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Book Review

Chryssides, George D. and Stephen E. Gregg (eds) 2020. *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Studying Christians*. London: Bloomsbury. xv + 338 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3500-4338-1 £130 (hbk). ISBN: 978-1-3500-4340-4 £93.60 (e-book).

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"Handbook" is the most precise designation for this largely judicious combination of reference book, position statements, descriptive accounts and some excellent analytical pieces probably best suited for senior school and undergraduate use.

It comprises four major parts: (1) Research methods and problems (8 chapters); (2) Current research and issues (13 chapters); (3) New directions in studying Christians (12 chapters); (4) Resources. It then covers some forty pages with an encyclopaedia-like A–Z, from Angels to Women, which sits oddly in the volume. There are also brief notes on selected chapters, a Chronology of Christianity—extremely comprehensive on the Reformation period, and a useful note on "Changes in Global Christianity 1960–2013". There is a good bibliography and index and, most valuably, a list of websites which are of considerable use as a teaching resource.

Space demands high selectivity amidst the 32 chapters and hundred or so pages of "further resources". To my inevitably critical reviewer's question of gaps in the material I return much later—and sympathetically—as someone who has edited an encyclopaedia himself. Meanwhile, let us consider some of the informatively creative and mostly very good chapters that often lead readers into various Christian worlds, distinctive terminologies, and practices, something important for many students unfamiliar with Christianity at large, or only know their own niche.

Chryssides and Gregg's opening account of vernacular Christianity begins with the USA and "The State of American Theology" expressed in reported statistics of practice and belief, spelling out "layers of allegiance" and glossing notions of official, popular, folk, and vernacular religion to highlight the descriptive force of the ensuing volume. They also include "'Bad' Christians", spiritual abuse and coercive behaviours in their sweep of interest, emphasizing that this book does not offer "textbook essentialism of a character-type" (p. 16).

Well-pitched phrases sometimes capture our attention, as with Dyron Daughrity's "the unravelling of Constantinian Christianity", following his informative account of Pentecostalism (p. 28). Other valuable entries of real use for students unfamiliar with formal

Christianities and their ways, include George Chryssides on denominations, and Andrew Village on the Bible—including a statistical survey on "literalism and parable scales among Church of England lay people" (p. 58). I was, however, uncertain of the wisdom of the latter's excursus on "The Bible and Psychology" with its apparent advocacy of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, especially in a book like this. In my experience, some folk easily and uncritically appropriate this life-descriptor. Perhaps it is simply a case of one person's research interests spilling over too much in a Handbook-type context. Stephen Gregg on Jesus as "historical, global, personal, popular and alternative" is far more descriptive, engaging and thought provoking, although some text-critical and biblical theologians would probably have wished for a more historical hermeneutical strand here, but I think that would have been largely misplaced.

What is certainly well-placed is Simon Coleman's "Fieldwork in Studying Christians" (Chapter 6). Its title is fully exemplified, touching a few historical anthropological positions but with much on significant contemporary work, including that of Martin Stringer. Coleman knows about older books—something that cannot be guaranteed today—but which are vital backgrounds for serious research. He covers fieldwork and its formal and informal dynamics as well as its politics, issues of accessing venues, and of identity and commitment. Talking of phrases, I liked his "experience-near" depiction of varieties of fieldwork.

And now I have a real problem! How can I extol Sue Yore on the visual arts or Elizabeth Harris's splendid "Interreligious Encounter", except to encourage you to read them? Then, in a tranche of shorter pieces we have Dawn Llewellyn on children, family and childlessness, Tim Jensen on education and schools, and Christina Welch on death. Others cover spirituality, fundamentalism, Africa, work, and politics. I certainly felt for Daniel DeHanas on that last topic, necessarily venturing to write, pre-2021, on Donald Trump. I must, perforce, leave much unsaid about the remaining dozen chapters.

Finally, the key absences from my perspective—readers will have their own. Both ritual and symbols should, I think, have greater attention to enable students to "study Christians", especially in fieldwork contexts including their own churches, where gaining some theoretical "distance" from the ordinary is vital. Despite Coleman's important chapter, "fieldwork" has no indexical presence, neither does the issue of "worldview studies". So too with "gift", and reciprocity theory, though elements of these crop us here and there as with afterlife issues and dubiously immortal souls (p. 258). "Embodiment" and "habitus" are also absent, which is a pity as far as fieldwork or vernacular studies are concerned. Lastly, and post-colonialism disregarded, I wish Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" was revived amidst the somewhat dispersed comments on ecology and environmentalism.