

Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions

Yudit K. Greenberg, ed. *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008. 2 vols: 665 pp. \$265.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781851099801 (set). Ebook. ISBN: 9781851099818.

At the center of most religious traditions there lies an emphasis on love: divine love, love for one's neighbor, altruistic love, familial love, self love, and even sexual love. Love is everywhere a hallmark of our relationship in this world with each other and with the divine. But how love is perceived and valued and the nuances it takes in one religion as opposed to another vary, sometimes widely. While many works in recent decades have focused on specific aspects of love in religion, such as sexuality, no reference work has yet tackled the full spectrum of love's complexities across the world's religions. Such a focus is at the heart of the *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, which seeks to be "the first reference work to offer a comprehensive, multidisciplinary investigation of the subject of love in the classic and contemporary literature of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and in other world religions, cultures, and philosophies" (xxvii).

This two-volume set is arranged alphabetically by subject with some subjects containing composite entries from the five major religions (i.e., Body in Buddhism, Body in Christianity, etc). Entries include "historical figures, major literary works, and language- and culture-specific topics" but exclude entries for "writers and thinkers" (xxx). Each entry is signed, contains helpful cross-references to related subjects, and is accompanied at the end by a short bibliography of references and materials for further reading.

Editor Yudit Greenberg's aim for the work is not only to provide a comprehensive investigation of love in all its depths and dimensions within world religions, but also to challenge both popular Western clichés about love and the perceived "rigid dichotomies between sexuality and spirituality, sacred and profane, immanence and transcendence, and earthly and divine love" (xxvii). She also aims to expand cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue through this book. Greenberg is currently professor of philosophy and religion and director of the Jewish studies program at Rollins College, as well as a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Greenberg has employed a collection of nearly two hundred scholars from a diverse range of fields including theology, religious studies, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, gender studies, and history to undertake this daunting task.

The primary strength of this book indeed lies in its achievement of being the first reference book of its kind on the specific topic of love in world religions. The fact that the overall quality of its articles and the diversity of the aspects of love that are covered are good must be considered a blessing for such a pioneering venture. The encyclopedia covers topics the reader would expect such as beauty, charity, community, compassion, divine love, forgiveness, grace, marriage, motherhood, and romantic love. It also covers controversial or taboo topics such as adultery, bisexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, hedonism, lust, pornography, and sexual pleasure. Finally, it covers more specific works, concepts, and figures of individual religions or thought traditions such as ahavah, Akiva ben Yosef, bodhisattva, *Dialoghi d'Amore*, *Gita Govinda*, Kundalini, prema, and shekhinah.

The majority of the articles are well-written, provide substantial coverage of the topic, are narrowly focused on the topic's relation to love, and provide excellent and up-to-date bibliographical references. "Catholic Mysticism,"

for example, covers everything from the notions of “indwelling,” asceticism, ecstatic love, and annihilation of the self in order to reunite with God to the theologies of Meister Eckhardt, Julian of Norwich, Saint Francis, Saint Catherine of Siena, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint John of the Cross. This entry also emphasizes the constant struggle between “fulfillment and frustration” (105) that characterizes the path of the mystic who is sometimes united and often separated from the divine. The entry for “Sabbath” focuses not only on the basic understanding of the term as the day of rest and goal of weekly existence, but also explores its mystical interpretation as the beloved bride of Israel. “Wine in Sufism” masterfully unravels the metaphorical wine-related terminology that connects this simple, everyday language with the various aspects of the Sufi path to salvation. “African American Religion” relates the quest of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others for social justice and then comes to the provocative conclusion that there has been a general disconnect from justice as it regards “gender and sexual equality” within the African American religious community (37). Additional examples of solid articles such as these are to be found aplenty.

Another strength of this encyclopedia set is the valuable features outside of the entries themselves. Each volume begins with a general table of contents, a list of entries, a list of contributors, a foreword, and a preface and ends with both a general index and a selected topical index divided by religion. The list of entries supplements the general table of contents by identifying the entries and the two indices provide support in finding subjects alphabetically or more specifically by religion as well as providing page numbers lacking in the entry lists and the table of contents. The foreword, by Harvard comparative religion scholar Diana Eck, provides a succinct but satisfying overview of the terminology used for love in the main religions of the world and whets the reader’s appetite for delving into the deeper complexities of what love means in all its religious, cultural, and semantic contexts and nuances. The first volume of the set also contains reflections on love from spiritual leaders of the world’s religions as well as perspectives from religious studies, sociology, and philosophy. These brief discussions present a contemporary perspective on love in various religions and thought systems that is sometimes lacking in the entries themselves (for example, the entry on “Sexual Pleasure in Christianity” focuses entirely on the earliest centuries of Christianity) as well as real-world examples of how love is perceived by the believer within these given religious traditions.

The work is also successful in achieving Greenberg’s secondary objectives. Common Western misconceptions about such topics as “Platonic Love,” the “*Kama Sutra*,” and “Tantra” are dispelled and corrected in their respective entries. Meanwhile, entries such as the “*Gita Govinda*,” “Catholic Mysticism,” “Longing in Sufism,” “Bhakti,” “Androgynous Myths,” “Sufi Poetry,” the “*Song of Songs*,” and “Separation” blur and/or challenge the lines typically drawn between the sexual and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane, and earthly and divine love. The mystical traditions underlying these entries use traditional human sexual and marriage terminology to explain their devotion relationship to the divine and the *unio mystica* that is their shared goal. Finally, the goal of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue seems easily in reach of this work with entries like “Desire” as well as the excellent cross-referencing system within the book. The subject entry for “Desire” bounces between discussions of its influence/impact within Daoism, the story of Adam and Eve, the *Symposium* of Plato, the *Dialoghi D’Amore*, the *Song of Songs*, and the *Gita Govinda*. This melding of religions, philosophy, and literature under a single heading is bound to lead some readers to explore dialogues beyond their own foci.

Despite these strengths, the *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions* has several weaknesses that restrain it from being an exceptional reference tool. First, and perhaps most disappointing, it fails to provide adequate coverage of

all the world religions, even while boasting a diversity of aspects of love within the traditions it covers. The broad strokes of the work's coverage land squarely in the realm of the major religions and their mystical and devotional traditions. Not only are indigenous religions almost totally neglected, but even more traditionally acknowledged religions such as Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Shintoism are given minute attention. Greenberg's acknowledgement of this weakness as being a result of meager interest on the part of contributors for these areas (xxx) is unsatisfactory. Such a detriment to the scope of the work leaves the reader feeling it better to call it the *Encyclopedia of Love in the World's Major Religions*.

Another weakness of the encyclopedia is the inconsistency of a few of its entries with the vast majority of the book's successful entries. The article on Daoism, for instance, opens in a confusing manner because in interweaving discussion of Daoist sects with discussion of love, it draws the befuddled novice's attention away from the article's emphasis on love and focuses it onto unanswered questions presented by the introduction of these variant sects. Furthermore, what notions of love are explained in the opening do not seem to greatly enhance the explication of love provided in the remainder of the article. The article on "Muhammad," meanwhile, focuses much more on presenting the man as a paragon of the obedient servant of Allah than it does on what love meant to Muhammad and what value it has within Islam. Others, such as the aforementioned "Sexual Pleasure in Christianity," only focus on certain periods of time rather than covering all historical periods.

Another troubling aspect involves the selection criteria for what should and should not be included as entries. Greenberg is clear that entries for writers and thinkers are being excluded, but beyond this little limitation is given for included entries. This broadness allows concepts like Shakti to be included despite the highly speculative relationship they bear to the concept of love. One must question the set of criteria that allows for Mary the mother of Jesus to be included and not Mary Magdalene, allows the Dead Sea Scrolls but neglects the Gnostic tradition, includes the *Divine Comedy* but leaves out the *Book of the Courtier*, discusses Lilith yet remains silent about Astarte/Ishtar, etc.

Finally, two of this title's supposed features must in fact be considered weaknesses in this case. First, there are relatively few photographs and illustrations, and the absence of color, their small size, and limited enhancement of the text leaves one wondering why they are included at all. (The photos of the spiritual leaders alongside their opening excerpts are a key exception.) The reflections of the spiritual leaders and perspectives from sociology, religious studies, and philosophy, meanwhile, left this reader wishing these leaders had been asked for original contributions rather than displaced extracts.

The *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, despite its shortcomings, remains a worthwhile reference tool both for undergraduate and graduate students that can serve as a great starting point for those studying love in one or more of the world religions. I would recommend it highly for all theological/religion libraries with the exception of those whose main reference focus falls outside the major religious traditions. Granted the tremendous significance and complexities of the topic of love, no single tool can hope to accomplish full treatment of this area yet and it is hoped that more reference materials of this type will soon emerge with sharper clarity in editorial scope and criteria.

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