

The History of Western Philosophy of Religion

Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis, eds. *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 5 vols. \$895.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780195394283.

As a candidate for general library collections, this is a good series which should be especially useful to undergraduate philosophy students. Does it deserve space in your reference collections? The jury is hung on this question. So the verdict will come down to the philosophic judgment of the individual collection developer, and it turns on the question of whether or not this series constitutes a reference work.

The History of Western Philosophy of Religion is exactly what the series title suggests it is: a history of western philosophy of religion. Like many other philosophical histories of its type (especially Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, upon which it is self-consciously patterned), the *History* provides a sequenced presentation of the viewpoints and biographical highlights of significant theorists in philosophy of religion. Those unfamiliar with the interdisciplinary nature of philosophy of religion may be surprised by the eclectic nature of the subject coverage. Philosophers are there in abundance, of course, but the list of significant theorists also includes many theologians, apologists, and biblical scholars, as well as pure and social scientists.

These are boom times for philosophy of religion. There is no shortage of guidebooks, handbooks, companions, and dictionaries on the market at present catering to the upsurge in interest. What sets this series apart is its breadth of scope on the one hand and its avowed methodological modesty on the other.

If the *History* is not a first of its kind multi-volume history of philosophy of religion, it is the first in a long time to cover the subject with such comprehensiveness. This is a five-volume chronicle of western philosophy of religion, covering its entire developmental history from inception to the present—not something you come across every day. To be sure, guidebooks and handbooks in philosophy of religion serve a similar purpose. However, their scale is necessarily circumscribed to modest, single volume dimensions. The 107 entries covering 2,500 years of the western religious philosophical tradition in this series cover well the major players and provide good introductory overviews of their thought.

The ambitious scope of the series is balanced by what the editors believe to be a more circumspect methodological approach than similar historical philosophic works (most notably Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*). The *History* does not aim to set forth a grand narrative, sacrificing expert treatment in the interests of synoptic perspective. Rather, its approach is collaborative, bringing together the subject expertise of 109 international scholars to contribute essays. Each entry therefore represents current perspectives of a subject expert on a given religious philosopher or theorist, not a generalist gloss by scholars attempting to speak beyond their areas of specialization (as in Russell's case).

The volumes of this series cover five broad historical epochs: ancient, medieval, early modern, nineteenth century, and twentieth century. Volumes devote a chapter to each major philosopher of religion in the western tradition. Coverage is necessarily selective. While there are no startling omissions, there are a few names one might expect to see in a series of such interdisciplinary scope that do not show up. The volume on Twentieth Century Philosophers

of Religion, for instance, is weighted more heavily towards the first two thirds of the century and misses philosophers and theologians like Gadamer and Lindbeck altogether.

Essays are chapter length (averaging between twelve and twenty-five pages) and sufficiently large to overview a subject's main lines of thought, telescopically address hermeneutical issues, and comment on their enduring significance to the field. Depth of coverage is what one would expect from a discipline-specific handbook: these essays are introductory forays designed to rapidly acclimate the untutored reader to a given thinker's main ideas and refer the reader to other sources for further research. Hence the recommendation for undergraduate studies above: advanced scholars would require more granulated analysis. Indeed, the content summarized in these essays fills whole books, as the chapter bibliographies make evident.

The *History* looks enough like a reference work in some of its features that an unsuspecting buyer could be fooled into thinking that it is. But it isn't really. At least it doesn't function terribly well as a reference work when examined in detail. A core assumption of this critique is that reference works are designed for ease of access. They are intended to make the content of the work as accessible as possible to the user with minimum effort. In this respect, two of the most obvious things one looks for from a reference work are good cross referencing and multiple access points.

On neither count does the *History* stand up well. Histories of western philosophy are commonly organized chronologically, by thinker. This is a natural arrangement given the fact that particular schools of thought or the development of certain ideas are so closely tied to specific theorists in the western tradition. For those already familiar with a given thinker's range of ideas, access by author/thinker may be all that is required to find their way to discussions of their research topics. However, those requiring a more thematic treatment of a topical research question, such as immortality of the soul or theistic proofs, and who are not aware of the pedigree of their topic may well find the *History's* arrangement frustrating. The *History's* treatment of conceptual content is embedded in the essays on historical figures. There is thus no subject coverage of ideas as ideas, independent of the essays on particular theorists.

One could make the argument that introducing topical essays into this series would not only increase its length and attendant costs, it would fundamentally change its character as a history of philosophy of religion, making it more an encyclopedia than a history. But the argument only serves to throw into greater relief the deeper philosophical question: on what grounds does a title or series that purports to be nothing but a history of a discipline deserve reference status? What reference function does a historical series serve that other historical series not so deemed could not serve equally well? In the present instance, it isn't obvious that the series is a reference work or was intended for reference purposes. Its limited structural access points merely reinforce the impression that this is a work originally intended for general circulation.

The series includes both volume-specific indexing and extensive cross referencing. One might expect these features to redress its structural access deficits, providing the fledgling researcher with sufficient alternative access points to readily locate any topical information that might be sought. However, the lack of explicit topical treatment means that specific ideational coverage is episodic and governed primarily by contributors' larger concerns for a balanced presentation of their subjects' views and influence. Topical treatment is therefore patchy and sporadic. The cross referencing at the end of each essay is series wide in scope, directing the reader to other relevant volumes and chapters where major topics are covered. However, coverage of the cross referencing is only chapter specific. This means that the topical researcher is forced to skim the chapter's contents to locate material relevant to their interests.

In this regard, the indexes at the end of each volume are helpful, as they include authors, topics, and titles in their coverage and provide page-level access to topics. But the indexing is specific to each volume and does not provide access to the others. This means that the researcher must consult the index of each volume separately to determine if a topic is given coverage in its pages. This is hardly the kind of convenient, easily accessible content coverage one looks for in a reference book or series.

A critique of the *History's* inadequacies for reference purposes may seem unnecessary, given the fact that its editors do not introduce it as a reference work nor is it marketed as such by Oxford University Press. Yet the fact that it is being reviewed by *Theological Librarianship* at all (which only critically reviews reference works) is initial evidence of its being received, at least by some, as a title for reference shelves. Other deserving general collection series (*The Cambridge Ancient History*, for instance) have suffered the fate of being impressed into service on reference shelves, where they were both ill-equipped to serve and entirely out of place. To my fellow collection developers, a plea: let's avoid creating yet another collection mismatch by allocating this series to our circulating collections where it truly belongs!

A series does not *ipso facto* belong on reference shelves, simply because it is a series, comes from a prestigious publisher, and has a price tag that would make its purchase difficult to justify from departmental collection budgets or general funds. In addition, lackluster efforts to add reference value by slapping on inadequate cross referencing do nothing to strengthen weak credentials. Reference collections are too important to dilute and clutter with material that clearly belongs elsewhere. This series would add tremendous value to a library's general collection philosophy of religion holdings but very little to the reference collection. The *History* is a good introductory scholarly work that deserves a place in the general collection of every academic library that can afford the cost.

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