

The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society

Jodi O'Brien, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009. 2 vols.: 1032 pp. \$350.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781412909167 (set). Also available electronically via Sage Reference Online; contact publisher for pricing.

The *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (*EGS*) contains articles on a broad variety of topics, among them the intersection of religion with gender and society. As the encyclopedia's introduction states, "In addition to its importance as the central aspect of personal experience and identity, gender can be studied as a social factor that has tremendous impact on economic, cultural, religious, legal, and political institutions" (v. 1, xxix). Scholars who hold the understanding that there is no completely unbiased perspective will find the resource and its subject matter a helpful overview of the many levels on which gender and society interact. The discipline of Gender Studies within the fields of religious studies and theology becomes more important as more people learn about the many ways in which gender shapes one's personal and institutional experiences.

The editor of the *EGS*, Jodi O'Brien, has spent over a decade in the field of gender studies. As the chair of and professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Seattle University, she shows a strong commitment to studying the places where gender and society meet. She recognizes, however, the inherent challenges in creating and compiling a work of this nature and states, "We knew from the outset that it would not be possible to provide a comprehensive compendium of all the scholarship on gender and society" (v. 1, xxx). The *EGS* is not intended as an exhaustive work of everything related to gender studies, but is important in its variety. The *EGS* provides scholars with an adequate starting point for delving more overtly into the field of gender studies, covering such diverse topics as "Black Feminist Thought," "Men's Magazines," and "Transgender Political Organizing." The *EGS* has a very broad variety of topics in its nearly 500 entries, and almost 300 contributors (most of whom are located in the United States) provide a helpful plurality of voices on those topics.

While not an overtly theological resource, the *EGS* is helpful in the engagement of religious studies and theology within the broader cultural realm. Scholars in these disciplines will find some material in this work that specifically addresses theological and religious subjects. The Reader's Guide (located in both volumes) on page xix has a section titled "Religion, Mythology, and Spirituality," with a touchstone article by Kristin Aune on "Religion, Gender Roles in." Twenty-one articles are listed in this section, including "Christianity: Status of Women in," "Christianity and Homosexuality," "Divine Feminine Spirituality," "Judaism, Gender Roles and," "Theology, Feminist," and "Women in Islam." Wicca also has its own entry, while Buddhism does not. However, the index at the end of Volume 2 does show a few pages covering some aspects of Buddhism in other articles. As with many encyclopedic works, most of the articles conclude with a "Further Reading" section for those desiring additional reading and study on the given subject. Some articles offer web resources for further reading as well. The articles that do not have this section might leave the reader wanting more information on the subject.

As O'Brien states, "We have also included several 'framing' essays representing the organizing categories listed earlier. These essays are longer entries that provide an overview of the area and summarize commonly used concepts

and directions of research. These framing essays can be used as a basis for reading related topics and understanding how they fit in contemporary gender scholarship” (v. 1, xxx). Finding which essays are the “framing essays” is a difficult task, however, and the reviewer wishes they were more overtly noted as such in the List of Entries, Reader’s Guide, or Index. One may wonder if the resource would be improved with more subject-related “helps,” especially for those who are new to Gender Studies as a discrete academic discipline. Some articles are so wide in scope that they use generalizations by necessity. For instance, the article, “Religion, Gender Roles in” states, “Religions tend to adopt traditional gender roles, asserting that it is the place of men to be leaders in the family and religion and identifying women with the body and sexuality” (v. 2, 709). While such a statement may be very generally correct, it covers too much territory at once. Scholars who are used to the specific, minute, and discrete regarding their area of specialization may at times find some entries too broad and uncomfortably general.

Additionally, the wide variety of contributors to this work makes for a certain amount of unevenness; subject experts who are currently teaching in their fields to graduate students contributed entries to the *EGS*. The reviewer was a bit disappointed with some of the religious-related entries, occasionally written by those who are not subject experts. The writing is acceptable in all cases, but is sometimes a bit too general. The entry “Christianity – Status of Women in” is only one page in length and covers this subject mostly from a very North American standpoint. Additionally, while the *EGS* provides a helpful overview of some of the main issues and arguments regarding Christianity and homosexuality, one wishes there was more coverage about other religious perspectives and homosexuality.

The reviewer would like to see each contributor’s encyclopedic entries listed underneath his or her name in the Contributors list in order to have a better idea of each person’s subject expertise. The Reader’s Guide in “Religion, Mythology, and Spirituality” also seems somewhat incomplete. There were several articles of interest to religion and theological studies that were not included in this section. These include “Buddhism,” “Sikhism,” “Promise Keepers,” “Taoist,” “Christian Coalition,” “Concerned Women for America,” “Dorothy Day,” and “Focus on the Family.” On the other hand, some topics in this section seem to be only tangentially related to gender and religion, such as “Honor Killings” and “Hysteria.”

The editor’s aim of intending “to provide users with a ‘gender lens’ on society by focusing on significant gender scholarship within commonly recognized areas of social research” (v. 1, xxix) is achieved. As stated previously, O’Brien is not trying to compile a comprehensive resource, but rather provide a general and broad overview of the places where gender and society intersect. The resources listed for further reading (when available) on a particular article can provide a helpful entry into more specific subject material of each topic.

Overall the format of this encyclopedia works well for what it is trying to achieve. One wishes the Reader’s Guide for “Religion, Mythology, and Spirituality” would be slightly more accurate in terms of the subject matter it covers, with additions and deletions as noted above. Entry length ranges from half a page to a few pages, which for most topics is appropriate and provides the reader with general information without becoming sluggish in too much specificity.

The *EGS* is also available in e-format, which adds to its value and increases its availability to users. This work as an e-resource could possibly be indexed within library database collections, and thus searched by users looking for specific information by author, subject, keyword, title, etc.

Regarding bias or lack thereof in this work, the very idea of an encyclopedia of gender and society assumes a particular stance: that the topic of gender is valuable as a study in and of itself. However, from this presupposition,

the entries themselves do tend to present as objective a stance as possible. More than objectively, this resource presents material fairly. The field of Gender Studies often provides analyses of controversial subjects, and the *EGS* is no exception. Topics such as “Abortion,” “Defense of Marriage Act,” “North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA),” “Shari’a,” and other controversial subjects are included within the scope of the *EGS*. The contributors tend to focus on factual information and present positions on both sides of contentious issues, rather than taking sides on a particular issue.

The reviewer recommends this item for library acquisition, especially in settings that currently study the intersection of gender and society, as well as in places where there is a desire to add resources that complement the existing collection focus. This work is a valuable resource for anyone seeking general information about topics within the realm of gender and society, and it presents scholars with helpful information about religion’s intersection with gender and society from a sociological standpoint. While there are similar earlier works available that focus more particularly on women’s studies and women and society, there have been no published encyclopedic works within the past seven years specifically addressing the intersection of gender and society per se. The *EGS*, while not exhaustive, presents a helpful overview for anyone, including those who study religion and theology, finding their way in the field of Gender Studies.

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