

The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions

Patrick Taylor and Frederick I. Case, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 2 vols: 1192 pages. \$250.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0252037238 (set).

The editors' goal for the new two-volume *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions* is to encourage "a better understanding of the role of religion in Caribbean life and society, the Caribbean diaspora, and wider national and transnational spaces" (volume 1, xiv). The editors take a multidisciplinary approach, "[presenting] Caribbean religions in a way that combines the breadth of the comparative approach to religion with the depth of Caribbean spirituality as an ever-changing and varied historical phenomenon" (volume 1, xiii). Editors Patrick Taylor of York University and the late Frederick I. Case, formerly of the University of Toronto, are both respected scholars and authors in the field of Caribbean studies. The fact that they are scholars of Caribbean studies generally and not scholars of Caribbean religions specifically is apparent in the variety of topics covered by the *Encyclopedia*, including gender, sexuality, politics, art, music, and literature. This multiplicity of subjects and perspectives is further enriched by the diverse backgrounds of the consulting editors and contributing authors, which include international scholars, researchers, and practitioners. This international and interdisciplinary effort results in an emphasis on the relationships between world religions and their incarnations in the Caribbean as well as the relationships among Caribbean religions themselves.

The *ECR* provides multiple methods to navigate the entries, including tables of contents for each volume, a comprehensive index in volume 2, and cross-references to other entries in boldface within each entry. General entries on broad religious categories (such as Christianity) and geographical territories in the Caribbean (such as Cuba) serve as useful starting points for users beginning their research. These general entries provide the user with an overview of the subject and contain numerous cross-references for further exploration. Bibliographies at the end of each entry direct users to additional resources beyond the *ECR* which are as varied in approach as the *ECR* itself, enhancing the *ECR*'s value as a foundational reference tool. Most of the bibliographies include both recent and older works, providing an excellent overview of the literature for a researcher beginning a project. Volume 1 includes sixteen color plates, primarily of religiously inspired artwork, and a limited number of black-and-white photographs appear throughout the text for visually minded readers.

The *ECR*'s wide-ranging entries and multidisciplinary approach also make it a useful resource for researchers who are already familiar with the subject generally but are examining particular aspects of Caribbean religions. Entries on topics such as gender relations, literature, and politics are useful for researchers studying Caribbean religions through a specific lens, and researchers seeking information about specific individuals or institutions will also find relevant entries.

Perhaps the most interesting and unique feature of the *ECR* is the inclusion of personal narratives, which are meant to give "scholars as well as practitioners...the opportunity to share their varied understandings of the sacred in a sincere and scholarly manner among themselves and with the wider international community" (volume 1, xix). Although not as plentiful as the *ECR*'s introduction suggests, these narratives provide the reader with a glimpse into the personal experiences of the author, enhancing the reader's understanding of both the subject and the author's perspective when writing the entry. These entries are unfortunately not clearly and consistently identified as personal narratives, which could cause confusion among users, but this problem is mostly addressed by the noticeable shift in tone in the narratives (they are written in first person, unlike the vast majority of the rest of the *ECR*) and the fact that the titles of most of these entries include differentiating words such as "memoir," "my story," or "personal."

This combination of the scholarly and the personal invites the incorporation of author bias into entries, but for the most part the *ECR*'s contributors remain evenhanded and openly recognize their biases. All entries are signed, and brief contributor biographies in volume 2 allow users to assess authors' qualifications and perspectives. When necessary, special note sections at the ends of the entries provide information about any potential author biases, such as membership in the

church being described in the entry. (These notes also include information about any relevant fieldwork or additional contributors.) However, a sampling of entries did reveal some intrusion of unacknowledged bias and judgment. For example, the “Managing the Same Sex Debate” subentry within the “Sexuality and the Church” entry reflects the author’s belief that criminalizing or vilifying homosexuality is “detrimental to civil rights” (volume 2, 953), despite the evidence presented in the entry about “the fundamentalist disposition of the Caribbean population” (volume 2, 951), which would indicate that a substantial number of Caribbean churchgoers disagree with that belief.

A significant flaw of the *ECR* is its inconsistency in coverage, treatment, and organization. Although all of the contributors use a similar writing style, they each arrange their entries differently and often cover completely different topics within each entry. These differences are most apparent when comparing entries of similar types, such as those for geographical locations. For example, the entry for “Cuba” comprises twenty-seven pages and includes an overview of the history and current state of religion in the country as well as a number of subentries on various special topics. Conversely, the entry for “Haiti” includes only the historical and current overview and is a mere three pages long. The types of information included also vary from entry to entry: some authors favor a quantitative approach, while others prefer qualitative descriptions. Users should be prepared for varying amounts of coverage and not expect specific information under one entry merely because it is included in another.

Despite these shortcomings, the *ECR* is by far the most comprehensive reference work available on Caribbean religions and as such is a valuable and much-needed contribution to the field. The editors identify “researchers and readers... [and] teachers and practitioners” (volume 1, xiv) as the target audience for the *ECR*. The work is scholarly in nature and requires an advanced college-level reading level for full comprehension. Strong information literacy competencies are also necessary to navigate the mixture of personal narratives with objective scholarly writing and to critically assess any biases. *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions* is highly recommended for seminary libraries and libraries serving graduate students as well as those supporting undergraduate programs or faculty in Caribbean or religious studies. Public libraries serving Caribbean populations should also consider purchasing the work. Although it is suited to scholarly research, the *ECR* is, as the editors suggest, also of interest to teachers and practitioners.

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