

## *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion*

Bernard J. Verkamp. *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008. 229 pp. \$65.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978032868.

There have been a number of good dictionaries and encyclopedias published in the area of philosophy of religion in recent years. However, Bernard Verkamp's new *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion* is unique in that it uses a biographical approach to provide insights on key philosophical figures who have made significant contributions in the area of religion. This biographical, rather than conceptual, approach makes the encyclopedia both interesting and informative.

The author, Bernard Verkamp, is a professor of philosophy at Vincennes University in Indiana. He has written several books, including *The Sense of Religious Wonder*, *Senses of Mystery*, and *The Evolution of Religion*. He has also written a number of scholarly articles related to such topics as religious pluralism, world religions, and religious history. His encyclopedia is both religious and historical, quite in keeping with the author's areas of interest and expertise.

This work provides coverage on 152 philosophers. It deals with figures from different religious traditions, and covers a wide range of time periods. Entries are between one to two pages in length and provide general information on the philosophers' religious background as well as specific information on their religious perspectives. Entries also include a list of bibliographical resources that contains both primary and secondary sources. There is also a helpful index of approximately twelve pages.

Verkamp selects major figures who have written significantly in the area of religion. The entries might be viewed as falling into one of several categories. The author has included some figures who are mainly regarded for their religious or theological ideas, such as Abelard, Anselm, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher, and Whitehead. Others included are quite hostile toward or critical of religion, such as Feuerbach, Flew, Horkheimer, Hume, Marx, Nietzsche, and Voltaire. A third group is comprised of major philosophical thinkers, such as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Plato, and Socrates. A fourth category incorporates those who focus specifically on the psychology or philosophy of religion, such as Hartshorne, Hick, and James. A fifth group is made up of philosophical figures from the classical period, such as Cicero, Epictetus, Epicurus, Heraclitus, Pythagorus, and Zenophanes. Psychologists such as Freud, Jung, and Piaget are included, as are sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, Wach, and Bellah.

In all the entries one finds clearly written and relevant information for understanding the philosophers' religious thought. The author consistently provides insight into their religious life and religious ideas. While he is a religious person, he does not attack the ideas of those who are critical of religion. Neither does he overly praise figures, such as Augustine, who are highly significant in the history of Christianity. The author attempts to maintain a level of objectivity in all his entries.

When examining the entry on Martin Heidegger, for example, one finds information about his early baptism into the Catholic faith and his thoughts at age twenty of becoming a priest. The entry also discusses his strong

criticism of Catholicism as well as his later anti-Semitic leanings during the 1930s and early 1940s. After this general discussion, there is specific focus on Heidegger's philosophical ideas regarding religion. Following this is a bibliographical listing of approximately eighteen works. After reading this entry, one has gained not only good insight in the philosopher's philosophical ideas but also in the historical and biographical context surrounding the formation of those ideas.

Verkamp, in his preface (ix), gives some indication of his goals in writing this book. He notes that frequently people think of contemporary philosophers as uninterested in religion or as hostile to it. Philosophers are often seen as agnostic or atheistic in their approach to religious thought. The author notes that this perception is not completely accurate, as many philosophers are religious and many more are at least interested in religion on a philosophical level. Verkamp writes, in part, to show how many of the significant philosophers, past and present, have addressed the subject of religion in a substantial way.

The author also notes in his preface that his work is a "biographical encyclopedia" that provides a "bird's-eye view of the major points of the many different philosophers" (ix). Verkamp is well aware that, in the scope of his book, he cannot provide thorough coverage of all the religious ideas of the philosophers. Instead, his goal is more modest—he provides an introduction or outline of the philosopher's religious thought.

Given the goals the author seeks to achieve, it is clear that he is successful. Verkamp is able to present information on a large number of significant philosophers who have an interest in religion and to show the significance of their religious thought. Additionally, he provides a biographical encyclopedia that gives a good overview of over 150 philosophers. He does so in a clearly written, interesting style.

The encyclopedia is not without weakness, however. There is little coverage of Eastern philosophers, so that the title might more appropriately be "Encyclopedia of Western Philosophers of Religion." Additionally, the work would be far stronger if a greater number of philosophers were examined. The selection of philosophers seems somewhat arbitrary and limited. Verkamp, for instance, includes Augustine but not Aquinas.

Also, the author does not explore the connections between the philosophical thinkers. He does not, for instance, show the linkage that flows from Hegel to Feuerbach to Marx. The Feuerbach entry does not mention Marx, and the Marx entry does not show the influence Hegel and Feuerbach had on his religious thinking. This is a significant criticism, for it is necessary to understand the philosophical influences on a philosopher if one is to understand accurately the ideas of that philosopher. Also, one needs to understand how a particular philosopher was influential on others, thus showing his/her philosophical impact. Verkamp neglects to provide the linkages.

Another weakness is the comparatively small amount of space in entries devoted to the philosopher's specific ideas on religion. Generally, only three to four paragraphs address this dimension, while significantly more space is given to the religious and biographical information. While the biographical context is helpful, in a subject area such as this the specific religious ideas are more important.

This work, to be comprehensive and thorough, needs to be twice as long. Having entries of two to three pages would address the problem. It is interesting that one of the good encyclopedias of the philosophy of religion, *The Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 2005), even as a *concise* work, is 344 pages in length. Verkamp would have done well to expand both the number of entries and the length of them.

All things considered, however, the *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion* is an excellent and unique work that complements other reference works in philosophy of religion. Verkamp's creative biographical approach helps to ground the ideas of the philosophers in real life. College and seminary students likely will find the book to be useful and easy to understand. The encyclopedia will make a good addition to any religion/theology reference collection.

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