

The Religion and Theology Student Writer's Manual and Reader's Guide

Hopko, Joel, Gregory M. Scott, and Stephen M. Garrison. *The Religion and Theology Student Writer's Manual and Reader's Guide*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 195pp. \$34.00. ISBN 978-1538100943.

Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison have written a number of student writer's manuals, though this volume is their first foray into religion and theology. In 1995 they published *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual* bringing together the experience of Scott as Professor (now emeritus) of Political Science and Garrison as Professor of English and Creative Writing (both from the University of Central Oklahoma). The retitled *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual and Reader's Guide* is now in its 8th edition (2016). Subsequently they have addressed other disciplines, bringing in subject specialists to coauthor with them. The current publisher has available their manuals in sociology (2016), psychology (2018), and philosophy (2017), although previous endeavors have also covered other disciplines. For their religion and theology manual, they have collaborated with Joel Hopko, coordinator of the Jornada de Fe for the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Hopko is also the Region XIII representative of the National Association for Lay Ministry.

This book consists of four parts divided into twelve chapters, with a target audience of undergraduate students (vii) and, to a lesser extent, their instructors (ix). The first part focuses on reading and writing in introductory religion and theology courses, and the second seeks to build on the first in developing scholarly skills. Part three considers some dimensions of the study of religion, and part four envisions a pivot to theology, the study of scriptures, and homiletics and liturgics. The parts are not equal in length or depth, with the first comprising half the work (103 pages) and the other three being 37, 23, and 18 pages, respectively. The work includes both brief (iii) and detailed (iv-vii) tables of contents, a glossary of religious and theological terms (184-7), a reference list (188-90), and an index (191-5).

The book includes forty-four "Read & Write" exercises, one for each chapter subsection. These exercises range widely from the relatively brief and manageable to the surprisingly long and complex. "Freewrite" (31) and "Correct a Sentence Fragment" (45), for example, are brief and manageable tasks that students might even explore on their own. Most exercises in the volume, however, are much more expansive and complex assignments, with many requiring outside research and significant time. One particularly curious example is "Explore Doctrinal Options for the Separation of Church and State" (19, 20), in which students are asked to "find more information about Pastafarian doctrine on a variety of websites" and write an essay of up to ten pages considering what constitutes the establishment of religion and what qualifies as legitimate religion and religious doctrine. This is a fairly wide-ranging and complex task for just the fifth exercise a student reading this manual would encounter. While the overall plan of the book tries to scaffold learning, this strategy is not always consistent in application. The book repeats the idea that writing is the best method of learning (vii, 21), but without proper guidance, support, and evaluation, it is a stretch to imagine that many of these exercises will result in significant learning for students on their own.

The work is, at root, a writer's manual, and the strengths of the book are the chapters on writing (Chapters 2 and 3), which give attention to motivation, an overview of the writing process, and detailed advice on mechanics, formatting, and citation. The advice is rigorous ("follow the directions in this manual exactly" [66]), cautionary ("language errors spread doubt like a virus" [44]), and detailed ("do not overuse semicolons" [59]).

These sections may provide novice writers with detailed advice on common writing errors. It is unfortunate that the citation section of Chapter 3 makes consistent reference to the 16th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2010). While the differences are likely minimal, one would expect a 2018 imprint to refer to the current, 17th edition (2017) of the style manual.

The book is also a reading guide, but this is more of a mixed bag. The first chapter and section 6.1 provide helpful guidance for readers new to the disciplines of religion and theology. Other sections, especially Chapter 8 (“Study the History of Religion”), tend to interpret passages for the reader and generalize from limited information in ways that are less helpful. This may be a function of space; an eight-page chapter is a tight fit to introduce even parts of the origins and histories of religion as well as comparative religion.

The weakest part of the manual is Chapter 4: “Become Familiar with Quality Information Sources.” It advises students to find quality information sources through five means: The American Academy of Religion website, The Society of Biblical Literature website, dissertations and theses (especially the CRL search engine), studies by think tanks, and the Library of Congress website. The list of sources presented here is disappointing for its glaring omissions. Mentioning neither monographs, journal literature, nor subject-specific reference works, the authors bypass a student’s local institution completely in finding resources for *introductory* religion and theology courses. Although there are references at other points about consulting “a library to see how much published work on your issue exists” (26) and moving on from *general* encyclopedias “to academic articles that you will find by following links on your college library’s web page” (133), there is no real guidance on how to effectively search and navigate a library catalog, an academic database, or even Google Scholar.

The five “quality information sources” highlighted by Chapter 4 are also noteworthy (and perplexing) for the sources they actually include. The AAR and SBL websites provide a lot of information about their respective memberships, publications, and related topics. They are effective for discovering information about the *study* of religion and biblical literature, but they are not (and not designed to be) good sources of quality information *about* religion and biblical literature themselves. Theses and dissertations are seldom advisable information sources for introductory students for various reasons: the best bits are often eventually published elsewhere in a more usable form and, given their nature and typical length, they are usually not user-friendly sources. The advice to conduct a “Google search on ‘think tanks’” (101) to discover quality information is as bizarre as it is irresponsible, especially for introductory students. Advanced students, adept at recognizing and filtering out bias, *may* find valuable reports made available by think tanks, but novice students should probably avoid private research institutes of unknown provenance and agenda. This think tank section is one of the shortest in the book and is (thankfully) contradicted by instruction later in the book about evaluating resources (138). Finally, visiting the Library of Congress website as a source of quality information is vastly more sound advice, but it still assumes a level of information and digital literacy that many undergraduates in introductory courses have yet to attain. Access is a concern here, too, for non-digitized resources; they may not be held locally. This entire section should either be drastically restructured or omitted altogether; this is a writer’s manual and reading guide, and so it could merely point readers to quality research manuals and guides.

In its present form, this book is not recommended for purchase; its deficiencies outweigh its strengths. The chapters on writing could benefit students seeking a resource in that area, but there is likely very little in them for which an equivalent might not be easily located. The care and detail of these sections only highlight some of the disorder and confusion in others. While the chapter on finding quality information sources is certainly the low point, other sections have their own problems. It is likely that the work in its present form is trying to do too many things to do them all adequately and cohesively. Chapter 5 provides cursory information about conducting interviews, focus groups, case studies, and surveys on religious topics, but the book later acknowledges that most “college papers will be based on your use of secondary sources” (133). Chapter 6 encompasses only ten pages but purports to teach students to read scholarship, critique an academic article,

write a book review, and write a literature review. Many of the later chapters suffer from the same dynamic, resulting in potential confusion, almost certain oversimplification, and poorly considered material. The book concludes with the 44th “Read & Write” exercise: “Select an actual person whom you love or who you know is well loved. Write a homily in which you imagine that person is departed.”

Ryan Shrauner
Librarian
Baptist Seminary of Kentucky
Georgetown and Louisville, Kentucky