

## *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*

Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iaian R. Torrance, eds. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 549 pp. \$205.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780531880923.

The dust jacket claims that this volume “provides an introduction to the defining topics in Christian thought and is an essential reference point for students and scholars.” This marketing blurb both understates and overstates the volume’s merits. On the one hand, the volume provides more than a mere “introduction to the defining topics in Christian thought.” This volume provides an *unparalleled* introduction to Christian theology. This work is indisputably the best single-volume dictionary of Christian theology in existence today.

In an age when many reference works are assembled in a seemingly serendipitous fashion—either organized around little more than the senior editor’s personal fascinations or else written by whatever junior scholars happen to be available on short notice—this volume is well-conceived and judiciously authored. The editors spent more than five years assembling the 550-plus entries, and the results demonstrate that this was time well spent. The “core” of the work is fifty-five two-thousand word articles. Ten percent of the total number of articles, these core articles account for twenty-five percent of the dictionary’s text. These two-thousand-word articles focus on five areas: traditional doctrinal categories (e.g., Trinity and creation); various confessional traditions (e.g., Catholicism and Orthodoxy); theological movements (e.g., feminist and evangelical theology); academic approaches to theological discourse (e.g., historical and systematic theology); and Christianity’s relationship to other religions (e.g., Buddhism and Islam). The addition of this last set of core entries makes the volume particularly useful in the contemporary context of religious pluralism. The shorter articles, starting at 250 words, are designed to augment the discussions in the “core entries.” Although the editorial decisions in any volume of such scope and complexity can be second guessed, the overall conceptual work behind this volume is unsurpassed in any volume of comparable size.

If the editors’ conceptual work is commendable, their authorship selections are simply impeccable. Readers who are familiar with theological scholarship will quickly discern a pattern in the authorship of the individual articles. Each article is written by one of the most prominent scholars currently writing about the issue addressed in the article. For example, N. T. Wright, author of the highly esteemed *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003), authored the article on “resurrection.” Such connections between recent publications and the authorship of the various articles are routine. It is nothing short of amazing that the editors were able to gather such a distinguished set of authors within a single dictionary. With just over 550 articles and more than three-hundred different authors, the editors avoided the temptation of relying on a few readily available authors to compose scores of the articles. Even the brief entries are written by experts in that area of theological discourse. The connections between the authors, their scholarly production, and the assignments of articles are clear and compelling. It would be difficult to imagine a more authoritative single-volume dictionary.

Having said much in praise of this tome, let me briefly speak on the other hand. This is not, in my opinion, “an essential reference point for students and scholars.” In fact, in the days of the ubiquitous Internet, perhaps no single-

volume reference is truly essential. A quick comparison of a few dozen topics (e.g., “Lutheran theology” and “Karl Barth”) revealed little difference between the quality of the information in this volume and the information freely available on the Web. (Web comparison was made using the public search engine Blekko. Blekko, unlike its larger rival Google, prioritizes .org, .edu, and other academic domains over the more commercial .com domains. www.blekko.com.) We may be entering an age when not even the most distinguished scholars are able to significantly and consistently outperform the free Web in a format consisting of a few hundred or a few thousand words. The editors have anticipated this critique and have briefly addressed “the proliferation of web-based resources” in their preface (xix). However, anticipating a critique is not the same thing as overcoming that critique.

So... a great volume, exceptionally well-conceived, unparalleled in authority, expertly edited, but very, very pricey and not clearly or consistently more helpful than discerning use of the free Web. Individual acquisitions officers will have to decide if the volume passes their local costs-versus-benefits analysis.

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