with the contribu-

[7] For further discussion of Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, see also the essays by Lindsay Jones, Robert A. Segal, and Eric Ziolkowski in the present special issue. –Ed.

[8] Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ed.-in-chief, *The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 6 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005).

tor's own scholarly impression. Since a work like the *Encyclopedia of Religion* is as much for the use of students new to the field as it is for established scholars, the bibliography is an extremely significant component of the entry. I prefer an annotated bibliography, as it gives all readers an entry way into the source materials, and promotes a mixture of classic and more recent, innovative texts.

My editorial work on the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* afforded me a series of challenges. While I had ventured forth in my own scholarship into the multidisciplinary matrix of diverse fields of study that interested me, I had not considered the larger picture of interdisciplinary scholarship as it had existed in the 1960s and 1970s. From the late 1960s through the 1970s there arose the study of "the marginalized": ethnic groups, feminism, race, gender, and the so-called third world. This expansion of concerns needed to be addressed in terms of the history of ideas. My purview of "the arts and world iconography" had to be redefined with the advent of film and media studies, popular culture, material culture, and visual culture, as well as the challenges of multiculturalism and globalization.

For any reference book to have a life beyond its immediate time of publication, it needs to be dependent as much upon the classics as on the innovations and future directions of study. This is the difficult part of an editor's job—to work within the assigned word limits and to be able to balance the classic with the innovative. Without doubt, this is also the challenge in selecting contributors: to find those who are established scholars, especially as they provide both gravitas and a tonality of "the classic," as well as a careful balance with both younger up-and-coming scholars and those identified perhaps as rebellious innovators.

Evaluating the submitted entries requires both a careful editorial eye and a clear-headed recognition of the information in each topic area. Technical language is one thing, and unnecessary jargon, another. Clarity of definitions and methodology are required in entries for new fields such as visual culture, material culture, popular culture, and outsider and visionary art. My personal view is that if a scholar, senior or junior, classic or rebellious, can explain the topic to me so that I can repeat the most essential ideas in a few quick sentences, then it is accessible in both tone and content.

When I became an editor for the arts, dance, film, and new media for the 2011 two-volume supplement to *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*,[9] I found

[9] Robert L. Fastiggi, executive ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement* 2011, 2

myself once again in the midst of a revision and an expansion of the content, as the clearly defined focus of this supplement—which I should note began as a one-volume work that quickly grew into two volumes—was the arts writ large, that is, literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so forth. After an initial editorial board meeting, however, it was clear to me that, for the coverage of individual artists, writers, and composers, and stylistic movements, a simple reiteration of the previous style of Eurocentric entries, dashed with the occasional American, would be insufficient for the contemporary reader.

After several days of looking over more recent reference books in the fields of Catholicism, religious art, film studies, and such, and in consideration of the growing awareness that Catholic culture was now multicultural and global, I developed a proposal to provide a mix of specific "traditional" entries for major artists (now including dancers, film directors, and new media personae) which were both biographical and situational, that is, incorporating their significant contributions to the study of Catholic culture and situating them within their milieu.

Obviously, following the Reformation there were many artists, stylistic movements, and events that were influenced by or reflected Catholicism, even though their creators were not members of the Catholic faith. Further, I proposed a series of major overview entries on the global and multicultural reach of Catholic culture, and sought out authors who were indigenous to those geographic regions, including Africa, Australia and Oceania, Latin America, and South East Asia. This created a reference volume that would speak to the transformations as well as the traditions of Catholic culture for some years to come.

The procedure of creating a nomenclature, writing individual scopes, inviting contributors, and reviewing entries remained in place. What also remained in place was the reality that even though one was an editor, there would still be entries to write. However, now the sea tides had shifted. Although for all three of these reference projects I had the opportunity to select from the very beginning the entries I would like to write, others came my way either because no contributor could be found or, at the proverbial eleventh hour, the contributor had either dropped out or failed to complete the entry. So the peril of being an editor is simple: beware of the responsibility of saying to the powers-that-be at the press that this particular entry is significant and

vols. (Detroit: Gale/Cengage Learning, 2011).

should not be dropped, because it may end up on your lap. There is also the unexpected entry that appears because of a current event, new publication (for example, a papal letter to artists), or a breakthrough exhibition. These, too, most often fall into the lap of the editor.

The Agony and the Ecstasy of the Single-Author Project

Having had the editorial experience of entries falling on me at the proverbial eleventh hour, I remembered the advice given me by the colleague who had invited me to write multiple entries for the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*. He said that it was easier for him as an editor to write the shorter entries himself rather than seek out contributors and coax them to completion. Further, he advised, he would probably have to write them himself anyway at the apocalyptic hour. So, I wondered, how difficult would it be to design my own single-authored *Dictionary of Christian Art*?

Clearly I was familiar with the procedures for the development of nomenclature, word count assignments, entry templates, and illustration selections. Doing the research which would include a review of all the previously published handbooks, guides, and dictionaries could prove a rewarding and useful experience. So why not?

With the editor assigned to me by the press, I proceeded to develop what became my *Dictionary of Christian Art* (1994).[10] It was an exhausting and daunting task, especially as a critical part was that it was not being developed as a scholarly resource to replace the multi-volume encyclopedias that existed. It was rather as much an introductory resource for students, seminarians, and the educated general reader as it was a guide to bibliographic resources for scholars.

Once it was finished, I was pleased with the finished product but surprised to learn that the Library of Congress indexed it as an encyclopedia and not a dictionary. After several calls to the staff there and conversations with the reference library at the Georgetown University Library, I found myself educated in the indexing distinctions between a dictionary and an encyclopedia—the length of the entries! Several crucial entries, like those on Jesus Christ, were necessarily over the limit set for a dictionary entry. Therefore, despite the title, my dictionary was indexed as an encyclopedia.

[10] Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Christian Art* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

When the time came two years later to consider a more inventive reference book, I argued for the title of *Encyclopedia of Women in Religious Art* (1996). On this project, I found myself without models to follow or previous nomenclatures to build upon, despite the over twenty years of pertinent feminist scholarship. Meanwhile, I bemoaned the lack of resources to use and the sad realization that the majority of those writing feminist studies of female figures in religious art were responding to the earlier studies by male scholars.

I went ahead with the hope that beyond the unevenness in the quality and length of the entries, and the lacunae in the subject matter, mine would be a work that might be, as one reviewer described it, "a book from which a thousand dissertations could spring." The irony was that when my *Encyclopedia of Women in Religious Art* was released in paperback it was re-entitled *Dictionary of Women in Religious Art*, even though the Library of Congress had indexed it as an encyclopedia. I truly wonder whether this linguistic confusion over the categorization of a "dictionary" vs. an "encyclopedia," a confusion hinging simply upon the entry lengths, will be looked upon as a distinctly twentieth-century concern, given the almost unlimited entry length that is now possible with the advent of online resources.

Is It Different writing for Online rather than for Print?

Since my first entry for *The New Dictionary of Theology* almost thirty years ago, the remarkable growth of interest in religion and the arts has been matched by the sea change brought about by technology. The growing reliance on computers and the accessibility of the internet have altered the world of scholarship. I can now access research materials and visual resources at any time of the night or day from the comfort of either my office or my home computer. I have almost daily access to information about scholarly symposia, publications, and international exhibitions that I can even visit virtually online.

Obviously the progress of online publications has further expanded the borders of scholarship. So the question should be raised: is it different to write for an online publication than for a print text? Having now written essays for conference volumes that are e-books and for reference works that will be released online only, I can say that my own entries are researched and written the same way.

I do see, however, that there are pros and cons involved in this new world of academic publications. The benefits might appear obvious: first, that there should no longer be a need for strict adherence to word counts; and second, that entries can be updated regularly. The greater benefits are, however, the immediacy of publication schedule, and the larger reading audience. For the promise of the dreaded Wikipedia, that knowledge should be free and accessible to all, may be writ large in the fact of electronic access to peer-reviewed reference works.

There are downsides beyond the one obvious to a research dinosaur like me who now does not always have the comforting feel of a book in my hands. There is the question, especially with regard to an academic resource, as to the definitive edition of a work, and, further, the process of peer review when regular updates may fall out of the purview of the original author or the commissioning organization. After all, the major danger of Wikipedia is that the updating and editing process is open to all users whether experts or not, and so the way that process seems to work does not always prevent non-experts from violating basic protocols of scholarly ethics; indeed, over the years, I have found my own work plagiarized and corrupted on Wikipedia.

The Sagest Advice: Never begin with the Letter A

Reference works are important regardless of whether we have to blow the dust off them when we take them down from the bookshelves, or whether we access them online. Scholars of all disciplines need access to information, especially when they venture outside of their areas of expertise. As academic studies become more and more multidisciplinary, religious studies scholars need to be able to access the basic information necessary to have a dialogue or a trialogue with colleagues or students. The absolute, if unspoken, reality of religious studies is that religion is involved in all things that human beings are engaged with, from politics to science, to advertising and entertainment. Religion scholars then need to be cognizant of everything that touches upon human existence, and reference works provide both the backbone and the structure for that information.

My work in religion and the arts will continue, as will my dependence upon reference books. In fact, I might even write another single-author reference work one day, except this time I will be armed with most important piece of advice. Didn't I tell you? When I developed the nomenclature for my *Dictionary of Christian Art*, I did not notice how many entries began with

the letter A. Yet, as I wrote the entries and spent weeks working on the As, I found myself discouraged by the amount of time this part of the project was taking. I thought to myself: I will never get to the Bs let alone to the letter Z! I sat back and counted the number of entries under each alphabetical letter. Guess what? There were more entries under A than any other letter. So when I began writing my *Encyclopedia of Women in Religious Art*, I started with the letter Z and worked backward. If you ever take on a reference project and want to learn from my experience, the sagest advice is never start with the letter A!