

The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization

George Thomas Kurian, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 4 vols.: 2733 pp. Hardcover. \$595.00. ISBN: 9781405157629 (set). Online description from publisher: <http://bit.ly/yxsCrT>.

This is a terribly perplexing work. What exactly is it? With the exception of a few articles that survey subjects such as the arts, economics, science, and secularization, this encyclopedia is more of a muddled mess than the well-defined synchronic/diachronic look at Christian civilization that it claims to be. The editor's preface gives some indication that this work will attempt to convey the dynamism of the Christian faith, that "there is a core Christianity as distinct from its outer shell . . . This visible shell is a series of moral codes, prescriptions for a happy life, a placebo, not a cure. It is diluted and alloyed with ideas of human origin, with no inherent power within them." Against this picture, he contrasts "core Christianity" that is "a powerful and explosive force." Because of its great power, it must "be masked, stepped down, or scaled down to make it comprehensible to finite intelligence" (lxxix). One gets the sense that Mr. Kurian would have preferred to present a cinematic documentary rather than a written encyclopedia.

Most theological librarians will be familiar with the controversy that has surrounded this work. It was originally intended for publication in 2009, but the publisher halted the process abruptly. Subsequent press releases indicated that the publisher's action was prompted by concerns expressed by the editorial board. Most prominent in this discussion was Bernard McGinn, who was alarmed by the triumphalist tone of the editor's introduction, as well as historical inaccuracies. The publisher accepted blame for the lack of oversight given to the project. The editor publicly expressed his outrage that the publication was delayed and would possibly be re-edited. His charges of censorship and anti-Christian bias were followed by threats of lawsuits.¹ Evidently these conflicts have been, at least nominally, resolved: the encyclopedia was published; Kurian's name continues as editor; and, upon review, it does not appear that the present work has endured any anti-Christian perversions.

It is unclear what criteria were used in selecting articles for the encyclopedia. Articles range from theological topics, like the generic "Assurance," to more particular articles on composers of sacred music. The articles are listed thematically in the front of the first volume. The framework given by the editor includes categories for the 1,402 alphabetized entries:

1. Core Articles
2. Chronological History
3. Global, Regional, and Territorial Christianity
4. Denominational and Confessional Christianity

¹ See Melody Layton McMahon's June 2009 article in this journal, "Librarians, Publishers, and Theological Reference Resources: A Way Forward," *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 1(2009): 8-19, <https://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/86/235>, for a more extensive treatment of this public publishing crisis and its general relevance to the practice of theological librarianship.

5. Biographies
6. Interpretive Essays
7. Breakout Entries

The core articles contain the actual “civilization” portion of the work. These are generally longer, with more expansive coverage. Much of the better material in the work is found in this section. Each of the nineteen entries (the twelfth century is missing, due to a tardy author, according to the publisher; it will be added to the online version) of the chronological histories covers a century of the past two millennia. These are generally well written, and, if they were properly ordered, would provide a basic church history. The eighty articles on the localized expression of Christianity in particular countries (“Finnish Christianity”) and regions (“West African Christianity”) tend to be weighted toward the *history* of Christianity in that locale, but some contemporary developments are covered as well. The denominational section includes traditional American Protestant denominations as well as providing significant coverage of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, including entries for religious orders. The largest swath of the work is biographies. More than a third of the articles (550+) are biographical. Most are one page in length; however, an oddity like “Catherine of Genoa” goes on for six pages. The final two sections of classification are amorphous; they could all be classed as “breakout entries.”

Of the 1,402 articles, 255 (18% of the total) were authored by three men: the encyclopedia’s editor (138, plus the twenty-page encyclopedia introduction), Ron Bigalke, Jr. (50), and Alvin Schmidt (67). While only the latter writer has held an academic post at any time, none of the three has engaged in substantial academic writing—unless Mr. Kurian’s prolific editorial work on reference works is included. Most of the other contributors are from mainstream academia—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox. The authors represent global diversity, but the majority of contributors are based in the U.S.

Some of the articles duplicate topics, under seemingly synonymous headings, e.g., “Compassion: The Hospice Movement” and “Hospice,” “Theonomy” and “Reconstructionism,” “Bible” and “Word of God,” “Evangelical Wealth” and “Riches & Christianity,” “Resurrection” and “Risen Christ,” “Music” and “Music, Early & Medieval,” and “Methodism” and “Methodist Churches.” Large parts of these articles are redundant in content, with one article often more comprehensive than the other one. The encyclopedia introduction repeats material available in the body of the work, with the majority of it devoted to “The Major Traditions of the Christian Church.” Each section (Roman Catholic Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, etc.) has corresponding entries in the encyclopedia that reiterate the material in the introduction.

There are other quirks as well. There are entries on “Women in Pentecostal Ministries” and “Women in Early Christianity,” but no article on women in general. There are entries for the discipline of “Missiology,” “Missional Church,” and “Missionary Aviation,” but none focused on the world mission movement or its impact on civilizations. There is no entry for “The Book,” which is odd, considering its place in the history of Christian civilization. It is briefly covered in “Media and Communications, Christian.” There is no entry for “medicine” or “hospitals.” “Southern Baptist Convention,” “Seventh Day Baptists,” and “Northern Baptist Convention” (why not ABCUSA?) have entries, but there is not a generic Baptist entry that might include African-American Baptists and non-U.S. Baptists. And, finally, the most interesting article title that I have ever seen in a reference work: “What’s new in the history of Christianity?” filed, of course, under the Ws.

The bibliographic assistance that the entries might have provided is mitigated by the lack of distinction between “References” and “Suggested Readings,” as all are listed together in one section without category. The illustrations are generally unhelpful; most are no more illustrative than a picture for a PowerPoint presentation. All are in black and white, including the online version. It appears that most or all of the maps are original to the encyclopedia. Some are baffling, lacking a legend for shadings; one, purportedly demonstrating “missionary development in America,” has lines radiating from somewhere around Louisville, KY, to various continents and countries. Other than indicating that Americans have not sent missionaries to Russia, Western Europe, Australia, and Greenland, it is unclear what this is attempting to communicate. Most of the material in the appendices is the type that can be easily secured with a basic Internet search, although the listing by denomination of “Liturgical Books” is a helpful compilation.

The online version does not improve upon the content. The search engine is basic. When a word is searched in the full text, the search results consist of links to entries containing that word. When the entry is opened, the searched word is not highlighted in any way. Of course, the individual articles can be searched using standard PDF and html protocols. At least three of the appendices are unavailable, as are most of the maps, in the online edition. The editor’s lengthy introduction is also absent from the online version (but the publisher says that it will be added shortly). Contributors’ biographies and the preface are only available in a PDF format and are not part of the searchable content.

Due to its unevenness and price, this encyclopedia would not be recommended to most libraries. The binding is not a library binding—it is a lightweight, glossy, laminated cover, ill-suited to a reference work. Repeated use of these volumes will quickly result in broken spines and hinges. Libraries that already own the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (expansive coverage of Christian civilization with a degree of authority) and the *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Eerdmans and Brill) should feel no need to add this encyclopedia, unless their budget is limitless. The World Christian Database or its predecessor, the World Christian Encyclopedia, might be helpful in providing some current information on Christianity in particular countries. Both the database and the *WCE* are far beyond what this encyclopedia offers.

One final note, concerning marketing and book blurbs: Professor Mark Noll of the University of Notre Dame was quoted in the publisher’s early marketing materials, saying, “‘Christian civilization’ is an immense and immensely complicated subject. But George Kurian’s thoughtfully conceived Encyclopedia does a fine job with its authoritative articles, sensible bibliographies, and consistently illuminating treatments. The perspectives of this volume are particularly welcome at a time when ‘Christian civilization’ is making a historical transition from the European West to the global South.” When interviewed about the encyclopedia by the *Christian Century* in 2009, he said, “My contact with the project was very, very limited. I saw the table of contents and the list of editors, and I read a few finished articles and then wrote my blurb. But it was so long ago I can’t remember what the articles were, only that I thought they were well done.”²

It is unfortunate for many of the contributors and their material to be embedded in these volumes. A number of high-quality articles by acknowledged scholars are scattered throughout the work. Perhaps the publisher will consider compiling these in a smaller (and less expensive) work on Christian civilization.

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² John Dart, “Encyclopedia Project Stirs Heated Argument,” *Christian Century* 126, no. 6 (March 24, 2009): 14-15.