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Olson, Mead, Hill, and Atwoods' "Handbook of denominations in the United States" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Olson, R. E., Mead, F. S., Hill, S. S. & Atwood, C. D. (2018). *Handbook of denominations in the United States*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. 384 pp. \$25.49. ISBN 9781501822513

The authors of the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* include, Roger E. Olson, Samuel S. Hill, Craig D Atwood and the late Frank S. Mead. However, it was Olson that revised and edited the fourteenth edition of the *Handbook*. The thesis of the *Handbook* is “to provide especially non-scholars with a relatively simple, easy-to-use reference work for learning about the most significant Christian traditions and denominations in the United States in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (p. xxv). Included in the *Handbook* are over two hundred distinct Christian denominations, which includes the major Christian tradition they belong in. All of which, is based on “shared historical and theological roots and commitments” (p. xxv).

It is noted in the introduction that there was debate as to whether the book going forward should omit the word *denomination* in the title. This comes as result of the word falling “on hard times” (p. xxv). For example, “to many people, ‘denomination’ automatically implies an exclusivistic, superior-minded, divisive, and hierarchical religious group” (p. xxvi). Furthermore, beyond perception, some look to the publication of H. Richard Niebuhr’s, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, where he criticizes Protestant denominations in America “for identifying with middle-class American values and ignoring the poor and marginalized of society who went about creating their own ‘sects’ mostly in obscurity” (p. xxvi). Nevertheless, the authors have chosen to retain the word *denomination* and have set forth a clear definition. The *Handbook* states, “a denomination is any group of churches, congregations, assemblies, or religious meetings with some affiliation among themselves however formal or informal it may be” (p. xxvii). A denomination does not need a headquarters, rather, the affiliation could be historical-theological in nature (p. xxvii). A denomination does not need bishops, “although it may have one or more” (p. xxvii). A denomination does not need a hierarchy, “although it may have one” (p. xxvii).

The *Handbook* also provides its own “rule of thumb” for deciding which denominations to include in the work. First, notwithstanding a few exceptions, inclusion in the book required “approximately a minimum of one hundred congregations or five thousand to ten thousand members (p. xxix). Second, the denomination must be recognizable (p. xxix). Third, the denomination must have a history (p. xxix). In

other words, “for the most part, denominations included here show evidence of ‘staying power’” (p. xxix). In this fourteenth edition, the *Handbook* has returned to including “only denominations with some legitimate claim to be Christian” (p. xxxi). This is a change from previous editions where the *Handbook* included “mostly Christian denominations” (p. xxxi).

It is important to note that as with previous editions, “this one attempts to include denominations in proper categories using historical and theological criteria” (p. xxiii). This means that certain denominations with similar historical and theological roots are brought together that would not otherwise prefer to be “lumped together” (p. xxiii). As a result, “the editor and publisher apologize to denominations for any offense taken by that, but our defense is simply that categories are important to scholars, students, and people wanting to know the roots of denominations and how they are related to others, if at all” (p. xxiii).

Overall, the *Handbook* does not want to merely present data on membership statistics, it desires to “help readers to get to know their neighbors, join a worshipping community, and better appreciate the intricate social fabric of America” (p. 9). The *Handbook* does achieve its purpose. It is thorough and well-documented throughout. The layout is clear and will provide a valuable resource to anyone interested in the geographical, theological, and historical background of major Christian denominations in the United States.

Reviewer

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