

Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations

J. Gordon Melton, ed. *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011. 2 vols.: 1036 pp. \$189.00. ISBN: 9781598842050. (e-version also available).

R*eligious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations* is a new two-volume work that has assembled an impressive amount of information about the many ways that religions, large and small, celebrate the events, people, and occasions unique to their faith tradition. Published by ABC-CLIO, the set was edited by J. Gordon Melton, a scholar experienced in the work involved in organizing and executing comprehensive reference works. Melton is the distinguished professor of American religious history at Baylor University, Waco, TX, and the director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion. In addition to authoring over forty books, Melton has lent his editorial hand to such standard reference works as *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (2009), *Encyclopedia of Protestantism* (2005), and *The Encyclopedia of Religious Phenomena* (2008). While the text of many encyclopedias is written by a wide range of scholars, most entries in *Religious Celebrations* were written by Melton and his co-authors Constance A. Jones, Christopher Buck, and James A. Beverley. A small group of eight additional scholars was employed to write selected entries.

There are other resources that concentrate on the same general theme of this set. However, none specifically narrow their focus only to the religious. This is underscored by the set's Library of Congress classification at BL 590 (Religions, Worship and Cultus) rather than GT 3925 (Holidays and Festivals). That emphasis and the breadth of material covered set this effort apart from other works. Six hundred entries are devoted to major religious groups and their development, history, and holidays. An additional 550 entries explore individual holidays of other religions. Included are celebrations that are currently practiced as well as those no longer observed but whose impact is still felt. What emerges from such an in-depth examination of this topic across many faith traditions are the similarities that exist in the manner that certain types of occasions are observed, as well as the differences in how other aspects of their communal life are expressed. For example, many celebrations include a time of fasting and of feasting. The length and restrictions of the fast could be as long as the month that the Islamic observance of Ramadan requires or as short as the twenty-five-hour fast that the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur follows. These two fasts are good examples of another common thread across traditions. Most traditions devote specific places in their calendar for observing significant events whose import is such that the routine of everyday life is set aside and the main focus is the observance of that holiday. These occasions often include reflection on past stories, participation in special activities, the wearing of distinctive garments, or a re-examination of core beliefs. How this is expressed is as varied as the events and the groups celebrating.

The decision to organize the encyclopedia's entries alphabetically makes navigating the set very easy. If one needs a succinct introduction to a religious group or a basic understanding of a particular religious holiday, the user should be able to locate that information with a minimum of effort. Other tools facilitate a more systematic and thorough search of the content. Each of the two volumes begins with a list of all entries in the encyclopedia. Using this list could save one from searching the contents of both volumes only to discover that the term isn't included.

Scanning this list would be a good first step in understanding the types of material covered in the encyclopedia and for locating the exact term to use for a successful search. A seventy-page index of all topics covered in the set is at the end of the second volume. The index goes beyond merely listing entries to aggregating related topics under their broader headings, so that the inter-relatedness of entries is readily apparent. This feature makes it very easy to locate the sixty-two entries in the encyclopedia related to the “Eastern Orthodox Churches,” including such diverse topics as Augustine of Hippo, Old Calendarists, and Zaccheus Sunday. Taking advantage of this attribute ensures that one has a comprehensive list of all the festivities, figures, and occasions that are related to a particular topic.

This encyclopedia’s usefulness as a reference tool passes several tests. A question about “Kartika Purnima” was easily answered by turning to its alphabetical location under that heading to learn that it is a “Jain holy day that falls on the full moon of the Indian month of Kartika (March-April on the Common Era calendar)” (494). Another query about holidays celebrated by the Shinto religion could be addressed in several ways. One can turn to the entry in volume 2 for “Shinto” which is immediately followed by “Shinto-Cycle of Holidays,” or one can use the master index listing for “Shinto”; a quick scan of the listing leads to the next more helpful entry “Shinto Cycle of Holidays” and a list of the twenty-three such events from “Aki-Matsuri” through “Tohju-Taisai.” In a world whose religious diversity is a part of everyday life, access to reliable sources of information that explain the celebratory aspects of unfamiliar traditions is invaluable.

The one- to two-page length of most entries facilitates quick scanning of the text and location of needed information. Each entry concludes with a helpful list of “see also” related topics and a brief set of “references” for further research. Illustrations and photographs accompany many entries, which adds a welcome visual dimension to the text. By necessity the entries on major religions are longer, such as the one for “Islam” and its annual festivals and holy days, which is thirteen pages. Regardless of the length of an entry, the text is concise, well organized, and easily understood. The clear writing style employed throughout the text ensures the encyclopedia’s successful use by students at levels from high school through university.

The editors of the encyclopedia are to be commended for a finished product that succeeds on many levels. The emphasis on religions worldwide and their myriad holidays and various celebrations provides a wealth of data on this ever-expanding topic. The alphabetical arrangement of entries enables a reader to easily use the set. The references to related material in the text and index indicate other entries that might be useful, which provides a logical way to continue searching. This two-volume set would be a good addition to the reference collection of most seminary and theology libraries.

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