BOOK REVIEWS

Encyclopedia of Christian Education

Edited by George Kurian and Mark Lamport (2015). Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield. 1678 pp
ISBN-13: 978-0810884922

Barry Hill

Education Director (retired), South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Wahroonga, NSW



Having neither seen an Encyclopedia of Christian Education, nor even alas sought one out in my educational career, I was heartened to sight the Encyclopedia of Christian Education, a three-volume set of 1630 pages in length, that includes over 1200 articles by 400 contributors. I shall briefly comment on its purpose, audience, range of entries, quality of entries, and overall appeal.

Purpose

The encyclopedia is on one hand diachronic, attempting to trace the history of Christian education, schools and training in all significant Christian denominations over 2000 years. On the other hand it aims to profile the state of contemporary Christian education worldwide. These two objectives require the gathering of massive data, selection of good contributors, and skilful editing to make the work manageable. The encyclopedia organises its information clearly and concisely, and appears to achieve its objectives. However I think it achieves its historical objective better than its contemporary one. Overall I think the editors have managed their role very well.

Audience

The stated audience are the 21,000 Christian education institutions in English-speaking countries and churches, denominational leadership and para-church organisations worldwide. Although I see the encyclopedia as being useful for a range of institutions, and despite its brave attempt to survey the state of Christian education globally, its orientation and appeal reflects a strong American focus. This orientation shows itself in aspects such as terminology, selection of contributors, universities described in main alphabetical entries, and American-style discussion of key elements of education such as curriculum, learning, character education and emotion.

Range of Entries

The authors have managed to include an admirable range of entries in this encyclopedia. In scanning the three volumes I notice entries on a broad range of diverse topics such as Blooms' taxonomies, children's spirituality, consciousness, constructivism, faith, generational issues in education, metacognition, neuropsychology, phenomenology, post-modernism, spiritual formation and values education.

The work also attempts to profile the main Christian school systems around the globe. Although various contributors generally provide helpful succinct summaries, useful information can be omitted. For example apart from Lisa Beardsly-Hardy's account, I notice little if any mention of the Adventist contribution to Pacific Christian education, nor to Christian tertiary education globally, and this is significant. Neither do Adventist authorities like George Knight receive mention, though Knight's publications do appear in several bibliographies. Of course my observations here reflect my Adventist bias.

In my view the encyclopedia presents a reasonable set of profiles of significant Christian and occasionally other educators. I note a range of people like Karl Bath, Parker Palmer, William James, and even Australians such as Graham Rossiter, Marissa Crawford and John Hull. Overall though I think these profiles favour the historical perspective over the contemporary, and I would wish for more balance.

In general, I think that despite a sprinkling of significant omissions and the American bias, the editors have made a brave fist of addressing the range of issues and data required in such a comprehensive work.

Quality of Entries

This encyclopedia appears stronger in some content areas than others. For example its whole Christian education section including its sections on research and publications is fairly comprehensive and potentially useful. And it

seems that that the history, philosophy, theology, nexus between theology and education, and the evangelical thrust of Christian education, particularly in America, are well represented.

That said, my perusal of some topics of particular interest to me raised some questions. For example although the section on learning gave a helpful introduction to the topic, there could have been more definition, more mention of experts like Guy Claxton and Eric Jensen, and discussion of more recent developments. The work on emotional education could also present more on the current state of play including more key issues. Likewise sections on curriculum, character education and values education could feel more current and inclusive. These and many other entries could also include more current references. Of course there is always a time lag between writing encyclopedia entries, editing, and publication, so any encyclopedia will feel slightly dated on publication.

Overall usefulness

Articles in these three volumes are generally concise, clearly written, and present the essential bones of topics that either provide essential information or help get readers started on a journey of inquiry. They also provide a broad brush stroke of Christian education globally.

In the minus column, the work feels rather American in its selection of content topics and issues. It also appears to favour the historical over the current educational scene, and lacks some currency in sketching the essentials of some areas of education.

However in summary, encyclopedias are limited by their need to be concise and introductory in their treatment of information and issues, so they cannot be all things to all people. Overall, this one presents numerous instructive entries on a range of helpful topics. I think that the contributors have carried out their brief well. This work fills an important gap in the literature, and I would have it in my Christian college or university library. TEACH