A Wealth of Small Articles, but Theoretical Reflections in Tiny Doses: An Evaluation of the New RGG

HANS G. KIPPENBERG


Dictionaries are like wolves in sheep’s clothing. They inform on subjects in a particular field from A to Z apparently without any opinions of their own. But actually they do much more: they establish ideas, subjects and problems and convey a distinct perspective to the reader, who mostly takes it for granted. No other scholarly tool succeeds to a similar degree in accommodating effective pre-scriptions in simple de-scriptions—to use a pun by Ivan Strenski.¹ This certainly applies to the fourth edition of the RGG.

The history of this dictionary (Handwörterbuch) is impressive. It has appeared from the same publisher since 1909, a publisher today directed by a descendent of the very same Paul Siebeck under whose guidance the first edition came into being. This continuity offers a unique chance to have a look behind the scenes and to disclose elements of construction of an ‘innocent’ dictionary. The first edition of the RGG (RGG¹) came out in the years 1909–1913, the second in 1927–1932, the third in 1957–1965; for the fourth edition (RGG⁴), the one here under review, the first five volumes have appeared. Three others are still to come, one each year. The preface to the new edition

is tantalizingly brief about that history; the mere 2½ columns ignore that intriguing issue. Yet the present edition is erected on a structure that derives from that inception; the reasons underlying it are tacitly assumed as valid today. Only by going back to the time of its beginning are we able to recognize the implications of its structure, the substance hiding behind the architecture. For that reason this review compares the fourth with the first edition. The correspondence in the years 1904–1906 preceding the first edition along with the preface of the first volume of RGG\textsuperscript{1} reveal the reasons and decisions underlying its structure.\footnote{I was able to check documents preserved in the archives of the publishing house J.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) in Tübingen. The most relevant of them are collected and made accessible by Alf Özen in an internal typescript: \textit{Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (Erste Auflage)}, Tübingen 1989. I am grateful to Alf Özen and Dr. h.c. Georg Siebeck for permitting me to use it.}

Four basic elements run through the RGG\textsuperscript{1} and its recent successor. All were the outcome of debates and decisions: an extensive number of entries; the adoption of popular catch-words; the involvement of non-theological disciplines; a division of subjects according to history, society and tradition.

“A wealth of small articles”

The number of entries is remarkable. According to my rough estimate, the eight volumes after completion will contain 10,300 entries. Since many of the entries are internally subdivided into parts written by different authors, the figure is even higher, according to the assistant editors in Tübingen, about 20,000. A comparison with the other German encyclopaedia of religion, \textit{Theologische Realenzyklopädie}, reveals the difference: its 36 volumes contain “merely” \textasciitilde 2,200 entries. The abundance renders the RGG an invaluable instrument for scholars, particularly since a bibliography is added to each entry. But its generous structure was not self-evident. It was the publisher, Paul Siebeck, who, from the very beginning, seems to have had the firm intention to create a “scholarly reference book for everybody,” similar to the \textit{Brockhaus} (Paul Siebeck in July 1904 in a letter to Köhler).\footnote{“Wissenschaftliches Nachschlagewerk für Jedermann”: Alf Özen, \textit{Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (Erste Auflage)}, Tübingen 1989, 6.} Some of the early protagonists had still to be convinced, as a letter by the editor