

An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies

Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff, eds. *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007. 1521 pp. \$49.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780814658567.

Winner of the 2008 Catholic Press Association Award, *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies* is described as a point of reference for understanding the terminology and concepts studied in college and university theology and religious studies programs. In this first edition, editors Orlando O. Espín of the University of San Diego and James B. Nickoloff of the College of the Holy Cross state that they have responded to a need for a resource that would make understandable to students those “ideas, terms, historical events or persons deemed important in the study of religion” (xxx). Nearly three thousand entries cover topics from “Aaron” to “Zwingli.”

While the dictionary focuses primarily on “mainstream Christianity, in particular ‘Catholic’ Christianity” (xxxii), its editors have also taken an interfaith approach. For example, an entry on “Imam,” an Islamic religious leader, appears on the opposite page to one on the “Immaculate Conception.” In addition to the typically represented European and Euro-American traditions, the editors have also attempted to give space to some of the following often underrepresented groups:

- Developing nation and U.S. minority perspectives
- U.S. Latino/a, Latin American, African American, African and Asian theologians
- Religions present in the United States but usually absent from American introductory dictionaries
- European countries usually ignored in American dictionaries (xxxii)

The contributors are scholars from a vast array of religious traditions and other academic disciplines. Considering the broad scope of this dictionary, making comparisons is difficult. Anyone seeking to weigh this work against another will be hard pressed, because there is little else out there like it.

The book could be criticized for its emphasis on inclusivity and political correctness, which it carries out possibly to a fault. In its attempt to be broad and all encompassing, the work almost becomes too much so. For example, an entry on Diana Hayes, who has written two books and published thirty articles, is given the same amount of space as “Augustine of Hippo.” The attempt to be representative is laudable, but in this dictionary’s case, many noteworthy theologians who have made significant theological contributions end up being left out. Important individuals such as theologian Dietrich Von Hildebrand and historian Christopher Dawson are notably absent.

The book’s entries are comparable in length to those in John A. Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary* and E.A. Livingstone’s *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Anyone looking for great depth on a topic will need to go elsewhere. Because it is a dictionary and not an encyclopedia, entries are limited to a factual overview. The authors cover the essentials on each topic, providing just enough information to help a student grasp the basics on a person, place, or idea. Some entries, such as “Grace,” entail many pages, and rightly so; the theology of grace is complex and means different things to different religions. Other entries are only a half dozen paragraphs (“God”)

or a few sentences (“Guardian Angels”). Most biographical entries touch on the major highlights in a person’s life, as well as listing his or her most important works or contributions.

Religious views on controversial topics such as “Homosexuality” and “Abortion” appear to be fairly represented. “Abortion” is separated into “Contemporary Concerns” and “Religious Perspectives.” “Homosexuality” is actually two separate entries—“Homosexuality (Christian Perspectives)” and “Homosexuality in Non-Christian Religions.” A check shows that the entry on Christian Perspectives matches up with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons and Non-Discrimination Against Homosexual Persons* and the Pontifical Council for the Family’s *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. The authors attempt to be unbiased toward any one religion or way of thinking, although sections on a few individuals such as “J. (John) Michael Clark” and “Rosemary Radford Ruether” seem to lean more toward agenda than definition. However, at a time when there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the Islamic religion, the dictionary attempts to give students an unbiased and factual basis for their studies.

The dictionary contains an impressive list of contributors. The majority of the dictionary’s authors are both specialists in their fields as well as experienced professors, making this a credible, scholarly resource. The authors are targeting a specific audience with a view toward their needs. For students with little prior knowledge of much of the subject matter, the language used is clear and understandable. It is evident that this project was carefully produced over many years, as the editors indicate in the introduction.

Sufficiently covering such a broad scope in a single volume is nearly impossible. Criteria for inclusion in the dictionary are unclear, and it would be interesting to learn why some saints and religious orders are included but others are not. For example, major Catholic religious orders like the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Trappists are included, yet other lesser-known orders that have made significant contributions, such as the Redemptorists or Blessed Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, are left out. Because they cover new religions and the views of formerly underrepresented groups, the editors have included entries on scholars and religious leaders still living. “Pope Benedict XVI,” who is emerging as one of the most brilliant theologians of the twentieth century, is given two paragraphs highlighting his work to date. Cross-references point the student to other entries for further reading. As with most dictionaries, this work is without an index, and indeed it is not needed except when a student doesn’t know where to look for the topic. For example, the term Amish, which does not have its own entry, is explained within the entry for “Anabaptists.” Either an index term or an entry for Amish with a cross-reference to “See Anabaptists” would be useful in an instance such as this one.

While the dictionary is intended for students, its value goes beyond the classroom. Professors and librarians will find it a useful tool in a personal reference collection. Even parish libraries and catechesis classes will find it valuable. Whether researching the basic meaning of the word “Pagan” or seeking a description of the more complex mystery of the “Trinity,” one will find that the dictionary does a credible job attempting to cover a wide range of material.

Theology and Religious Studies have long been kept separate as two distinct academic disciplines, but this work acknowledges a relationship between the two fields. In a sense, this dictionary attempts to bridge the gap between the two, providing theologians with historical context and background, and giving religious studies students a deeper understanding of theological concepts.

In their introduction, the editors acknowledge the volume's imperfections. In fact, they encourage feedback from students and professors in the hopes of improving the book in subsequent editions. Despite these disclaimers, the book is quite impressive in scope. For the most part, the editors have achieved their aims. With the promise of future editions, the work will undoubtedly improve over time. It would be a valuable resource for anyone in comparative religious studies or theology, from beginner to experienced scholar.

*Renee C. Willkom
Globe University*

