

The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion

Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. London: Routledge, 2011. 543 pp. \$220.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780415559201.

The editors claim that this is the first volume on research methods in the study of religion ever published in English (xx). While such a claim may be debatable, it is undeniable that the editors have indeed constructed a valuable information resource that belongs in every academic library, is worthy of consideration as a textbook for doctoral students, and for inclusion in the personal library of researchers in the area of religion. The text is well organized, easily transportable, and designed in an intuitive, practical style with the information seeker in mind and it is certainly the most comprehensive and recent guide on research methods in religion. The handbook represents the works of an academically diverse, interdisciplinary, and international group of scholars.

The handbook is divided into sections on Methodology, Methods, and Materials. The Methods section rightly represents the majority of the handbook and is very comprehensive with twenty-two chapters covering a wide array of quantitative and qualitative research methods from content analysis to videography. Each chapter follows a helpful pattern that begins with a chapter summary of bullet items, an explanation of the research method, its theoretical background, its application in religious studies, practical issues in the use of the method, and an assessment of the method. Each chapter concludes with bibliographic references, suggestions for further reading, definitions of key concepts, and a list of related chapters within the handbook.

As a print-based resource, the handbook presents a useful model that should appeal to the information seeker who is familiar with and may well prefer an electronic resource as the layout of each chapter has the look and feel of a LibGuide or Wikipedia entry. The only thing missing, of course, is the hyperlinks to the references and suggestions for further reading. Having said that, future editions of the handbook, if not digital in format, would do well to include URL listings for web-based resources regarding the particular research methods, including the name and subscription information for possible email lists, a list of relevant journals that feature articles using the particular research method, a list of noted scholars who employ the method and, if available, Twitter feeds and/or links to blogs published by these scholars, social network groups of researchers on Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., using the particular method. Nevertheless, in an age of shrinking analog collections of reference materials, this handbook is a worthy and affordable purchase.

As the title implies, this is a handbook on Research Methods and the few chapters on Methodology and Materials seem to have been apparently thrown in for good measure. Perhaps the implicit assumption is that each section could easily be a separate volume, but the value of this handbook would be made even stronger with a few more chapters on research methodology and materials in the study of religion. Chapters on how to build a body of evidence using both qualitative and quantitative methods would greatly enhance the value of this handbook for doctoral students. While the handbook does focus on epistemology and feminist studies as critical, yet traditional, methodologies in the study of religion, the editors would have done well to solicit chapters on additional methodologies such as sense-making, institutional ethnography, constructivism, and statistics in the study of religion.

The Materials section is both intriguing and confusing in that this reader expected to find information necessary for locating, accessing, and using data sets of various types of materials for the design and implementation of research projects. In other words, the section title implies contents of a practical nature to facilitate the application of the research methods and theories presented in the previous sections, but that is not the case. The five chapters in this section each present a theoretical basis for conducting research with various types of materials such as sound, space, and visual phenomena. The Internet is presented, not incorrectly, as a digital universe in which new dimensions of the age old phenomenon of religion is being born and evolving and thus providing opportunities for research previously unavailable to the academic scholar. These chapters certainly deserve a place in the handbook, but perhaps the more proper place is the Methodology section. At the very least, the reader would be better served if the current section was renamed to “Research Theory and Materials” and a section on research materials was added.

It is surprising that a handbook that strives to be the comprehensive and definitive resource in the English language in research methods for the study of religion published in the last fifty years does not include at least an appendix with a list of resources for research data. To do so would greatly enhance the value of the handbook especially as a potential textbook for doctoral students. As mentioned earlier, each chapter on a particular research method should include information for additional resources relevant to the particular method. Likewise, the handbook as a whole should include a list of databases, digital repositories, research centers and institutes, conferences, organizations, etc., relevant to the research of religion such as The Archive of Religion Data Archives, the Religion Database of the American Theological Library Association, etc., and the various related resources on an international scale. Perhaps a future edition of the handbook will include at least a chapter on the use of information technology and the suggestion to seek out the assistance of theological librarians when designing and conducting research in the area of religion.

In summary, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* would be a worthy and valuable addition to the reference collection of any academic and theological library in that it does provide a much-needed current survey of research methods for the study of religion. The cost to value ratio may not justify the expense of individual purchase for a personal library or for the use as a textbook except that in the latter case the handbook should be one that the student would retain for future reference long after needed for a class in research methods.

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