



## ***Encyclopedia of Women in World Religions: Faith and Culture across History (2 volumes)***

***Ed. Susan De-Gaia***

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**Review by Amanda Haste. First published online 3 April 2019.**

**To be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Independent Scholar*.**

The two-volume *Encyclopedia of Women in World Religions: Faith and Culture across History* is a comprehensive work, over three years in the making, which features the work of no fewer than 126 contributors. Many are independent scholars, including several members of NCIS.

Editor Susan De-Gaia states in her introduction that these contributors were chosen for their "wide range of experience" rather than academic rank (xxxiv). They are therefore not only academics (including professors emeriti and adjuncts) but are sometimes both academics and religious leaders. The religious leaders "include Wiccan priestesses, Jewish priestesses, rabbis, Christian ministers and lay leaders, a former nun, and a Native American shaman," and there are also "healers, ritualists, artists, performers, and museum directors" (xxxiv-xxxv).

This breadth and depth of experience is evident in the *Encyclopedia*, with its eclectic view of faith and religious culture which goes far beyond the canon of organized religion and the Abrahamic religions: its 17 sections also include the role of women in religions such as Baha'i,

Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Indigenous Religions, Jainism, Paganism, Prehistoric Religions, Shinto, Sikhism and Spiritualism.

However, the *Encyclopedia* does not provide an overview of these, but rather tackles topics demonstrating in detail the role of women as "creators and sustainers of culture" and the "enormous contributions" they have made, and continue to make in world religions, as well as covering issues concerning women.

The richness of these topics is revealed in the alphabetical list of entries, in which we find such eclectic juxtapositions as this under Buddhism:

- Buddhism in the United States
- Dance
- Dance of Tara
- Engaged Buddhism
- Female Divinities
- Funeral Practices
- Gender Roles

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For such a comprehensive, cross-cultural work, effective cross-referencing is a must, and this is achieved through an excellent, thorough structure which makes searching the book an easy process. The entries for each religion are each prefaced by a general introduction, followed by substantial articles (from 500 to 2000 words) on topics which are also covered from the perspective of other religions: these include those on "marriage" from Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Ancient Greek and Christian points of view.

In addition to the Table of Contents detailed by religion, there is also an Alphabetical List of Entries, giving the section in which they appear, and a Comprehensive Index in the back of each volume, which together allow the reader to cross-reference topics longitudinally as well as laterally. All the front page matter – alphabetical list of entries, acknowledgements and introduction by Susan De-Gaia, and a wonderful timeline by Harald Haarmann giving periodization and developments in religion from the Paleolithic Age (2.5 million years BP)<sup>1</sup> to the Modern Era (from the latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to today), appear in both volumes, and provide a comprehensive overview which effectively contextualizes what could otherwise be a challenging work to navigate.

Volume 1 contains the entries from "African Religions to Hinduism," while Volume 2 runs from "Indigenous Religions to Spirituality." In case you are wondering why an encyclopedia would end at Sp, you can be assured that "Spirituality" includes excellent articles on Spirituality and Gender in Social Context, and on Yoga, and you will also find for example Wicca under "Paganism," Writers and Poets under "Ancient Religions," and Women Warriors under "Native American".

Susan De-Gaia has been careful to use language in a way which does not "perpetuate old prejudices" (xxxii). For example, she replaces the word *cult* with "more exact terms, such as *religion*, *worship*, and *ritual*" (xxxiii) and explains the rationale for the capitalization of terms such as *pagan*, *gods* and *goddesses*. She uses Wach's schema of three forms of religious expression – theoretical, social and practical – as a starting point for her focus on women "as active agents in religion" (xxvii). Examples of this include the articles on women's rituals, meditation, pilgrimage, art, and drumming (*practical expression*), women's ordination, priestesses, rabbis, shamans, and gurus (*sociological expression*), and myths, such as those of Lilith (Judaism) and the Fall (Christianity), and female divinities (*theoretical expression*).

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<sup>1</sup> Before Present.

This impressive work thus provides an enormously rich resource for all those with an interest in religion and spirituality in all its manifestations, women's studies, ritual, sociology of religion and more. The editorial brief was to make the articles academically rigorous, but also accessible to students, with a minimum of referencing but with lists of suggested further reading. The result is a fine addition to the literature on women in religion which affords a detailed, deeper reading of women in religion which will complement existing general studies of religion.

This reviewer would like to see a copy of this fine work in every library, and recommends that you suggest it to your local or university library for purchase, citing the ISBN number given above. It should be essential reading for all those with an interest in the field.

**Amanda Haste** teaches as adjunct faculty at Aix-Marseille University, France and is an independent scholar, notably of 21<sup>st</sup>-century convent culture and identity construction through music and language. Her research is published in the *Journal for Religion, Media and Digital Culture* and *Culture & Religion*, and *The Languages of Religion: Exploring the Politics of the Sacred*, ed. Sipra Mukherjee (Routledge, 2018), among others. She translated archival manuscript sources for, and copy edited, *The Chronicles of Nazareth (The English Convent) Bruges 1629-1793*, ed. Caroline Bowden (Boydell, 2017) and co-authored (with Prof. James Block, DePaul University) *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015)*. Dr Haste is currently preparing a monograph on the British Colony in nineteenth-century Marseille, focusing on this ex-pat community's founding of the city's Anglican church and their engagement with this and the Protestant temple.