

Librarians, Publishers, and Theological Reference Resources: A Way Forward

By Melody Layton McMahon

The recent controversy over the Wiley-Blackwell publication *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* (ECC),¹ edited by George Kurian,² can be seen as a continuation of the nearly ten-year ongoing discussion among theological librarians regarding reference works and what librarians expect of them. The problems librarians sense fall into two large categories (though they are often allied)—bias in the content and a lack of transparency about how the content of a given work relates to the marketing of the work. A review of this history will offer some insights leading to a consideration of what librarians may reasonably expect.

In May and June 2001, members of the ATLANTIS listserv³ conducted long discussions regarding the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE), wondering what possible objectivity could be involved in the reporting of statistics on the number of so-called “great commission” Christians when these calculations resulted in strange numbers such as 100 percent of the citizens of San Marino being identified as Catholics, while less than 1/5 were rated the status of so-called “great commission” Christians.⁴ Then, in June 2003, Jan Malcheski posted the ATLA Reference Review of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (NCE) which became a *cause célèbre*, especially among Roman Catholic librarians.⁵ Things had been relatively calm (although plenty of evidence that librarians have not been satisfied with recent reference works has been displayed in the reviews in this journal) until this recent furor surrounding the ECC.⁶

¹ Not yet published. In a telephone call to the publisher, corporate spokesperson for John Wiley and Sons, Susan Spilka stated that the publisher is waiting on the work of the editorial board before making a final decision about publication.

² George Kurian is a prolific editor of over sixty reference works including *Encyclopedia of American Studies* and *Encyclopedia of Medical Media and Communications*, as well as two works discussed in this article, *World Christian Encyclopedia* and *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*.

³ In November 1999, when Charles Willard left his position at Harvard Divinity School to work for the Association of Theological Schools, he agreed to transfer the stewardship of ATLANTIS to a server at the offices of ATLA in Chicago. Contrary to widespread assumptions, ATLANTIS has never been an official organ of ATLA. Any person interested in theological librarianship may participate, whether or not an ATLA member. Dennis Norlin, email message to Melody Layton McMahon, March 31, 2009. The ATLANTIS listserv is only archived beginning with December 2003; I am thankful to several ATLA members who scoured their email folders and forwarded to me relevant emails prior to this date.

⁴ Anne Leveque, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 5, 2001.

⁵ Jan Malcheski, review of *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, *ATLA Newsletter* 50, no. 4: 24-27; also email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 26, 2003.

⁶ See Cait Kokolus, review of *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development*, edited by Elizabeth Dowling and W. George Scarlett, *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 2 (2008): 86-87, <http://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/43/95>; Armin Siedlicki, review of *Westminster Dictionary of Theologians*, edited by Justo L. Gonzalez, *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 2 (2008): 91-92, <http://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/42/97>; and Mikail McIntosh-Doty, review of *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy* edited by Michael L. Coulter, Stephen M. Krason, Richard S. Myers, and Joseph A. Varacalli, *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (2008): 68-70, <http://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/20/7>.

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CASE STUDIES OF THREE REFERENCE RESOURCES

WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA

In retrospect, the *WCE* controversy of 2001 erupted following a positive ATLA Reference Review by Kris Veldeer. She said,

What makes this work special for a reference collection is that the *WCE* analyzes and describes an abundance of information about the extent, status, and characteristics of modern Christianity worldwide and compares it to other religions. Huge amounts of previously unpublished data on religion in general, on the current global situation of Christianity, and on the world's countries and peoples have been consolidated in to the *WCE*.⁷

Interestingly, she ended with the notice that “the sheer amount of information compiled will also lend itself to individual analysis of what is happening in the world today.”⁸

An earlier review in *Library Journal*, however, had been scathing, and further posts on ATLANTIS indicated that the third volume of this work had not been published (and the two published volumes were revised before publication) following the harsh review in *Library Journal*. Part of the review read:

Volume 3 can be best described as an explosion of numbers, categories, cross-listings of what the editors define as “miniprofiles” of at least 10,000 distinct religions, 12,600 peoples, 13,500 languages, 7000 cities, and 3030 major civil divisions in 238 countries. What results is hundred [sic] of pages of utterly confusing statistics, some highly suspect, culturally biased, and anthropologically useless (such as categorizing people by using moribund race-defining terms as Australoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid and further subdividing those into “stylized color” such as black, grey, brown, red, tan, white, and yellow). There is a need for a comparative survey of world Christian churches and other religions. This is not it. Not recommended.⁹

A posting by one ATLANTIS librarian stated,

I had an extended discussion with the publisher (more accurately, a sales rep) concerning this title. Seems that *LJ*'s review caused the publisher—Oxford—to consider their reputation. As a result, they had the editors review, correct, update the entire volume. Seems that as a result of the re-editing, the publication has been reduced in size from a 3-volume set to a 2-volume one. The re-editing is why it took so long to actually be released. The *LJ* article was in May, 2000. I believe the release date was Dec. or Jan.¹⁰

A friend of the editors was quoted in a further post:

According to Jon Bonk, Director of the Overseas Ministry Study Center in New Haven, who knows the editors of the *WCE*, the material not published by Oxford may be published separately. He says: “The editors of the *WCE* struggled with OUP to have all three volumes published concurrently. Alas! Volume

⁷ Kris Veldheer, review of *World Christian Encyclopedia*, edited by David Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson, *American Theological Library Association Newsletter* 48, no. 4 (2001): 20. Also email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Glenn Masuchika, review of *World Christian Encyclopedia*, edited by David Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson, *Library Journal* 125, no. 8 (May 2000): 104.

¹⁰ Jeannie Colson, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001.

3, which contains the explanatory materials and missiological analyses, was not deemed to be within the purview [sic] of that press.”¹¹

At this point librarians expressed their opinions about the merit of Oxford’s revision and republication. Jeannie Colson stated, “Sounds like the reviewing process might have actually increased the value of the product for us; I’m sure it cost Oxford heavily.”¹² Another responded, “Thanks for this posting. I was amazed that a book with such established editors as Kurian and such an established publisher would be so totally trashed in a book review in a respected library science publication. And yet the criticisms of the reviewer seemed to make sense. If Oxford UP has made the necessary corrections, it sounds like the revised ed. would be a very good buy.”¹³ And, “Should we find it encouraging or sobering (or both?) to observe that book reviews can be paid this much attention by publishers.”¹⁴

Once librarians started looking in more depth at this work, they were more than a little curious about the information contained in these two volumes. Noel McFerran started the discussion with the question about a statistic of “Great Commission Christians”:

One statistic which is new in the second edition of this work is the number of “Great Commission Christians” in each nation. I wonder how widely used this term is; it is certainly not a term widely used in the half of Christianity with which I am most familiar (i.e., Catholicism)... It seems to me that the only way one could determine the number of Great Commission Christians is by making a value judgment (i.e., far more than accepting the statistics provided by various different religious groups). I’m making an assumption here (so please feel free to correct me), but it seems to me that this is a term for “real” Christians (i.e., those who meet the standard of the editors). I really wonder how the editors came up with this statistic in any “scientific” way.¹⁵

Other librarians looked closely at various statistics, and within a short time provided some interesting examples taken from the encyclopedia:

Even if this is the distinction intended by the editors, I still share Noel’s concern about how such a figure could be obtained. I know of no denominational official who would be willing to make this kind of “guesstimate,” i.e., “there are 4 million Episcopalians in the US, but 2.7 million of them are nominal only.” Like Noel I fear this was based on the editor’s opinion about whether or not whole denominations were “committed to the Great Commission.” If that is true, the inclusion of that number is not only unscientific, it is offensive.¹⁶

And, “look at the entry for San Marino (p.645, v.1)... The country’s population is 8,000; the number of Catholics is 8,000 ... however the number of Great Commission Christians is given as 1,400! ... It is still not clear to me how the editors arrived at the figures for Great Commission Christians.”¹⁷

¹¹ Paul Stuehrenberg, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001. Volume 3 was published as *World Christian Trends: AD 30-AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus*, edited by David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, associate editors, Christopher R. Guidry, Peter F. Crossing. Published by the William Carey Library, 2001. It is now updated regularly as the *World Christian Database* by staff at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

¹² Jeannie Colson, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001.

¹³ Linwood DeLong, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001.

¹⁴ David Stewart, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, May 2, 2001.

¹⁵ Noel McFerran, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 5, 2001.

¹⁶ Kevin Smith, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 5, 2001.

¹⁷ Anne Leveque, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 5, 2001.

The next day, McFerran pointed out some other anomalies, “According to the editors more than half of Italy’s Christians are GCCs—so clearly it’s possible for Catholics to be GCCs. On the other hand only about 3% of Greece’s Christians (mostly Eastern Orthodox) are GCC’s. Two-thirds of Canada’s Christians are GCCs; I cannot imagine what the editors are measuring.”¹⁸ And these were examples from the two volumes that were published after revision to make them acceptable to the publisher’s standards. Other reviewers, even when praising the volumes, made the same points, although a few seemed to accept these debatable figures as deserving of equality with the Holy Book itself.¹⁹ In November 2002, Chris Brennan wrote an article for the *ATLA Newsletter* detailing several methodological problems inherent in the encyclopedia.²⁰ By the time of the ATLA conference in 2003, he had decided to use it as a case study of bias in reference works for a conference presentation.²¹

NEW CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA

Just ten days before Brennan’s presentation, Jan Malcheski had published a severely critical review of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* on ATLANTIS.²² On the same day that Chris Brennan gave his presentation at the ATLA conference, Roman Catholic librarians met for their annual denominational meeting at the conference and devoted most of their time to discussion of Malcheski’s review. His review pointed out that, “without detailed analysis, the exact proportion of unchanged, or only cosmetically edited, entries cannot be determined. Nonetheless, the immediate impression on the attentive reader is obvious: a sense that something is wrong.”²³ He went on to assert that a quick sample showed “that anywhere from one half to two-thirds of current entries cite no sources published after the 1960s (or early 1970s in the case of supplements).”²⁴

During the next year, the present writer was contacted by a representative of the Thomson Gale. This provided a chance for the Roman Catholic Denominational Group and others in agreement with that group to express their concerns about lack of truth in advertising, lack of reliable editorial review, and transparency of the editorial process, and others.

At the 2004 ATLA conference, it seemed clear that the points made in Malcheski’s review had been sound, so over twenty-five members of the Roman Catholic Denominational Group sent a letter to Thomson Gale expressing the view that the advertising material completely misrepresented the actual content of the *NCE*. It was pointed out how much of the encyclopedia appeared to have been taken verbatim from the first edition, and that many important articles (for example, the article on “Pedophilia” appearing in the 1996 supplement volume) were completely cut. The group indicated that in addition to not getting what they had paid for, they felt it was their

¹⁸ Noel McFerran, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 6, 2001.

¹⁹ See the following reviews of *World Christian Encyclopedia*: Jan Jongeneel, *Exchange* 30, no. 4 (October 2001): 372; Gerald H. Anderson, “World Christianity by the Numbers: A Review of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Second Edition,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26, no. 3 (July 2002): 128; *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 448; Rich Poll, “The Heavyweights of Religion Research,” *Christianity Today* 46, no. 5 (April 22, 2002): 75; Isabel Wollaston, Werner Ustorf, and Marcel Sarot, “Once More. . .,” *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 8, no. 5 (November 2001): 569; George W. Harper, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 1 (January 2005): 84-86; Norman E. Thomas, *Missiology* 33, no. 1 (January 2005): 103-104; Mark S. Young, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 637 (January 2003): 127-128.

²⁰ Christopher Brennan, “The *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed.,” *ATLA Newsletter* 50 (2002): 16-20.

²¹ Christopher Brennan, “Rearranging Their Prejudices: The *World Christian Encyclopedia* as a Case Study of Bias in Reference Books,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 57 (2003): 54-58.

²² Malcheski, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, June 26, 2003.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

duty to make sure patrons understood that many of the articles were not accurate. The then Vice President and Publisher of Thomson Gale, Frank Menchaca,²⁵ responded with a detailed letter, stating that Malcheski's analysis of the amount of new material (or lack of) was indeed accurate and he agreed that the preface's claim of being "an entirely new edition" misrepresented the work, as did their advertising. Thomson Gale was at the same time starting to market the new editions of *Encyclopedia of Religion (EoR)* and *Encyclopedia Judaica (EJ)*. They seemed to appreciate the need to be more forthright in their dealings with librarians and convened a focus group of about eight ATLA librarians at the annual joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature in the fall of 2004. This meeting led to some productive ideas, and it has been observed that the *EoR* and *EJ* both garnered better reviews, although marketing material was still clearly slanted to indicate more revision than might have been carried out.

Recent reviews in *Theological Librarianship* have demonstrated that librarians continue to have ongoing concerns with reference publications. A review by Cait Kokolus of the *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* published by Sage, for example, notes that the work has an overwhelming preponderance of contributors from a single university, considerable *lacunae*, and an inability to discern what should be important entries ("crop circles" being given more space than "Catholicism," for example).²⁶ The review of Scarecrow's *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy* by Mikail McIntosh-Doty, draws attention to even more egregious examples of the same types of problems which appear to inform a reference set with a troubling amount of bias. So much so that she recommends that "this new work would best be used with an informed guide, preferably a librarian who has a suitable background in the Catholic Church and her policies."²⁷

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION

Should we be surprised, then, to read current blog and online news source headlines such as "Christophobia on the March?"²⁸ or "Too Christian for Academia,"²⁹ or "Encyclopedia Project Stirs Heated Argument"³⁰ with reference to the new *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*? What has changed is that none of these commentaries offer review at the same serious level of the earlier examples by Malcheski or Brennan. The new discussion forums such as blogs have made it even easier for bystanders to take up a cause without taking a serious look at the real issues involved. Immediately some bloggers and their commentators jumped to the conclusion that Wiley-Blackwell, the publisher of *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, was "anti-Christian" as were the members of the editorial board. One blogger, for example, concluded that the aim of Wiley-Blackwell was to sanitize it of any pro-Christian statements.³¹ One uninformed commentator even suggested that secular publishers do not or will not publish works on Christianity.³²

²⁵ Frank Menchaca is currently Executive Vice President of Publishing, Gale, a part of Cengage Learning. The publication of the *NCE* preceded his assuming the role of publisher of Thomson Gale's religion list.

²⁶ Kokolus, review of *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development*.

²⁷ McIntosh-Doty, review of *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*.

²⁸ "Notes & Comments: March 2009," *New Criterion* 27, no. 7 (March 2009): 1-3.

²⁹ Edward Feser, "'Too Christian' for Academia?" *National Review Online*, February 11, 2009, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NDaWNGU4MzAwMTc4OTYzNDdkYTZhMzZDY5MjA>.

³⁰ John Dart, "Encyclopedia Project Stirs Heated Argument," *Christian Century*, March 24, 2009, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.jasso?id=654>.

³¹ "Gotta Serve Somebody--Bob Dylan 1979," Tony C Today, comment posted February 23, 2009, <http://tonyctoday.blogspot.com/2009/02/gotta-serve-somebody-bob-dylan-1979.html>.

³² Neil Parille, comment on "'Too Christian' for Academia?" by Edward Feser on *National Review Online*, February 11, 2009, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NDaWNGU4MzAwMTc4OTYzNDdkYTZhMzZDY5MjA>.

News magazines that publish on a day to day basis (or minute by minute, it seems) contributed to the discussion though sometimes with a more measured tone. *WORLDmag.com* noted that among the complaints of the editorial board members who had asked Wiley to hold up the publication was that Kurian constantly denigrated Muslims for their persecutions of Christians, but never described persecutions of any non-Christian sects by Christians. Kurian's reported response was "that is the decision we made when we determined the tone and scope of the work. We decided this was an encyclopedia of the Christian worldview. And we are not here to denigrate Christianity. Many other books do. We are presenting the opposite view from the Christian standpoint. There is no point in neutralizing the whole scope of the work by making it what they call more balanced."³³ *WORLDmag* continued:

Of course, the Christian worldview includes the supposition of human frailty and folly, even among Christians. Why not include such historical realities for the sake of truth? "It's a question of motivation," Kurian insists. "This is a Christian encyclopedia. It has to be on the side of Christians, because that is the purpose of the encyclopedia." In that vein, Kurian accurately recounts the myriad contributions of the faith to all facets of society—human rights, literacy, law, art. But the absence of Christianity's stains paints a rosy picture unworthy of honest history. Wiley-Blackwell need not dismiss such a text as "too Christian," but rather not Christian enough.³⁴

Others however, picked up on Kurian's inflammatory statement that this was the "first instance of mass book-burning in the 21st century" and accepted it for fact, although Wiley has repeatedly stated they have not burned anything, but rather recalled the volumes for review by the editorial board.³⁵

What appears to have happened is that after the *Encyclopedia* had its debut at the Fall 2008 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, some members of the editorial board contacted Wiley to voice their concerns about having been left out of the editorial process. According to Wiley, the publishers realized that the editorial board had not had the oversight that Wiley expected and Wiley has admitted that there were lapses in their own editorial process. Susan Spilka, the Director of Corporate Communications for John Wiley and Sons, made available to bloggers a letter sent by Wiley-Blackwell to contributors which said, in part, that,

the *Encyclopedia* was commissioned in 2006 as a major cross-disciplinary reference work on the subject of Christian civilization. Mr. Kurian was known to us as an experienced compiler of encyclopedias, but not as a religious scholar. Accordingly, it was agreed with Mr. Kurian at the outset that an editorial board of prominent Christian theologians and scholars would be appointed to provide expert guidance on the composition of the work and its preparation for publication. Mr. Kurian approved and helped to appoint an editorial board consisting of six such experts and was responsible as Editor for overseeing the review and editing by the board members.³⁶

³³ "Sin of Omission," *WORLDmag.com*, <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/15191>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See, for example, Katherine T. Phan, "Publisher Recalls Encyclopedia for Being Too Christian," *The Christian Post*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.christianpost.com/Education/General/2009/02/publisher-recalls-encyclopedia-for-being-too-christian-13/index.html>; Edward Feser, "Too Christian for the Christian Encyclopedia," *National Review Online*, February 17, 2009, <http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/?q=MmNhMjI2NmFiNDE1NDFIOGVmNTczMmI1NzRiNmU0MjI=>.

³⁶ "An Update on the Encyclopedia Drama," *clavi non defixi*, comment posted on February 6, 2009, <http://nondefixi.blogspot.com/search/label/Encyclopedia%20of%20Christian%20Civilization>.

There are plenty of accusations flying around at this writing, and only time will tell whether Mr. Kurian, who was also an editor of the highly controversial *WCE* and numerous other general reference works, in fact holds the moral high ground he seems to claim. However, Mr. Kurian's own remarks in available drafts for the encyclopedia include statements that it is doubtful many theological librarians will see as passing any test for objectivity: "The greater danger to orthodox believers is not so much from ...marginal Christians but from spiritual quislings within the church, as for example the U.S. Episcopalian [sic] Church, who don the garb of traditional faith but preach and uphold worse heresies than Unitarians" and "the original Christian homelands of Christians in North Africa and the Middle East were stolen by Muslims who unleashed one of the most brutal massacres characteristic of their faith and race."³⁷ In a document written by Kurian (the draft of the introduction for the encyclopedia), he has the following to say of the Roman Catholic Church alone: "Roman Catholic worship remains warm and devout, although it is designed with the priest in mind rather than the congregant" and asserts of the Reformation that the "breakup of the Roman Catholic Church was perhaps the greatest blessing of all," although he goes on to say that the breakup was effective because it "spawned hundreds of churches" that would then go out and evangelize.³⁸ Further, in his statement explaining his position regarding the retraction of the publication (widely published on various blogs) he states, "Then the devil struck in the form of a wrecking crew of seven malcontents led by David Morgan and Bernard McGinn and some members of the editorial board."³⁹

McGinn, the well-respected scholar and editor for numerous Christian publications, including the highly respected series *Classics of Western Christianity*, supplied a memo written to bloggers and other publications who were reporting on the publication to respond to the situation and explained that after accepting a position on the editorial board and writing several articles, he heard nothing more until he was sent an "introduction." He summarized his concerns with this:

First, there were a good number of outright historical errors, as well as highly dubious statements and judgments. Second, there was misleading, erroneous, and potentially inflammatory language about Islam. Third, there was an almost total neglect of the contributions of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism to important Christian beliefs and values. Finally (and more subjectively, I admit), there was a tone of repetitious and bombastic Christian triumphalism that I thought did not belong in a serious scholarly project written in an era where the major religious traditions are striving for greater mutual understanding.⁴⁰

Wiley-Blackwell has responded with several statements to contributors, bloggers, and other publications saying that

we learned that Mr. Kurian did not engage the Editorial Board in the manner we had agreed to at the beginning of the publishing process; therefore, we requested that they perform these responsibilities to

³⁷ Dart, "Encyclopedia Project Stirs Heated Argument."

³⁸ A copy of the proposed introduction was provided to the author of this article by a contributor. The document includes all the quotes that have been cited on various blogs.

³⁹ See Jeremy Weber, "Is the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* Really Too Christian?" Christianity Today Liveblog, February 20, 2009, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2009/02/is_the_encyclop.html for links to most blog posts relating to this controversy.

⁴⁰ Bernard McGinn, email to Melody Layton McMahan, March 31, 2009.

ensure that the Encyclopedia meets Wiley-Blackwell's standards of scholarship... No decision has yet been made about the inventory that is being stored in our distribution facilities.⁴¹

IMPLICATIONS, AND LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Why should we as theological librarians care about the imbroglio surrounding this publication? How, if at all, are our concerns different from those of the editors and publisher? What are we to think about the actions of the publisher?

As we look back at how librarians have responded to inferior publications in the past, it is hard to avoid the sense that as librarians we should prefer that a publisher intervene to delay publication of a given work, should they determine that it does not meet the standards they set for it. From a librarian's point of view, there are numerous lessons learned from these examples cited, lessons that we should articulate for publishers and thereby demand the highest quality possible from their publications, both print and online. By and large, libraries constitute the primary market for publishers—an even greater challenge for publishers than usual in the current economic climate. Libraries need to have a venue for making their standards and expectations clear to publishers regarding what they expect of major reference works. Some of these lessons learned include:

- That the editorial board selected should be well-rounded and committed to a fair, scholarly treatment of the works discipline
- That the editor, editorial board, and publisher should work together to make the review process thorough
- That the editorial board should have oversight throughout the preparation of the publication
- That where there is conscious bias, it should be acknowledged, and be kept in check

FUNCTION AND COMPOSITION OF EDITORIAL BOARD

Secular publishers should make sure that an editor who approaches them with an encyclopedia project is not pursuing an agenda outside the parameters of acceptable scholarly work (which seems to be the case of the *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*, for example). The publisher also needs to strive to assemble a credible board of editors for the publication. It is reasonable to expect the publishers to be informed regarding members of the editorial board, assuring that a range of viewpoints is recognized. Depending on the discipline and topic, issues such as gender balance and appropriate diversity (denomination, country of origin, scholarly disciplines, etc.) should be considered when putting together an editorial board. Once a board is established, its roles should be clear (perhaps to gather topic ideas, suggest possible contributors, read entries as submitted, make sure that the editorial principles set out for the work are accomplished, and that the result is a scholarly, fair treatment of the subject).

⁴¹ Statement from Wiley-Blackwell about the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, *clavi non defixi*, February 13, 2009, <http://nondefixi.blogspot.com/2009/02/statement-from-wiley-blackwell-about.html>. A phone call with Susan Spilka on April 8, 2009 to the present writer indicated that they intend to let the editorial board take their time to figure out the best way to handle this situation. They believe most of the contributions are acceptable and are highly desirous of being fair to contributors. At the same time, they must uphold the integrity of the company and do not believe they can do so if they publish articles with statements such as the ones quoted. (Susan Spilka, phone call to Melody Layton McMahon, April 8, 2009.)

FUNCTION OF THE PUBLISHER

It falls to the publisher to ascertain that all of these things have happened, and, further, that the stated goals of the publication have been met. In the letter to Roman Catholic librarians regarding the *NCE*, for example, Frank Menchaca stated that he agreed that the absence of articles on pedophilia and black theology were troubling omissions and said, “I concur that the absence of any articles covering these topics specifically is a flaw. *NCE*’s editors and Thomson Gale’s internal staff should have been alert to such *lacunae* and filled them, whenever possible.”⁴² The statement from Wiley-Blackwell regarding its recall of the *ECC* has stated that “We acknowledge that we should have been aware of the shortcut Mr. Kurian took in his editorial process sooner, but that does not change our responsibility to rectify the situation now.”⁴³ These illustrate the level of “project ownership” that librarians should reasonably be able to expect.

ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF BIAS

Most librarians might expect some degree of bias from denominational or overtly Christian publishers, but still expect a scholarly tone and a lack of inflammatory writing for reference works that are published under a religious imprint. Astute librarians know that there are publishers whose points of views may slant in one direction or another. However, with secular publishers, librarians expect that the publisher will do all it can to maintain an objective standard throughout the work, both overall and in individual articles. In regard to the current *ECC* situation, John R. Fitzmier, executive director of the American Academy of Religion, stated that “secular publishers, non-religious houses, tend to want to have an even playing field... They expect scholars of religion not to plead special cases.”⁴⁴ Another religious scholar responded that “when that Christian is claiming to do solid and substantiated research, the language, assumptions, and general rules of the game are totally different. We are all biased, but when a Christian scholar does shoddy and misleading work, he is obviously no scholar at all. A commitment to fairness and truthful representation should be the mark of all Christian scholars.”⁴⁵ Dan Reid, senior editor for reference and academic books at InterVarsity Press, when asked about the *ECC* controversy, reflected on his own experience in editing the *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. “To the best of my ability, I wanted objective scholarship,” Reid stated, indicating its importance for both Christian or secular publishers.⁴⁶

Again, why should librarians in particular care about such issues? We are stewards of the financial resources we have been allotted, and our goal should be to spend them as wisely as possible. Many librarians have long lamented that they do not have appropriate budgets to buy the books and resources they need; in the current economic situation, this has become even more acute. In fact, there is the potential that the economic climate, along with changing technology, will finally combine to change the landscape dramatically for theological librarians. The recent decisions of MIT and other institutions of higher education to make faculty publications available on institutional repositories might turn the tide toward open access and away from big-budget spending for books

⁴² Frank Menchaca, letter to ATLA Roman Catholic Denominational Group, July 22, 2004.

⁴³ clavi non defixi, February 13, 2009.

⁴⁴ Scott Jaschik, “Too Christian or Too Narrow?” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/02/16/christian>.

⁴⁵ Stewart Davenport, comment on Scott Jaschik, *Inside Higher Ed*.

⁴⁶ C. L. Lopez, “Is the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* ‘Too Christian?’” *Christianity Today*, February 26, 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/februaryweb-only/108-43.0.html?start=2#related>.

and journals.⁴⁷ MIT Director of Libraries Ann Wolpert stated that “in the quest for higher profits, publishers have lost sight of the values of the academy. This will allow authors to advance research and education by making their research available to the world.”⁴⁸ Even scholars who contribute to major reference works know that libraries cannot continue the burden of the onslaught of encyclopedias marketed to libraries who feel that they cannot pass them by.⁴⁹

Further, the internet is increasingly providing public domain resources that traditional publishers will find it harder either to dismiss or compete with. A review of *Popes and Cardinals of the 20th Century*, from Noel McFerran in an ATLA Reference Review, suggested that rather than purchasing the biographical dictionary, one should turn to a freely available, yet more scholarly and complete, website on the subject. “Miranda’s website is one of a growing number of websites in a variety of subject areas which are actually better than anything available in book form... Other libraries, both academic and public, should encourage their patrons to use the much better reference material about cardinals available without charge on the Internet.”⁵⁰ It is becoming clear that some individuals (or groups) work to put information on the internet because they care (often passionately) about a topic and are often more knowledgeable than scholars in the field. Some encyclopedists may be passionate about their subjects, but Lindsay Jones, editor of the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, made it clear that finding noted contributors who would commit seriously to undertaking the necessary work was one of the difficult tasks of an editor.⁵¹ The combination of open repositories of faculty information and reliable, scholarly internet resources may make it quite difficult for publishers to continue to market expensive reference materials to libraries.

A primary reason librarians want desperately to feel they can place their trust in the reference works they purchase is their sense of responsibility to library patrons: they want to know their library users can trust the library’s resources. When librarians send students or other patrons to the reference shelves, they want to be confident that the reference entries the users read will provide an objective overview of the topic. One of the primary purposes of encyclopedias is to provide an overview for students who come to a topic with little knowledge and need to gain an understanding of the relevant language, setting, and concepts. They do not have the kind of knowledge necessary to make an informed decision about objectivity. McIntosh-Doty’s complaint that a librarian as a guide would be needed for the work she reviewed was noted earlier in the essay. In a recent posting on ATLANTIS, Elyse Hayes noted that

in an ideal world, our role would be to help library users evaluate sources critically. In my real world, they are just glad to find something on their topic, grab it, and run... Another problem I see is that people

⁴⁷ See also Kevin Smith, “Open Access and Author’s Rights Management: A Possibility for Theology?” in this issue of *Theological Librarianship*.

⁴⁸ “MIT Faculty Open Access to Their Scholarly Articles,” MIT News, March 20, 2009, <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/open-access-0320.html>.

⁴⁹ Bernard McGinn, email to Melody Layton McMahan, March 31, 2009. “I fully agree with you that the ‘encyclopedia-craze’ has got to stop. Basically, it seems to me that publishers know they can make money on these things by selling to libraries and therefore have stopped exercising quality control.”

⁵⁰ Noel McFerran, review of *Popes and Cardinals of the 20th Century: A Biographical Dictionary*, by Harris M. Lentz, *ATLA Newsletter* 53, no. 2 (February 2006): pages 14-16.

⁵¹ Lindsay Jones, “The Making of an Encyclopedia: Reflections on a Revision of Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 59 (2005): 86-98.

generally tend to be uncritical as long as something has made it into print, and into our library collection. They assume it is a good source if it is on our shelves.⁵²

For the *NCE*, one has to place the previous edition side by side with the new one and compare articles to see if the article had been updated. How can this be communicated to every user who might approach it? After the presentation by Chris Brennan on bias in reference works, focusing on the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, librarians were discussing placing labels on this new work with warnings to prospective users. A reviewer suggested that “every scholar and every student needs to be critical and study the philosophy and theology (especially ecclesiology and missiology) which are the pillars on which the *WCE* as enterprise is built.”⁵³ But how many students can afford the time to study these fields before simply using a reference work? And what will make them think that they even should? How many libraries can afford to post someone at the reference stacks to insure that they can “interpret” these works to researchers?

Another critical problem is that in teaching information literacy a central and enduring principle has been to assess the authority of a given work. What credentials does the writer or editor have? Does the publisher have a reputation for scholarly, unbiased publications? How does one teach this when formerly dependable publishers no longer meet the standards required—especially as the entire worldview of authority is shifting due to the internet? Students frequently do not have the same respect for authority, though librarians try to help them understand its necessity. In a recent article on authority in the current internet environment, Mariana Regalado states:

librarians continue to do what they have long done, that is, provide a meaningful context for research and provide a kind of nuanced, empathetic, thoughtful help no online search tool can provide. Furthermore, with the many authoritative tools at their disposal, including those of the age of Google, they work toward a shared mission: to lead all researchers, especially students, to relevant, reliable information they can understand and use.⁵⁴

However, with the increasing amount of reliable and even excellent scholarship made available freely on the internet, sometimes by amateurs who are more knowledgeable than university faculty members, publishers must start being fastidious with their own publications. Otherwise, librarians and users will be inclined to resort to free online resources. Publishers who are still relying on their print reference works must be even more astute as many users will prefer the searchability of online sources and the remote access to many of them.

It is often said that librarians keep older editions of reference works because they present a “slice of life”—scholarly life, one might say, from a particular time period. If reference works are not updated thoroughly, how will this historical use of encyclopedias be facilitated? If works present a heavily biased position, what kind of “slice of life” is presented? Only a very narrow one! Libraries that choose to keep all previous editions of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* in their collections with a view to illustrating the historical development of ideas will not be happy to know that the “newest” edition comprises mostly the same material without significant updating from previous editions. Non-Catholic libraries, on the other hand, which may not have either the room or the inclination to maintain a

⁵² Elyse Hayes, email to ATLANTIS mailing list, March 3, 2009.

⁵³ Jongeneel, review of *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

⁵⁴ Mariana Regalado, “Research Authority in the Age of Google: Equilibrium Sought,” *Library Philosophy and Practice* (June 2007): *LPP Special Issue on Libraries and Google*, <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~mbolin/regalado.htm>. Interesting article which discusses how “user-authenticated information” has gained acceptance, yet the librarian’s role can be as vital as ever in providing context for understanding information.

historical collection, will be hard pressed to decide which edition to keep on the shelf, or certainly whether it is worth purchasing new editions for the sake of minor updates. How will librarians determine whether a work is superseded or augmented when considering whether to withdraw it from the collection?

SUMMARY

Librarians have a responsibility to let publishers know what they require, especially regarding expensive reference works that will remain on the shelves for a long time, perhaps in perpetuity. Librarians must articulate the need for trustworthy print and online reference resources that deliver on the promise of updating, as well as providing objective and scholarly material. Basic practices such as naming reference works with appropriate titles that express the true scope would be one small step.⁵⁵ Recently, librarians have noticed many resources titled “*Dictionary of ...*” or “*Encyclopedia of ...*” that are really just collections of essays thrown together and foisted on unsuspecting librarians as a reference work when that is not how most librarians would characterize the work.⁵⁶ Publishers should accurately reflect the type of information included when they market their works. Another productive step would be to employ marketing material that represents accurately the amount of updating or revision that has actually been undertaken. Librarians should not deign to purchase materials that do not meet these criteria; without a market of librarians who will purchase biased, unreliable resources, publishers will have to amend their practices.

If Wiley-Blackwell is indeed reconsidering the *ECC* and intends after appropriate revisions to release it for publication, then they should be applauded for doing so. *ECC* has been marketed as a scholarly work, and for theological librarians this means that thorough coverage and unbiased writing should be hallmarks. We will all have a far better work on our shelves for this supplementary effort on the publisher’s part, and all parties involved—editors, publishers, and librarians, and, especially, researchers—will have learned something extremely valuable about the production of quality reference works.



⁵⁵ See Jonathan Jones, review of *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, and John Jaeger, review of *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion*, in this issue of *Theological Librarianship*, as well as the author’s review of *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, *ATLA Newsletter* 54, no. 2 (February 2007): pages 17-19.

⁵⁶ Thanks to my colleague Andy Keck for his timely reminder of this common marketing ploy.