

Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions

J. Gordon Melton, ed. *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*. 8th ed. Detroit: Gale, 2009. 1386 pp. \$362.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780787696962; \$418.00. eBook. ISBN: 9781414410395. Call for quote for eDirectory edition.

As North America emerges as the world's most religiously complex region, *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions* remains the best interpretive directory of religious organizations. Originating in Melton's graduate studies and his founding of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in 1968, the eighth edition represents a substantial revision and updating required by the seismic demographic changes that have occurred over the past decade. Since the first edition (1979), a key element of Melton's success has been his classification scheme through which he orders American religion into "primary religious groups." Now expanded to twenty-four "religious families," his latest edition brings order to a constantly changing welter of organized belief. This is the real genius of Melton's work that makes his *Encyclopedia* stand alone among reference resources.

Recognizing recent trends, "the major chapters on the Eastern and Middle Eastern religions in America have been most thoroughly revised and updated." This includes substantial new material on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Furthermore, Melton places "chapters listed in previous editions as the Ancient Wisdom, Spiritualism and the New Age, and Magical Families" within a new family group, "Western Esotericism" (xv). He divides this family into four separate sections—1) "Ancient Wisdom;" 2) "Spiritualism & New Age;" 3) "Magick;" and 4) "Christian Science-Metaphysical." These revisions and additions produce a reference resource that mirrors a far more diverse religious landscape than previous editions. Capturing the immense complexity that is American religion, Melton includes groups that include only a handful of followers. This reflects his research methodology that investigates "from the ground up," rather than selecting only the larger organizations or those regarded as "mainstream." Whereas the first edition reflects Melton's original work with Christian denominations, the eighth edition successfully incorporates the stunning diversity within American religion in the twenty-first century.

For this edition, Melton includes graphs and charts that illustrate major concepts related to each religious family. For example, in "Eastern Family, Part II" (Chapter 24) he provides a geographical illustration "Spread of Buddhism in Asia" (1042), and on the next page a box labeled "American Buddhism/Shintoism Chronology." He includes chronological data for each religious family, but omits the geographical information where this is not appropriate. Some chronological charts contain out-of-order dates, e.g., the "Western Liturgical Family Chronology" (76); these should have been corrected by the editorial staff. Other charts oversimplify historical information, e.g., the "Methodist Denominational Tree" (277); Methodist history is more complex than the chart suggests. While readers might find the chronological charts helpful, the graphic illustrations add only modest value.

The *Encyclopedia* contains several major essays, including three comprehensive surveys of American religion that provide readers with authoritative introductions to matters of history, characteristics, and interpretation. Each chapter begins with an essay on the historical development of the respective "religious family"—e.g., Adventist Family or Communal Family. Church historians and other scholars may differ with particular nuances of

interpretation or with the details of these essays; after all, Melton and his staff have been compelled to compress an immense amount of scholarship into limited space. However, no other reference resource comes close to Melton's *Encyclopedia* for comprehensiveness and authoritativeness—in one volume.

Melton places religious groups that do not fit within his classification scheme into Chapter 25, "Unclassified Christian Churches," and Chapter 26, "Unclassified Religious Groups." In this edition he includes a "Defunct Appendix" for extinct or almost-extinct organizations, as well as a Geographic Appendix and extensive Master Index.

An ebook is available for this volume as part of the Gale Virtual Reference Library. The searchability of the full text makes this mode of access of more value than the print version. In addition to 24/7 remote access, this volume has on-demand translation into eight languages. It is certainly easier to use than the unwieldy paper version. A new achievement for *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religion* is the availability of the eighth edition as part of the Gale Directory Library. This enables users to do a range of sorting, filtering, and exporting of directory data. Theological libraries should regard this resource as essential and give serious consideration to the ebook edition.

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