

Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion, volume 1

Hans Dieter Betz, et al., eds. *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion, Vol.1: A - Bhu.* Leiden: Brill, 2007. 719 pp. \$299.00 (series subscribers, \$277.00). Cloth. ISBN: 900413980X, ISBN13: 9789004139800.

Whenever an essential theological reference work is translated into another language, there is cause for celebration. The present happy occasion is the appearance of *Religion Past and Present, volume 1*, the first volume in an English translation of a classic German encyclopedia, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (4th ed., Mohr Siebeck, 8 volumes, 1998-2005; index volume, 2007). *RGG* has long been an authoritative standard for German-speaking researchers, and *RGG4* was thoroughly revised for broader coverage of topics that would have stronger international appeal. The publication of *RGG4* for an English-speaking audience is therefore all the more timely and welcome.

Each volume includes a list of area editors and subjects covered, as well as a list of contributors to that particular volume, followed by about eighty pages of abbreviations for ancient sources, authors, and standard works. Subject entries are arranged alphabetically in double-column format and conclude with a bibliography and contributor name. By design, entries aim for a balanced presentation of major ideas and competing issues but do not provide comprehensive coverage of a topic. Likewise, bibliographies include only essential sources for further research without duplicating more exhaustive lists easily found in other works. Many entries include internal Cross References, which are indicated by an arrow (→) placed before a name or subject. Cross References in any encyclopedia or dictionary are especially helpful for reference librarians and researchers in religion and theology, all of whom will be grateful for this essential feature. Scattered throughout the main alphabetical sequence are See References, also indicated by an arrow.

With an estimated 15,000 total entries when completed, coverage for the whole set is impressive. Special emphases within *RPP* are given in a list of subject areas (x-xi). Included are Bible and archaeology, New Testament, Hebrew Bible, church history, church music and liturgy, church law, ecumenism, systematic theology, fundamental theology, ethics and related social sciences, history of religion, Judaism, philosophy, philosophy of religion, practical theology and related social sciences, religion and science, religious studies, and missiology. Specific entries cover a broad range of topics: modern and ancient cities, including biblical place names; countries; biblical topics and theological terms; deceased figures in the history of Christianity, theology, biblical studies, philosophy, psychology, music, art, and other disciplines. Three examples of interesting or unexpected entries in volume 1 are: “Bells”; “Artificial Life” (with a bibliographic reference to a *Wired* magazine article); and “Carola Barth” (the first woman to receive a theology degree in Germany, in 1907).

Article length varies considerably. Many entries are one-fourth to one-half column in length, while others are several pages long. Short entries often appear tersely worded. Longer entries tend to address different perspectives or aspects by dividing the text into sub-entries. The two longest articles in volume 1 are “Baptism” and “Art and Religion.” Interested readers may want to consult a 39-page *Preview* brochure that includes the entirety of the longest article, “Art and Religion” (http://www.brill.nl/brochures/RPP_preview.pdf). Illustrations are seldom included with entries, and color illustrations are rarer still.

About 900 authors and contributors are listed for the first volume (xii-xix). As should be expected given the long history of *RGG*, German authors comprise the majority of contributors to volume 1. A significant number of contributors are listed as located in other European countries, with perhaps an even larger number of North American authors. Though present location does not necessarily indicate ethnic origin, nationality, or subject expertise, the following countries are also given as locations of contributors to volume 1: India, Brazil (x8), Israel (x12), Australia (x2), Ghana, Japan (x2), Nigeria, China, Mexico, Argentina (x2), New Zealand, and South Africa (x2). According to the publisher, the finished *RPP* will include “over 3,000 authors from 88 countries” (<http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=18&pid=18103>).

The work of the editors, readers, and authors to enhance the English translation beyond its German counterpart is apparent. Corrections listed in the index volume to *RGG4* (published in 2007) have been included in the English translation. Newly deceased authors have been so noted with a dagger (†) in the list of contributors at the front of the volume though unfortunately not also with signatures at the end of each entry (see Carl Bangs, p. 391; Adrian Hastings, p. 91).

The editors and publisher of *RPP* have introduced other subtle differences in appearance and substance for added benefit of a new, English audience. For example, more space between lines of text makes for easier reading. Use of small caps for author names in bibliographic listings of *RGG4* has been dropped in favor of capitalizing only the first letter of author names. Unlike *RGG4*, italics are used for titles of works in *RPP* bibliographies to better assist readers to separate author names from titles. Where column numbering was used in *RGG4*, only pages are numbered in *RPP*.

Many authors have updated their bibliographies with additional citations published since the appearance of *RGG4* (see, for example, “Africa. III. Christianity”). Where possible and appropriate, bibliographies in *RPP* offer English translations for sources cited, though with one notable caveat. Any actual page number reference found in *RPP* will be to the original-language source as cited in *RGG4*, rather than to the page number of the source in English translation. This feature will no doubt lead to confusion for many researchers and librarians who are seeking specific pages cited.

Occasionally, an article in *RGG4* has been replaced by a completely new English article in *RPP*, perhaps in an effort to reflect different audience sensibilities. See, for example, the entries on “AIDS” and “Abortion,” and note the inclusion of “for *RPP*” after the author names. According to the publisher’s preface (vii), a few entries in *RGG4* have been omitted because of a presumed limited appeal to a non-German audience. Finally, to be included only in *RPP* are wholly new articles on individuals who have died since *RGG4* was completed (e.g., John Paul II).

In light of many considerable enhancements that accompany the English translation, it is surprising and disappointing that the publisher and editors have presented neither a longer preface nor any informative introduction to the work. Perhaps that oversight will be remedied by the time the index volume is published.

Religion Past and Present will easily become a reference resource that researchers and librarians consult regularly. It compares favorably with a range of reference works that are likely already used in academic and public libraries. A quick, unscientific comparison of coverage in *RPP* with several other references works is presented below in table format for all alphabetical entries from “a” through “ab.” Internal Cross References and See Also References are not included in the counts below.

The range of works considered for comparison here is:

- *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2nd ed., Thomson Gale);
- *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Thomson Gale);
- *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed., revised 2005, Oxford University Press); and,
- *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (with supplements, Baker).

Abbreviated Title of Reference Work	Number of Content Entries “a” through “ab”	Number of See References “a” through “ab”	Total Number of Entries “a” through “ab”	Number of Entries in Common with <i>RPP</i>	Number of Unique Entries vs. <i>RPP</i>
<i>EP2</i>	4	1	5	3	2
<i>ER2</i>	16	5	21	6	15
<i>ODCC3R</i>	27	7	34	20	14
<i>NSHERK</i>	57	17	74	28	46
<i>RPP</i>	41	5	46	N/A	N/A

While *Religion Past and Present* adds significant new content to library reference shelves, it is clear from the above data that it does not entirely displace the importance of other reference works. For instance, *ER2* has a high percentage of unique entries (15 out of 21 relative to *RPP*) due mostly to its much broader coverage of Islamic history and culture in the alphabetic range used in the above table. It is interesting to note that *NSHERK*, which originated almost three decades before the first edition of *RGG*, reflects the highest number of entries (28) in common with *RPP*, but it also has the largest number of unique entries (46 out of 74) relative to *RPP*. *ODCC3R* and *EP2* both have a high percentage of entries (58.8% and 60%, respectively) in common with *RPP*, but that leaves a considerable percentage of material in each work that is not found in *RPP*. It is unclear, without considerably more effort, what percentage of entries in *RPP* is unique to it relative to the entire group of other works listed above.

As of October 2008, the first four volumes of *RPP* have been published. Brill’s current plan is to publish all twelve volumes, including an index volume, by 2011. When completed, this new reference set will be a goldmine for topics in the history of Christianity, biblical studies, and theology, as well as in related disciplines such as philosophy, religious studies, music, art, and social sciences. English-speaking researchers will value it for its breadth of coverage alongside other important references works such as *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, and *Encyclopedia of Religion*. This new work belongs in all religious and theological libraries. Despite its high initial cost, the set will also offer long-term value for college and public library reference collections.

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