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On Writing Abstracts

Abstract

Fred Guyette of Erskine College & Seminary shares his experiences with writing abstracts for Religious and Theological Abstracts (RTA) and Old Testament Abstracts (OTA).

Keywords

abstracts, Religious and Theological Abstracts (RTA), Old Testament Abstracts (OTA)



On Writing Abstracts

Friends, I would like to give a brief account of my avocation, which is writing abstracts for *Religious and Theological Abstracts* (RTA) and *Old Testament Abstracts* (OTA). In 1995, I began writing abstracts as a volunteer for RTA, just by writing to their office in Myerstown, PA and asking if they had any journals they would like to assign to me. In addition to my MLS, I had an MA in Religious Studies, so that must have been enough to convince them that they could take a chance on a new volunteer.

The first journal they sent to me was *Ethical Perspectives*, which is published by the University of Leuven in Belgium. Their focus, then as now, is on professional and social ethics. They sponsor a lecture series in which they invite a well-known scholar to read two papers, and then a panel of graduate students is invited to write responses. The first articles I read in my role as abstractor were about social theory, by Robert Bellah¹ and Michael Walzer.² From that point on I was hooked. Once a year RTA sends out a notice to their abstractors listing the journals that do not have an abstractor, and almost every year I volunteer for one or two new titles to analyze.

Since I can read a little bit of French, the RTA office assigned me two more journals in the following year, *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* and *Revue Thomiste*. It would be hard to imagine two journals with religious commitments that are more different from each other. *Revue Thomiste* is published by

Dominican monks who are committed to the traditions of Thomas Aquinas. Typically, their essays focus on the seven virtues as understood by the Catholic Church: faith, hope, love, wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance.³ *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* comes from a Protestant Reformed seminary in Montpellier. One of the first essays I analyzed for them dealt with The Edict of Nantes (1598), which is a landmark in the history of religious toleration.⁴ The Edict of Nantes was supposed to be a peace treaty that would put an end to the bloodshed between Catholics and Protestants in Reformation-era France, and it did have a positive effect in the first decade of the seventeenth century. However, it was finally revoked by Louis XIV in 1685. Fleeing from government persecution in France, many Huguenot refugees began to make their way to South Carolina in that same year. In fact, if you look up the word “refugee” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the very first entry you will find is a reference to the exodus of Protestants from France during this time.

The relationship between religion and law has provoked endless debate in U.S. History, and I leapt at the chance to write abstracts for two journals that focus on that subject: *Journal of Church and State* and *Journal of Law and Religion*. Baptists have a special interest in the separation of church and state, so for many years Baylor University was a natural home for *Journal of Church and State*. Several articles in *JCS* refer to the legacy of Roger Williams, since he was an early advocate for the separation of

¹ Robert N. Bellah, “Flaws in the Protestant Code. Some Religious Sources of America’s Troubles” *Ethical Perspectives* 7, no. 4 (2000): 288-299.

² Michael Walzer, “Seminar with Michel Walzer” *Ethical Perspectives* 6, no. (1999):220-242.

³ Serge-Thomas Bonino, “«nature et grâce» dans l’encyclique *Deus Caritas Est*” *Revue Thomiste* 105, no. 4 (2005): 531-549.

⁴ Hubert Bost, “L’Edit de Nantes. Lectures d’hier et d’aujourd’hui.” *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 73, no. 3 (1998): 371-390.

church and state. One of those essays sets up a debate between Williams and John Winthrop, whose *Model of Christian Charity* provided the intellectual foundation for the Christian government of Plymouth Colony.⁵ *Journal of Law and Religion* is affiliated with Emory University. I will mention two of my favorite articles from JLR. The first is by Ronald Osborn, "William Lloyd Garrison and the United States Constitution: The Political Evolution of an American Radical."⁶ It does an excellent job of showing how religious faith can lead to social change. The second is very different in scope, and concerns the history of the church's care for orphans: "Christianity and the Legal Status of Abandoned Children in the Later Roman Empire."⁷

Several teachers from my days as an undergraduate encouraged me to develop an interest in literature and religion. The Literature Department at the University of Notre Dame publishes *Religion and Literature*. I know when it arrives on my desk that there is a good chance there will be one essay on Dante and *The Divine Comedy*, and another on Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*. But they like to publish studies on literature from many eras and various perspectives, too. One of the most memorable articles for me is on the moral ambiguity of religion in *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara

Kingsolver.⁸ Running a close second is an essay on hope versus despair in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, which is set in a post-apocalyptic future.⁹

For me, one of the most interesting discussions in religious studies deals with the complex relationship between scripture and social ethics. An article from *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* has helped me think about the importance of kindness and compassion in The Book of Ruth, though I have to confess, sometimes it comes to mind only *after* I have been unkind to another person.¹⁰ By contrast, the Book of Judges is set in a time of social chaos and fear, "when every man did what was right in his own eyes." What would it take for social and moral renewal to become a reality? An article in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* offers a profound meditation on that question as it emerges in the Book of Judges.¹¹

I have also discovered that the journal *Worship* has a longstanding commitment to the study of liturgy and ritual. When I have failed to do the right thing, I find it helpful to re-read an article I abstracted for that journal: "Penitential Services: An Invitation to Conversion, a Celebration of Resurrection, a Call to Action."¹² Another essay published in *Journal of Religion* has challenged me to think about my

⁵ Robert T. Miller, "Religious Conscience in Colonial New England" *Journal of Church and State* 50, no. 4 (2008): 661-676.

⁶ Ronald Osborn, "William Lloyd Garrison and the United States Constitution: The Political Evolution of an American Radical" *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 65-88.

⁷ Joshua C. Tate, "Christianity and the Legal Status of Abandoned Children in the Later Roman Empire" *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 123-141.

⁸ Nathan Kilpatrick, "Singing a New Song from the Conqueror's Music: Religious Hybridity in *The Poisonwood Bible*" *Religion & Literature* 43, no. 3 (2011): 83-106.

⁹ Thomas A. Carlson, "With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger" *Religion & Literature* (2007): 47-71.

¹⁰ Hendel, Russell Jay Hendel, "Ruth: The Legal Code for the Laws of Kindness" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2008): 254-260.

¹¹ Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges" *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2009): 687-702.

¹² Eileen Crowley, "Penitential Services: An Invitation to Conversion, a Celebration of Resurrection, a Call to Action" *Worship* 87, no. 2 (2013): 113-129.

responsibility to try to be a blessing to others in my work as a librarian. In Hebrew, Tikkun ha-Olam means something like "mending the world" or "healing the world." It can also be applied in the context of marriage counseling, in legal proceedings, and in political situations. Certainly, in light of the violence that took the lives of nine parishioners who were praying at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston on June 17, 2015, working to mend the world would be a good idea, don't you think?¹³

As every librarian knows, an abstract is a brief summary of a journal article's contents, usually about a hundred words in length. Over the years, I estimate that I have written about 3,000 abstracts. Several trends have picked up momentum since I began writing abstracts for RTA twenty years ago. More editors require authors to provide their own abstracts now, rather than relying on someone else to read their articles and summarize them. In addition, there were very few full-text databases in 1995, and in that context, researchers relied much more on abstracts to help them identify articles that would have to be requested through Interlibrary Loan. So the landscape has changed and librarians might be justified in concluding that the need for abstracts has been declining. And yet, I find that I still make use of them every day in my reference work with seminary students, so I go on writing them and making whatever contribution I can to the field of Religious Studies in that way.

I will bring this account to an end by summarizing some of the long-term advantages of having undertaken this work. (1) Writing abstracts has made me a better reader and a better writer. (2) It helps me keep current with scholarly discussions in theology, Biblical studies, ethics, and church history, (3) which makes it easier for me to help our students with

their research projects. And (4), following the trail of footnotes and citations has helped broaden my vision for collection development, too. When I see that a certain book figures prominently in a journal article, I can easily check our catalog to see whether we own it, and if needed, I can fill out a purchase request for it.

Peace to you!

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¹³ Gilbert Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept" *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 214-240.