

Encyclopedia project stirs heated argument: The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

In the spring of 2006, a University of Chicago Divinity School expert on the history of Christianity was approached by George T. Kurian, a prolific editor of reference books, including two on Christianity. Kurian asked the professor, Bernard McGinn, to serve on the editorial board for an ambitious project: *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*.

“I agreed, and in subsequent months gave Mr. Kurian advice about helping shape the project,” said McGinn, who also suggested possible contributors and wrote three entries himself.

McGinn said he “heard no more about the project for some time” until last fall when he received a copy of Kurian’s 43-page introduction to the encyclopedia to be published by Wiley-Blackwell. “I unfortunately found it unacceptable, at least in its initial form, for a serious encyclopedia.”

The emeritus professor, along with a few other contributors, sent a letter to Kurian contending that the introduction contained historical errors, highly dubious judgments, misleading and inflammatory descriptions of Islam, a neglect of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish contributions to Christian beliefs and a “tone of repetitious and bombastic Christian triumphalism.”

McGinn recounted his experiences in a February 15 memo that reflects a sharp-edged controversy over scholarly integrity and editorial laxity and refers to threats of lawsuits by Kurian against the publisher and some contributors.

Publication of the four-volume encyclopedia, which already had a first-run printing, has been delayed pending a review by the publisher, who conceded in statements last month that major lapses occurred in the editing process. The manuscripts had

been turned in to the publisher in July 2008 and the books were slated to go on sale this July for about \$750 for the set.

Disconcerted contributors complained to the publisher in November. Spokesperson Susan Spilka, in a statement issued three months later on behalf of John Wiley & Sons, owner of Wiley-Blackwell, said: "We learned that few if any of the contributions to the Encyclopedia were reviewed by the editorial board members as required by both high standards of scholarship and our agreement with Mr. Kurian. Instead, they were only reviewed (if at all) by Mr. Kurian himself."

Historian Mark Noll, an evangelical scholar on the Notre Dame faculty, praised the 2,944-page publication in his advance blurb for its "authoritative articles, sensible bibliographies, and consistently illuminating treatments." However, Noll told the Century: "My contact with the project was very, very limited. I saw the table of contents and the list of editors, and I read a few finished articles and then wrote my blurb. But it was so long ago I can't remember what the articles were, only that I thought they were well done."

Kurian said in a recent interview with the Century that he learned only days before Thanksgiving that Wiley-Blackwell had suspended plans for publication. He claimed that "only four people out of 400 contributors made objections over a half-dozen passages that could be called offensive" about the history and evolution of Christianity. "I am describing history, these are facts," he insisted.

He said he could understand a publisher's delaying a publication date if there were instances of possible plagiarism, libel or other such problems. As for the critics' charges, Kurian said he wrote the introduction from a Christian perspective. "I am not ashamed. I would not want to abandon my interpretation of Christianity."

Two of Kurian's books published in 2001 might have indicated his particular views: *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary* (from evangelical publisher Thomas Nelson) and the second edition of the data-filled *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press), for which Kurian and Todd Johnson joined David Barrett as coeditors.

Kurian, impassioned yet cordial in the interview, has accused the publisher and the critics of conspiratorial motives.

In response, a February 6 Wiley statement said: "Mr. Kurian has alleged that [the publisher's current review of content] is being driven by an 'anti-Christian lobby

determined to de-Christianize and censor the Encyclopedia.’ This allegation is completely without foundation.”

Referring to online reports saying the volumes were going to be “pulped,” or destroyed, Wiley said that “it would make no sense for us to sabotage a project to which we have committed long-term investment and resources.”

In a second statement a week later, the publisher acknowledged “that we should have been aware of the shortcut Mr. Kurian took in his editorial process sooner, but that does not change our responsibility to rectify the situation now.”

In the meantime, some scholars who criticized Kurian’s introduction have declined to be interviewed because, they say, Kurian has threatened to sue.

The *Christian Post* quoted an e-mail Kurian sent to like-minded contributors inviting them to join him in a possible class-action suit that would charge Wiley-Blackwell with breach of contract and censorship of the encyclopedia’s Christian content, tone and character. “It will send a strong message to the politically correct establishment,” he said.

Kurian says he has received all of his \$5,000 advance but that he would lose his chance for 10 percent royalties if the publication is scrapped. Regarding his critics, Kurian said that “persuading a publisher to renege on a contract” could be a basis for civil court action.

One scholar, who did not want to be identified, read from a Kurian e-mail to his detractors that is filled with words such as *sabotage*, *fraud*, *garbage* and *vandal*.

McGinn appeared to be undaunted. In his memo he said that Kurian had personally accused him of “betrayal, racism and hatred of Christianity.” If loyalty to sound scholarship and judicious expression is construed as “betrayal,” McGinn said, “so be it.”

As for Kurian’s “unfounded accusations” that his objections are motivated by racism (presumably because Kurian is a native of India), McGinn advised Kurian to “withdraw them immediately lest I be compelled to seek legal counsel about how to protect my name from such libel.”

Encyclopedia excerpts

The introduction to *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, written by editor George T. Kurian, asserts that the 18 billion people who have lived as Christians since the days of the 12 apostles are indisputable witnesses to the faith's magnificent achievements—even if only 20 percent of today's 2 billion believers are “committed Christians.”

Among Kurian's declarations that critics have called defamatory or boastful:

- “The original Christian homelands of Christians in North Africa and the Middle East were stolen by Muslims who unleashed one of the most brutal massacres characteristic of their faith and race.”

- “The greater danger to orthodox believers is not so much from . . . marginal Christians but from spiritual quislings within the church, as for example in the U.S. Episcopalian [*sic*] Church, who don the garb of traditional faith but preach and uphold worse heresies than Unitarians.”

- “Christian growth has . . . long periods of dormancy followed by a quantum jump. This quantum jump is invariably the result of divine intervention. . . . The next eschatological phase in Christian history will accelerate the pilgrimage of the church from its role as the Church Militant to its final destiny as the Church Triumphant.”