

How reference books can help users of Google

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We live in a golden age of reference books, particularly reference books about Christianity. In the late 1980s publishers discovered how computers can shoulder the feats of memory required in editing a reference book, and for the past twenty years masterpieces of the genre have proliferated. My advice after fifteen years' experience of writing about reference books boils down to "Keep it simple." Identify the best recent works in a field, keep using those works, buy some if you can, and alert colleagues to their existence. Acquire the best and stick to them, where "best" means up-to-date, rich in bibliography, and steeped in contrasting points of view. The accompanying list identifies such staple reference books in Christian history and in the study of spirituality. Assumptions of previous generations that reference books must be overpriced, reductionist, and hostile to theory no longer hold true. Now excellent works can be purchased at about half price through websites like www.abe.com or www.bookfinder.com, and many, perhaps most recent works in Christian studies wrestle with methodology and offer revisionist views.

It is eminently Christian to care about reference books. We tend to forget that Christians invented the reference book. Benedictine scholars like Dom Jean Mabillon (1632-1707) at the Abbey of St.-Germain in Paris devised reference books, as did the Bollandist Jesuits in Belgium with their *Acta sanctorum* (1643-). A turning point came with a masterpiece by a French Protestant, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2 vols. (1695-1697). His work is the ancestor of all reference works on methodology in theological studies. The 28 volumes of the *Encyclopédie* edited by Denis Diderot (1713-1784) secularised the Benedictine notion of squeezing the riches of an entire library into a single shelf of books.

The notion that a reference book need not merely summarise data but can present novel views and pioneer new methods helps us to see how the internet is broadening access to reference tools. Google is a gigantic index and cross-referencing device to texts that have been posted on the internet. The concept both of an index and of cross-referencing is enacted in any sound reference book, but of course Google extends the capability to an unheard of

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extent. My advice to librarians is to urge all users of Google to ground internet searches in parallel searches in reference books. Google needs the ballast of printed masterpieces such as those listed below.

An antidote to the lightheadedness that Google can induce is to thumb through a reference book on similar topics. The pages of a book sober us up, whereas the lists of websites in Google can make us feel drunk with knowledge. Books teach a modesty that can counteract the giddiness that comes from feeling, "Aha, at last all pertinent knowledge is within a click of my mouse." What can be called the "God's eye view" used to be induced by mega-encyclopedias in thirty to forty volumes, and now that experience has been

democratised through the internet. A duty of advocates of reference books is to restore common sense by grounding Google-enthusiasts in books and by reminding users that even the greatest encyclopedists never achieved universal knowledge of particulars. Like the reference series of old, Google and the internet only mimic a "God's eye view." They represent the latest form of Faust's striving to claim mastery of all that can be known. One merit of reference books is to show that this dream is only that, a noble dream. Christians have long aspired to encapsulate all Christian knowledge in a book, and now that dream pervades the internet. The best remedy to such *chutzpah* is to browse in reference books.

STANDARD REFERENCE WORKS IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

[*** indicates works of the widest relevance]

Cross, F.L. and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 1786 pp.
OR 4 ed. rev (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) [old editions of 1957 and 1974]. ***

Hastings, Adrian, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford and NYC: Oxford UP, 2000) ***

Hillerbrand, Hans J., ed., *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 4 vols. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) ***

McGrath, Alister E., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1993)

Parry, Ken et al., eds., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford and Malden MA; Blackwell, 1999/2001)

Sunquist, Scott W., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001) ***

RECENT REFERENCE WORKS ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND WORSHIP

Bradshaw, Paul, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 2002) Supplants J.G. Davies, ed., *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM, 1972; 2nd ed. 1986)

Dreyer, Elizabeth A and Mark S. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005)

Holder, Arthur, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford and Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005) ***

McLeod, Hugh, ed., *Christianity: World Christianities c. 1914-c.2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006),

Mursell, Gordon, *English Spirituality*. Vol. 1 *From Earliest Times to 1700*. Vol. 2 *From 1700 to the Present* (Louisville, London, Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 548 & 580pp

Senn, Frank C., *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 748 pp.***

Senn, Frank C., *The People's Work: A Social History of Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006)

Sheldrake, Philip, ed., *The New Westminster [or SCM] Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). ***

Wainwright, Geoffrey and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 914 pages, 34 signed chapters ***

Waaajman, Kees, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leeuven: Peeters, 2002) 968 pp

