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Book Review: Encyclopedia of Christian Education

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Abstract

Kurian, George Thomas, and Lamport, Mark A. (2015). *Encyclopedia of Christian Education* (3 vols). New York: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 978-0-8108- 8493-9 (e-book). 1665 pp. \$340US

This three-volume set is truly a monumental achievement. With more than 1200 articles filling its full-size, two-column pages, it will serve as an important reference work for years to come. Some might wonder if a market still exists for such an encyclopedia when one can find so much of what it contains on the internet for free. To wonder that would be mistaken. While, yes, one can quickly find an article on Comenius in Wikipedia, for example, one will not find one called "Armenia and Christian Education" or one for every other nation "... and Christian education" (one of the clear strengths of this set). For that matter, a Comenius scholar wrote the Comenius article here; the same may not be true of the Wikipedia article. And these examples are but two among hundreds of succinct articles that synthesize their topics accessibly in this beautifully-printed and bound set.

Book Review

Encyclopedia of Christian Education

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Unfortunately, some articles are written by people who have no other publications or apparent expertise in the areas in which they contributed. This lack of expertise shows, inasmuch as the contents sometimes seem dated or thin (as distinct from brief). In some cases, the scholarly conversations have advanced well beyond what the articles indicate and readers who know those respective areas may (rightly?) conclude that some authors mistakenly thought that doing some quick research and meeting the requested word count would suffice.

That said, this set includes many articles by major contributors to—even central figures in—the various strands of conversation within the broad field of Christian education. Read the whole set or scan the contributor biographies at the end of volume 3 and you will quickly see names you recognize. An unintended

gift of this encyclopedia may in fact be that the reader will realize that many well-known writers and educators did not consider themselves above contributing a few hundred or a few thousand words in their own areas of expertise. Between “Humanism” and “Hungary and Christian Education,” you will not find an article called “Humility,” but humility is demonstrated throughout by the contributors.

Sprinkled throughout the volumes are review essays running to several thousand words. Some of these more comprehensive articles will stand as scholarly contributions in their own right and warrant careful reading and study rather than simply serving as references to check quickly in a time of need. In most cases, both major essays and the shorter ones provide historical and contemporary perspectives. Students and beginning researchers will consistently find a kind of 1:1,000,000 scale map of their field of inquiry, including worthwhile references for those wanting to search further afield.

The editors chose to include many articles about specific institutions. This decision is certain to please those whose institutions appear, to leave some others wondering how their workplace fell below the bar (or what the bar consisted of), and to leave some others completely miffed. We all have a voyeuristic gene regarding the places we have worked; I confess that I quickly checked my own employment history. We might all gain if instead of simply checking such resources to see if our own workplaces warranted inclusion or who wrote about those places, we were to read about the places we have not worked and know only by reputation, through colleagues, or from conference attendance. Rich lessons may await us in those institutional articles, especially at a time when so many agencies and institutions face financial difficulties and are asking again about their identity.

Bits of wit are sprinkled here and there for the careful

reader. For example, one of the editors authored an article called “Teaching, ineffective.” That title alone takes a bit of chutzpah to use. If the title doesn’t satisfy the reader’s hunger for some lightness amidst the gravitas, Lampport begins the article by noting the 94% of teachers who consider themselves above average and the 68% who rank themselves in the top quartile. I have not smiled this much at an encyclopedia article since I last read the article on “Nothing” in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Of course my smile is somewhat self-satisfied because, like you, dear reader, I rank myself in the top quartile of teachers.

To their credit—and to their readers’ immense benefit—the editors of the Encyclopedia of Christian Education have found authors from every continent, and not just in token numbers. They have included pieces by many younger and emerging scholars, and by people working in every imaginable setting. Contributors range across the theological and ecclesiastical spectrum. Articles deal with congregational Christian education (catechesis), Christian school education, and Christian higher education of all kinds (certificate training programs, Bible colleges, seminaries, Christian universities). In some cases, readers may be surprised that the editors chose to include an article, but a few minutes’ reading usually produces a response something like, “Yes, this belongs, why would I not have thought of that?”

This breadth sets the current project somewhat apart from other dictionaries and encyclopedias that have appeared in the last few decades, most of them having focused more on the first area—catechesis—than on the last two areas. In fact, this is the first such encyclopedia to appear since 2004 when Baker published M. J. Anthony, W. S. Benson, D. Eldridge, and J. Gorman’s Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education. That title was narrower in scope and purpose (and only one volume). This is also the most ambitious project of its kind in many decades. It may well be the last printed encyclopedia of Christian education.

In light of the possibility that this will be the last such encyclopedia, and recognizing that it is rare to recommend to a volume’s editors what they should do in the next edition, I do recommend that they identify perhaps 300 (about 25%) of the articles and consider keeping those up to date in the e-book version of the encyclopedia. Among those that warrant constant

updating (in my view at least) are the articles about Christian education in the various nations and those about major organizations and movements. Granted, as I write this in the fall of 2016, the editors are probably still celebrating that they got the project out the door at all. Still, with some effort, they and their publisher could extend the shelf life of this resource for a couple decades or more beyond what it is likely to have in this edition.

Many years ago, I proposed to Harro Van Brummelen that we co-edit an encyclopedia just like this one. He responded that such an undertaking would entail more work than either of us really wanted to do, and that he was not sure a market remained for such works. We did not do it, or, if we did, we kept it secret. But Mark Lampport and George Kurian took on this mammoth task and brought it to fruition. Time will tell whether a market remains for a project such as this one.

In the Preface, the editors note that they have directed their project at the 21,000 Christian educational institutions in the English-speaking world, as well as to those who serve in churches, in denominational leadership, and in para-church organizations. I suspect that many in that target market will assume—wrongly—that the internet has everything they might ever need to know about Christian education, that there is no need to purchase this encyclopedia. But many others will make the purchase and will be richly rewarded for doing so.

Institutions located where lacking bandwidth prevents easy online research should certainly acquire this set, as pricey as it will seem in such locations. And even those with bandwidth, especially libraries, should not hesitate to acquire this volume. There is material here, quickly accessible, that one simply will not find synthesized as well anywhere on the net. You will need to be at your most persuasive when you order this volume for your college’s library. Bluntly (and rightly), your librarian will want to know if it’s worth the money. The answer is yes.