

Faiths across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History

J. Gordon Melton. *Faiths across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014. 4 vols : 2054 pp. \$415.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781610690256 (set). e-book ISBN: 9781610690263.

J. Gordon Melton's new work, *Faiths across Time*, provides a chronology of the major persons, events, and activities related to religion from 3500 BCE to 2009 CE. His goals are to follow the emergence of religions over the past five thousand years and to place key events related to them in chronological order. His work is comprehensive in nature, addressing all religions from all parts of the world for this large time period. Melton states that no one has ever undertaken a project of this nature before, and a search through Worldcat seems to confirm this. Thus, he views this work as a significant contribution to the field and a helpful resource for scholars and others seeking to view religious groups and movements in their historical context.

The author is the Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University. He has also led the Institute for the Study of American Religion for the past forty-five years. Recent books he has written include the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (8th edition), *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations*, and *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Belief and Practice*. With this academic background, Melton appears well qualified to write *Faiths across Time*.

This four-volume bound set, which is also available in e-book format, covers the following time periods: Volume I covers the period from 3500 BCE to 499 CE; Volume II addresses 500 to 1399 CE; Volume III covers 1400 to 1849 CE; and Volume IV deals with 1850 to 2009 CE. The fact that the last volume covers just 150 years is an indication that a great number of significant events in the religious field occurred in that period.

These volumes include several elements. First, general timeframes (e.g., 3500-3000 BCE) are given, and a one- to three-page general article on each period is provided. Then, specific chronology entries are provided for each time period, and these make up the largest part of the work. Entries consist of the date (e.g., 3000 BCE), the location and religion (e.g., Europe, Britain; Traditional Religions), and a description. Entries are generally one or two paragraphs in length, but some have one or two pages of content.

Additional features include bolded entries, usually over half a page in length, which provide a broader understanding of a particular topic (e.g., Gladiators), and many timelines, covering Egyptian emperors, Roman emperors, monarchs of England, etc. Beyond this, Melton includes a large number of black-and-white photographs, generally between a quarter- and a half-page in size. The photographs, as well as the bolded entries, help make the work more visually interesting. Each volume also includes a large index, fifty to sixty pages in length. The indices show the thoroughness Melton brought to this resource.

Faiths across Time is an ambitious work that attempts to make a significant contribution to the field of religion. It is very evident that Melton has vast knowledge of the subject and is able to compile it in a consistent manner. The work is impressive, written with attention to detail and with clarity. The reader can easily search for a particular entry or time period and find helpful information or go to the index and find all the entries in that volume on a particular religion or religious event.

The chronological entries can be very helpful in understanding the history behind a religious idea. For instance, an entry for 1450 BCE discusses how the worship of Aphrodite began at this early date in Cyprus, in the city of Pathos. While people generally think of this goddess in terms of ancient Greece or Rome (Venus), the history goes back much further.

One problem Melton faced in creating this resource was finding accurate dates of events in ancient history. It also was challenging in some cases to be certain of the sequence of events, in part because of the use of many different calendars by nations in different time periods and locations. The lack of archaeological evidence for some early events, particularly those related to biblical material, presented another challenge. He could not verify all information as factual and provide precise dates for all events.

The issues mentioned above suggest that this work, in terms of its chronology, is probably not completely accurate. The author had to do guesswork in some areas, though he made decisions according to the best scholarship he had. Someone simply reading through the volumes, however, might well not be aware of these limitations and assume every entry is exactly accurate in all ways.

Another problem is in the entries themselves. While Melton certainly had to make decisions as to which entries to include and which to exclude, some of the entries lack necessary content. For example, the 81 CE entry on the Roman emperor Domitian discusses his rule, as well as his requirement that Christians burn incense to the emperor, but makes no mention of the fact that most scholars view him as the historical evil ruler discussed in the Book of Revelation. This element should have been included in the entry.

In spite of the issues mentioned above, *Faiths across Time* is an excellent work that would be a good acquisition for academic and theological libraries. Students at the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as scholars in the field, will find this set useful and insightful. It may be that the purchase of the set in e-book format, rather than in hardback, would be preferable. Four large volumes are rather cumbersome to use, and they do not have the special searching tools that are available in e-books. Also, students and faculty would have greater accessibility to the work, both on-campus and off-campus, in that format.

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