
What Does It Take to Build an Open Access Theological Encyclopaedia?

Considerations and Challenges

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ABSTRACT The *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* (saet.ac.uk) is a free online reference work dedicated to widening access to theological scholarship. With more than 200 peer-reviewed articles already published, the *Encyclopaedia* is a readily available resource for students, academics, members of faith-based institutions, and interested laypeople. This contribution shares some reflections on the opportunities and challenges involved in building an open access theological encyclopaedia for the 21st century. In particular, how has the publication's online format and open access philosophy shaped its behind-the-scenes strategies for information management? This brief overview focuses especially on enriching, preserving, and accessing theological information in the context of a digital encyclopaedic resource. Finally, it highlights a particular challenge faced by theological e-resources that do not share the static publication model represented by journals and e-books.

St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology (SAET) (saet.ac.uk) is an open access online theological reference work. Users exploring the *Encyclopaedia* will find more than 200 peer-reviewed scholarly articles written from an emic perspective covering topics in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, with the collection continuing to grow. Among the many practical, conceptual, and technical considerations of developing a digital theological encyclopaedia, several pragmatic questions about the SAET's contributions to theological knowledge have accompanied the SAET team since the very beginnings of the project.

First, what *gaps* in knowledge or available information are we addressing, and *who* is this information for? As the project's foundational goal is to widen access to theological knowledge—especially where access to it may be limited—our target audience is broad:

students, academics, ministers and faith leaders, people of faith, and interested members of the public. So, how can we make the information *accessible* and *useful* to these groups of potential readers? Additionally, what *information strategies* might be helpfully applied to theological scholarship? Finally, what is actually *achievable* within the scope of the project? Alongside and flowing from these considerations, there have naturally been certain challenges—some practical, others conceptual, and many technical in nature.

Several of these challenges relate to building and maintaining *SAET* as a reliable resource of theological information: keeping articles up-to-date and accurate for readers to reflect progress in the discipline without loss of information; making sure articles are discoverable by readers, libraries, educators, and other information providers; connecting *SAET* to the wider informational ecosystem; and ensuring the long-term survival of articles and the information they contain.

From a technical standpoint, our focus has been on *enriching*, *preserving*, and *accessing* theological information. As a digital resource, we continue to reflect on how to make the most of digital tools to present and encode theological information. With this in mind, we have paid particular attention to metadata, text encoding, cataloguing, and archiving as strategies to manage theological information in *SAET*'s articles.

To 'enrich' the theological information contained within articles, *SAET* makes use of Extensible Mark-up Language (XML), a format that encodes text using machine- and human-readable mark-up tags. A distinct advantage of XML is that it can hold additional metadata about the information being encoded. For example, if an article uses a word or phrase in a different language from the rest of the text, the mark-up language can embed metadata about which language is being used. This additional embedded information is thus available to anyone accessing the article in XML format. To keep the article XML documents compatible with other systems and legible to human readers outside the project, *SAET* follows the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) standard rather than our own internal coding language.

To avoid loss of the theological information we publish, *SAET*'s preservation strategy works in tandem with its publication and update cycle. A combination of version control and archiving measures allow

SAET to preserve older versions of articles when a newer version is released. Long-term preservation of article files is assured, in part, thanks to access to institutional infrastructure kindly provided by the University of St. Andrews, whose technical support and resources will allow *SAET* archives to remain intact and accessible into the future.

All our efforts to enrich, update, and preserve articles would mean very little if articles cannot be discovered and accessed by readers. How do we make sure readers (and information service providers) can discover and access articles? Metadata is, of course, essential for making articles discoverable and connecting with the digital ecosystem. We are grateful that we have not had to do this alone: Atla, the Directory of Open Access Journals, and ixTheo have all been vital partners in allowing *SAET* to become more integrated into scholarly indexes and institutional library catalogues. Compatibility with Google Scholar and automated search engine indexing has also been significant for wider discoverability, especially in relation to those who are outside of academia or do not have access to institutional library resources.

As its own open access web platform, *SAET* attempts to increase accessibility to its theological scholarship by using lightweight pages, PDF downloads for offline access, and immediate access to *SAET* articles and search tools with no user log-in required. As *SAET* continues to grow, there will be ongoing challenges and considerations to navigate along the way. Like any such project, these will include questions of funding; technical matters, such as potential development of additional digital tools; where and how the resource is used; and continuing attention to reader needs and preferences.

A particular challenge arises from *SAET*'s dynamic, if traceable, editing and revision model: we have found that establishing *SAET* as an open access and updatable theological e-resource positions it slightly out at the edges of the current paradigm for digital scholarship, which is built around static forms of information such as ebooks and journal articles. Developing open access resources in alternative or creative formats in response to reader needs may raise further difficulties for indexing and discovery if those resources are not recognisable to directories or catalogues as anything other than webpages. This, in turn, can obscure the academic nature of such

resources, perhaps implying an absence of peer-reviewed content or a lack of scholarly reliability.

We continue to actively seek partnerships with theological libraries, library associations, and educators to learn from educational and technical insights arising from the experience of those fields which could help *SAET* to be increasingly accessible, useful, and effective as a digital theological encyclopaedia.