

Book Reviews

Bron R. Taylor (editor-in-chief). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005. 2 Vols. HB xxlv + 1877 pp. \$450, £250. ISBN 1-8437-1139-9.

An encyclopedia demonstrates that a topic has become an established part of academic debate or public interest, and, if it succeeds, indicates confidence that the topic will continue to be debated for some time. That is, an encyclopedia surveys what has already been achieved and anticipates continuing research and argument. *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* opens with the question, "What are the relationships between human beings, their diverse religions, and the Earth's living systems?" Interestingly, this permits the encyclopedia to include entries about human engagement with the world but points to its chief focus on "religions" and "nature". The introduction gives some helpful initial definitions of terms, tells us what the editor and contributors set out to do, and provides an invaluable brief survey of the debate so far. All this overflows the boundaries of narrowly defined academic constraints: the question of human relationships with the world is of wide concern.

In a "Reader's Guide" the editor explains that there are different kinds of entries within the work: "scholarly entries", "scholarly perspectives entries" and "practitioner entries". This is not offered as an apology for not sticking to "objective science" but as a celebration of the potential of different kinds of writing to cross-fertilise or illuminate each other. If it is the job of scholars to describe and debate issues dispassionately (as some assert), their task may be enhanced by material that engages passionately with them. In this way, we gain greater appreciation of the significance of encyclopedia entries as more than interesting debating points. The introductory material also includes an outline of the origins and evolution of the work that clearly states that there are significant gaps, especially regarding North Africa (apart from Egypt) and Antarctica. It further acknowledges that some may see uneven treatment of that which interests them, insisting this is inevitable

in such a project and pointing out that major efforts were made to be fully comprehensive. But it also celebrates the work of all kinds of contributors who, between them, produced an invaluable encyclopedia of nearly 1000 entries.

Every reader has his or her own interests and will find something of great value here. Student essays ought to be greatly improved not only by the wealth of data provided, but also by the different examples set in “how to write academically”. More advanced scholarship will find not only a ready reference on myriad topics but also provocation of new thoughts, arguments and research. Great foundations are laid here for all kinds of scholarship. Religiously and environmentally motivated people will also find inspiration here for further thought and engagement. All of this is especially true because, of course, everyone will find something with which they disagree, not only in the “practitioner” or “perspective” entries but in many of the more “standard” entries too. I’m tempted here simply to look at the first and last entries of each volume: the first opens with an entry about Edward Abbey, an American “bare-footed anarchist” whose writings underpin a lot of radical eco-activism, and ends with two about Carl Gustav Jung and his contribution to “psychologized esotericism” and “sacralized psychology”. Volume two begins with a “scholarly perspective” on “Kabbalah and Eco-theology” which admirably introduces Kabbalah and situates it as a cosmology with contemporary ecological resonances. The final entry is on “Zulu (amaZulu) War Rituals” which explores purification and dedication rituals at some unspecified past date. Happily there are prior entries about contemporary Zulu concerns and contributions. Together these first and last entries suggest something of the breadth of the whole work. Different kinds of entries devoted to different kinds of individuals (and different communities they influenced or arose from) and others concentrating on particular religions, cultures or regions all invite consideration and response.

If it is hard to know how to review an encyclopedia’s entries, it is simple enough to assess the whole work’s value. The collaborative effort of a community of scholars interested in diverse approaches to a topic usefully delimited as “religion and nature”, their ability to cite an expanding bibliography of existing debate, and their demonstration that further debate is worthwhile, all demonstrate that *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* comes at the right time and will greatly enhance scholarly activity in discrete

disciplines and in truly inter-disciplinary dialogues. Even those who have never thought about “religion and nature” before but who are interested in either “religion” or “nature” (whatever those terms might mean, alone or together) will find this work invaluable.

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