

## *World Biographical Information System Online (WBIS Online) and Biographical Archive of Christianity (BAChr)*

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DeGruyter. (<http://www.degruyter.com/cont/fb/nw/detailEn.cfm?id=IS-9783110231458-1&ad=he.>)

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Imagine an author sitting at a table with multiple reference books surrounding her laptop. She is sorting through dozens of print publications that contain biographical information important for her manuscript draft. One text after the other is opened, indexes consulted, and page numbers located. This process has been the methodological approach to writing for centuries. Enter the *World Biographical Information System Online (WBIS Online)*. For many, the age-old approach to locating biographical information is changing. This new database from De Gruyter literally offers users a one-stop information-gathering system.

*WBIS Online* claims to be the “most comprehensive and extensive biographical online library.” With over 8.5 million entries it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue against that claim. Based online and monitored at publishing houses in Berlin and Munich, Germany, the database is extensive in its scope of people—over six million entries on individuals ranging from the mid-sixteenth century to end of the twentieth century. The database entries range vocationally from scientists to theologians to sailors and highlight a wide swath of subjects including law, politics, art history, and religion. Individuals from all walks of life and socio-economic status are referenced.

The extensive database is the result of the digitization of microform from K.G. Saur’s Biographical Archives. As of February 2011, fifty-seven databases are available, and libraries can purchase the full *WBIS Online* or limit to certain regional or religion-specific subscription-based packages. The various databases cover a wide variety of regions, cultures, and languages. Databases include the African Biographical Archive, the Arab-Islamic Archive, the Japanese Biographical Archive, and the Scandinavian Biographical Archive, among others. Languages represented in the various databases include English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Slovakian, and Spanish.

The database includes primary sources and secondary interpretations, some of which present historical points of view that would be considered racist or discriminatory. The database “Disclaimer” acknowledges that the resource includes documents from the early-to mid-twentieth century time period when Germany was under the control of Nazi extremists. De Gruyter distances the company and its product from these interpretations.

The database is accessible to subscribing institutions, and De Gruyter permits uses of entries for non-commercial research and/or educational purposes. Use of copyrighted materials is permitted as long as De Gruyter is cited as owner of the copyright of that particular entry. *WBIS Online* functions as a central portal that includes 10,000 reference works and more than 17,000 total volumes. The approach of aggregating information directly from other published sources opens the possibility of factual errors in the information presented to the user.

Compiled by Alex Frey, *The Biographical Archive of Christianity (BAChr)* is one of the fifty-seven databases available through *WBIS Online*. *BAChr* “covers the religious, historical and cultural development of Christianity throughout the world over the past two thousand years” by aggregating 113 titles with more than 250 volumes published between 1809 and 2006. Users have access to over 140,000 articles on over 75,000 people. The database includes theologians, ministers, missionaries, and laity from traditions ranging from Catholicism to Protestantism to Orthodox and Anglican. Entries are available in several languages including English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, and Spanish.

Once a user accesses the *BAChr* database the user can navigate a Basic Search Result that lists entries by name, occupation, year of birth/death, and original archive. Once information is entered into one or more of these fields users can click on the name of the individual they would like to investigate. If a digitized entry is available for printing or downloading a small book icon appears in the results listing. Clicking the “View Digitized Article(s) from Archive” link opens the entry on the next screen shot. This action sends the user to the specific Biographical Document that has been digitized from its original format. The actual look of each entry is a facsimile reproduction of what is available on the original microfiche or print version of the publication.

For a more detailed search users can click on the “Biographical Search” link which provides the following fields to narrow the search: name, gender, year of birth, occupation, occupation classification, archive or specific database where the information is located, fiche location, short title, source citation, and document number. Users can “Add a Row” or “Remove a Row” depending on how they want to set up the parameters of their search. Navigating through the results can be somewhat time consuming unless one knows the specific name of an individual. Viewers can print, e-mail, download, or save the URL to another document or browser. Users can also click “Marked Document” buttons next to the entry to create a personalized citation list. A Help and Preferences section is available to answer basic questions or to limit the parameters of one’s specific search interests.

The *WBIS Online* database (including *BAChr*) is a valuable resource for researchers, students, and genealogists. Access to thousands of names and articles through a central database will save much time for those looking for biographical information on a particular person of interest. The strength of the database is its size and the multiple resources from which the material is culled. The immense amount of information available also presents a challenge. Unless a user has a particular name in mind the search can take time to work through the results. Another challenge is related to the detail of the search results. Some of the facsimile scans taken from the original microform and print editions do not include page numbers. Thus, although the digitized information appears, a page number for purposes of citation does not. As a result, the researcher must return to the original source in a library, working through the print edition and locating the precise page number. In the end, this takes more time than it would by going to the microform or print copy in the first place.

The creators and editors of *WBIS Online* and *BAChr* seek to include a wide variety of entries on individuals representing multiple time periods, religious affiliations, and languages. The resultant product accomplishes this and more by bringing together thousands of entries from many print and microform sources into an electronic database that one can access through a computer or mobile device. Very few libraries will have purchased the print volumes from which the database gathers its information, which may make it worthwhile to purchase. (A list of sources included is available at <http://www.degruyter.de/files/pdf/9783110231458Source%20List%28e%29.pdf>.) If librarians seek to make the search for biographical information more streamlined the acquisition of *WBIS Online* and *BAChr* could be a worthwhile expense. Pricing is available upon request. The database functions in a similar way to Wikipedia, but rather than pointing users toward a constantly evolving collection of biographical entries this database points users toward materials from volumes professionally edited and published. This makes the database more acceptable for academic work, and users can rest assured that each entry has been examined by a team of editors and publishers whose reputations are on the line through the publication of their earlier microform and print volumes.

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