

**Joseph Giordmaina (ed.), *Systems of Knowledge: A Guide. Book 1 – Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, Middle Ages and Renaissance, Malta, Malta University Publishers, 1995.***

This textbook is the result of the co-operative and evaluative efforts of a group of teachers described in the book's foreword as having 'expertise of both the difficulties and rewards of stimulating teenagers to perceive the connection between spheres of knowledge and the values of existence'. It caters for a long-felt need in Maltese higher secondary education, and it signals important and ground-breaking curricular developments in the teaching and examination of the subject 'Systems of Knowledge', which is a pre-requisite to University studies in Malta.

'Systems of Knowledge' was introduced a few years ago with the aim of encouraging students to become critical and reflective thinkers – to ensure, in the words of one of its chief architects, 'that at the post-secondary and pre-tertiary phase, there would not be a total divide between science and arts studies and that there would be scope for creative, critical and operative thinking'. The Guide aims to achieve these ends by introducing students to a number of sequentially presented key concepts taken from different stages in the history of Western civilisation, with particular focus on intellectual, artistic and technological developments in the Mediterranean regions of the European continent. The book under review constitutes the first of a projected two-volume series. It caters for the first of the course's intended two-year division, and covers the period from Antiquity to the Renaissance. The projected second volume is described in the editor's preface as 'covering Module Modern and Contemporary'.

The book projects itself as no more and no less than a guide, meant, as the editor insists, 'to help teachers to identify text and to focus on certain areas of a vast spectrum of ideas'. It is the result of a radical re-evaluation of the course's structure, undertaken in the light of concerns over perceived limitations in, and misconceptions about, its purpose and objectives. The guide suggests that the lessons of those experiences have been well learned and evaluated. It comes across as a potentially very rewarding tool for teaching and learning, structured according to soundly developed pedagogical principles of organisation. It introduces the topics on which it focusses accessibly and imaginatively, is generously illustrated and user-friendly in format, and it also offers a range of astutely selected and sequenced colour reproductions of significant works of art which should further stimulate reflective analysis and discussion.

Each of the guide's chapters opens with an introductory overview of the contexts within which the guide's contributors have chosen to locate key concepts

and ideas. Some of these contextualising sections are more detailed and informative than others, but this should not raise major problems if teachers and students approach them critically and in the spirit in which they have been written - i.e. as guides to further discussion and research. Each chapter also reproduces selected texts, intended to encourage the further exploration of highlighted ideas. Not all the selected texts are likely to achieve this end, but they do provide a wide range of perspectives and include often stimulating excerpts both from academic studies as well as from primary sources. The latter are quite diverse, and include, to take a few random examples, a selection of Horace's odes, an abridged version of Aristophanes' *The Acharnian*, an excerpt from Macchiavelli's *The Prince*, and examples of Da Vinci's anatomical studies, juxtaposed against his spirited upbraiding of those 'who think that it is better to watch an anatomical demonstration than to look at these drawings'.

The guide (quite logically) presents the primary texts in translation, but it does not draw attention to this fact, nor is there any indication as to whose translations have been used. The act of translation raises challenging questions of interpretation in its own right, not least in terms of how historical renditions like those presented here relate to the experiences and systems of knowledge which they retrace and reconstruct. In a course leading to an examination which students are expected to write about complex ideas in both English and Maltese, this could be turned into a rich area of exploration.

One of the guide's chief aims is to show how the ideas it describes were influenced by the contexts in which they were forged. Given this focus, it could usefully have devoted more systematic attention to the implications of its own boundaries, and to the fact that its orientations are exclusively Eurocentric. However impressive, stimulating or influential they may be, the ways of seeing and the artistic and conceptual achievements presented here are no more and no less than examples of local knowledge. More could have been made of the fact that other cultural, artistic, intellectual and technological traditions were developed in non-European contexts, and that some of the most stimulating developments in art and thought often resulted from contact between different cultural traditions. The obverse is also true, in that destructive conflicts and the subjugation or even extinction of alternate cultures have often resulted from the misguided belief that any one system of knowledge or set of cultural values is somehow more 'basic', more absolute or more universal than others.

This is not a quibble over the topics which have been selected for inclusion. The lack of a more systematic acknowledgement of cross-cultural concerns is an omission whose implications are given an unfortunate twist in the book's blurb, which asserts that 'the programme of studies *Systems of Knowledge* encourages students to reflect on the basics of human knowledge'. The blurb also (and quite

unselfconsciously, it seems) speaks of inviting students 'to reflect critically and creatively on the products of man [sic] throughout history'. These universalising claims are as unnecessary as they are misleading.

The guide's real focus is (appropriately) on the influential and formative ideas, values and achievements of different groups and individuals who lived in the Mediterranean region over a number of centuries. It does no more and no less than explore some of the interconnections between the region's peculiar 'political, socio-economic, ethical and cultural environments' and the ways of seeing, knowing and being which have both grown out of them and also influenced their further development. That the guide manages to explore these interconnections in such a pedagogically innovative fashion is an impressive achievement.

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