

## *A Guide for Writing about Theology and Religion*

Mari Rapela Heidt. *A Guide for Writing about Theology and Religion*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2012. 128 pp. \$16.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781599820033.

Reminiscent of the size and scope of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, Mari Rapela Heidt's *A Guide for Writing about Theology and Religion* is a slim style manual addressing the particulars of writing about topics in theology and religious studies. The book's primary goal is to serve as a guide for undergraduates to improve their writing in religion and theology courses. The author, Mari Rapela Heidt, holds a PhD in theological ethics from Marquette University and teaches in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Dayton. Drawing from her experience teaching undergraduates, Heidt sets out to distill the fundamentals of good writing she sees as lacking in many of her students' assignments. At a little over a hundred pages, the book is just what the author describes in the preface: a "crash course" on punctuation, citation, and word usage (10).

Heidt devotes a significant portion of the book to addressing some of the more sensitive and nuanced issues that students encounter when writing papers on religious topics. Chapter 2 covers rules for capitalization, personal pronouns, references to adherents and leaders, and treatment of the sacred texts of the Abrahamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Chapter 3 covers these same topics for non-Abrahamic traditions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism). In such a short book, Heidt provides impressive coverage of a wide variety of specific issues relating to writing about religious traditions. For example, Heidt explains the difference between the term "Israelites" (the ancient people of God described in the Tanakh) and "Israelis" (modern citizens of Israel) (33). While these may seem like obvious distinctions to some, new vocabulary can be a source of confusion for undergraduate students. Heidt strikes a nice balance in these chapters of clearly and concisely explaining core style guidelines through concrete examples, as well as reminding students of the importance that word choice can have on striking a respectful tone in writing assignments: "Always write with respect for the deity, even if you are writing about a faith that is not your own or about ideas with which you do not agree" (30).

The latter half of the book addresses the rote details of citing sources, avoiding common grammatical pitfalls, and using proper punctuation. Chapter 4 addresses citation style. Heidt focuses on the most common citation styles, the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Chicago*-based Turabian style. The citation examples and explanations serve as a handy reference to standard citations, although readers would likely have to consult additional manuals for guidance on citing unusual sources like book reviews or sound and video recordings. A simple common-sense explanation of how to deal with citing internet sources and ebooks is included in this chapter. Chapters 5 and 6 address grammar and punctuation. Much of this is covered more comprehensively in other sources, but Heidt uses relevant examples and includes pointers specific to religious writing.

Heidt uses a flagging system of single triangles (▶) to indicate tips that warrant special attention and double triangles (▶▶) to indicate serious pitfalls. As a "quick" reference manual, the organization of some of these sections, even with this flagging system, is a little cumbersome. Overall the layout and organization of the chapters

with section headings makes it easy for the reader to locate relevant information. The book is engaging enough to read straight through, but it will more likely be used by readers for quick referencing while writing. A thorough index provides an easy navigation to specific entries in the text. Heidt includes two appendices, a practical “paper-writing checklist” and a bibliography of additional resources on writing and religious studies.

In the relatively specialized area of undergraduate writing in religious studies, there are only a handful of manuals. One notable comparison would be Oxford University Press’s *Making Sense: A Student’s Guide to Research and Writing: Religious Studies* (OUP, 2012, 239 pgs). The book is part of an ongoing series of discipline-specific writing manuals for undergraduates. While *Making Sense* covers more ground on research strategies and the writing process generally, it does not address certain style considerations specific to religious studies. Heidt’s book, on the other hand, provides more discipline-specific stylistic rules relating to the adherents, sacred texts, and rites and ceremonies of a wide variety of religious traditions. The *SBL Handbook of Style* and *Chicago Manual of Style* remain the authoritative guides for detailed coverage of citing, style rules, and documentation. Graduate students would likely find Heidt’s book too basic, but the book serves as an excellent reference manual for undergraduates who are learning the fundamentals of writing effectively and respectfully about religion. *A Guide for Writing about Theology and Religion* is highly recommended for university libraries with undergraduate programs in religion or theology.

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