

The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature

George Thomas Kurian and James D. Smith III, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press / Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2010. 2 vols. \$180.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780810869875.

In a remarkably disjointed work, Kurian and Smith have edited a two-volume guide for the general reader to Christian literature from the first century to today. The two volumes consist of 722 pages including appendices and indexes. The table of contents for both volumes is at the beginning of each volume, but there is no listing of the articles in Part 2, only the designation “Biographies A–G” and “Biographies H–Z.” The essays in Section 1 are not cross-referenced to each other or to the biographies, nor vice-versa. The table of contents lists the forty-two articles on types or periods of Christian literature. The biographies, which include 423 principal writers or collections (e.g., apostolic fathers), are in alphabetical order by last name, but there is no cumulative list of the names. Each article is signed by the author, and each of the 183 contributors has a paragraph describing his/her teaching position, which usually includes other publications. There is, however, no listing of who contributed which article. Part 2 includes many noteworthy writers, with a major emphasis on authors of the last one hundred years.

In Part 1, the essays include “Apostolic Fathers,” “Bible as Literature” (but not “Bible and Literature), “Christian Drama,” “Christmas and Christian Festivals,” “Fiction,” “Gospels,” and “Liturgies.” The articles on “Poetry,” “Prayer,” and “Songs and Hymns” maintain distinctions between these similar topics. The article on “Gender Literature” overlaps with “Women’s Literature.” “Apocryphal Literature” discusses early Christian non-canonical works, including Gnostic works such as the Gospel of Thomas.

The essays deal with many genres. The article on “Children’s Literature” surveys authors and titles well in its brief space and provides a good bibliography of secondary literature. In many ways it is one of the best articles in the *Encyclopedia*. “Media and Periodical Literature” usefully surveys media in addition to books. The article mentions that Billy Graham was instrumental in founding *Christianity Today*, but one must turn to the entry in Part 2 on Carl F. H. Henry to learn that Carl Henry was its first editor.

In general, the essays deal with Christian writers but not Old Testament precedents. “Apocalyptic Literature” focuses on pre-Christian writings in the Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha/deuterocanonical works, but not on the use of apocalyptic imagery throughout history. The article on “Creation” examines two groups of writers. After a survey of the theology of creation in the Old Testament, it skips to imagery in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien (who both have articles in Part 2), makes passing reference to Madeleine L’Engle (for whom there is a separate article in Part 2) and Calvin Miller (who has no article in Part 2), and briefly contrasts these perspectives with *Star Trek*.

“Apologetics” overlaps with “Systematics.” In “Apologetics,” Mark Aaron House surveys people from Clement and Origen to C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and G. K. Chesterton as literary representatives and Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, and Alvin Plantinga as theologians. House discusses how Anglican Alister McGrath describes the different realms of study of science and religion, but does not develop McGrath’s approach. McGrath has in fact

dealt more with systematics in general, yet is not mentioned in the article on systematics. John C. Polkinghorne, another Anglican whose fields of study have included extensive writing on science and religion, is not mentioned. House's article includes titles in the text of the article and some notes at the end, but no bibliography to the article. The article by Kurian, the first editor listed for the *Encyclopedia*, on "Reference Works," includes sixty numbered entries, the only numbered bibliography in the entire work. The items in the list are good works, but there is no annotation to allow the reader to weigh one title against another for use in any particular project. The information is mostly accurate—it would have helped to include ISBNs. The third entry, a work edited by Kurian, lists the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* as published by Blackwell in 2008. In fact, that edition was withdrawn by the publisher after it was printed and apparently has been rescheduled for 2011.

Biographical entries include people throughout the two millennia since Christ, but there are more entries for writers in the last one hundred years than for any other comparable period. Within this century, one finds popular and more technical writers. Significantly more articles discuss evangelical writers than any other group, and Roman Catholic writers seem the fewest. Some articles have an introduction to the writer, an analysis of their thought, a five- to seven-item list of "principal ideas," and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. These are the most useful articles in the biographies, but there is no means of telling beforehand if the entry one seeks to study has such an arrangement. Since there is no list of entries, one must browse the article entries to find Emil Brunner, T. S. Eliot, Shusako Endo, Martin Luther King, and Henri Nouwen. Dorothy L. Sayers has an article, as do Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, John Stott, Paul Tillich, J. R. R. Tolkien, John Updike, and Frances Willard. Jan Karon, author of the popular Mitford series, is not listed. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien have articles, as does Charles Williams. Indeed, C. S. Lewis is listed in the index more than any other writer.

Among other contemporary authors, one finds some authors one expects, some notable omissions, and some surprises. Tim LaHaye, one author of the popular Left Behind series, is listed; his co-author, Jerry Jenkins, is mentioned in the article on LaHaye, but not listed separately. The article on LaHaye is one of several that follow the pattern one expects from the introduction. The article surveys the life, thought, and writings of LaHaye. It gives a summary of "Principal Ideas of Tim LaHaye," and lists a bibliography of what LaHaye has written, by himself or with co-authors, and some secondary sources. Hal Lindsey, whose *The Late Great Planet Earth* popularized the dispensational perspective that LaHaye and Jenkins use, is absent.

This work invites comparison to *Masterplots II: Christian Literature*, reviewed in *Theological Librarianship* (1.2: 2008), which covers the same time period with a similar purpose. The *Encyclopedia* discusses the authors but seldom individual works, whereas *Masterplots* focuses on individual works, but the two works significantly overlap. The indexes in *Masterplots* make it useful to access by writer, time period, subject, or geographical association of the author. This encyclopedia lacks those indexes. If one did not have either work, the *Masterplots* would seem more useful. If a library had many patrons who browse reference books for interesting articles, this *Encyclopedia* could be appealing.

I am of two minds regarding this work. On the one hand, the articles survey many Christian writers—from Anselm to Brueggemann and Karl Rahner. But there are odd omissions. Why James McClendon but not Alister McGrath; Frank Peretti but not Stephen Lawhead; E. Y. Mullins but not James Boyce; Charles Wesley (and John and Susanna) and Fanny Crosby but not Brian Wren? I liked many of the articles as I examined the work, but I find it difficult to use for reference.

On the other hand, the articles appear without clear criteria for inclusion. For writers more than one hundred years ago, other more useful works exist. Articles for writers since 1900 include some useful entries for the general reader, but there is no way to know in advance who is included. The lack of guidance for the reader and structure for the articles prevents a collection of potentially interesting articles on related topics from becoming a useful encyclopedia.

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