

Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church

William A. Dyrness and Meli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds. *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008. 996 pp. \$50.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780830824540.

The *Global Dictionary of Theology* rides the recent wave of interest in how Christianity has expressed itself outside western Europe and North America. To legitimize the use of “global,” and to provide a basis for comparing the developments throughout the world, the *Global Dictionary of Theology* also summarizes key doctrines of historic Christianity and then discusses how these Christian traditions have developed as they have spread elsewhere. Although not primarily a history of missions (cf. *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*) or a dictionary of missiology (cf. *Dictionary of Mission Theology*), key articles address important subthemes of the relationship between Christianity and indigenous cultures, the development of doctrine, and the nature of revelation.

The editors, professors of theology and culture (Dyrness) and systematic theology (Kärkkäinen) at Fuller Theological Seminary conceived the *Dictionary* as a way “to provide a general overview of theological reflection and practice throughout the world” (vii). To this end, they enlisted over 190 authors to contribute 245 articles on topics as diverse as Christian doctrines, regional theologies, and ethics and pastoral theology, along with their missiological implications. All the entries are signed, and the list of contributors also serves as an author index to articles in the volume. Those enlisted have significant academic qualifications. Most have affiliation with Protestant institutions, with some Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and secular institutions also represented. The editors themselves point out that despite the global diversity of talent they have assembled, few have escaped the western influence because of their study in the West or their familiarity with the work of western theologians (xi).

The editors have succeeded in their objectives to provide a general overview. Though scattered by the alphabetical arrangement, most articles can be placed into one of four clusters: classic Christian doctrine, regional theological emphases and developments, practical theology, and missiological themes. As one might expect from Intervarsity Press, evangelical Protestantism pervades most articles. However, separate articles were written about Roman Catholic theology in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and about key Roman Catholic doctrines. Eastern Orthodox theology has only one article, and, based on the topic index, is likely underrepresented. Generally, the doctrinal articles first describe historic Christianity as developed through the ecumenical creeds, and then discuss how a doctrine’s themes have been enriched by theological reflection in different cultural contexts. “Atonement” and “Christology” can serve as examples. The former begins by recounting the traditional objective and subjective views of the atonement and then introduces “new soteriological images of Jesus” from the African context: Ancestor Par Excellence, Healer of Healers, and Master of Initiation. The first two receive fuller treatment in their own separate article; the third is left unexplained other than in a reference in the bibliography. The article concludes with a one-paragraph summary of the mixed reactions to the use of such “new soteriological images,” but advocates exploring further the multifaceted aspects of this doctrine.

The article on “Christology” is significantly longer, extending to nearly twenty pages. It begins with a straightforward discussion of the issues and a summary of the historic western solutions for unraveling the mystery of the Incarnation.

The second part looks at two other solutions: the “Christologies of liberation” (originating with Latin American theologians) and the “Christologies of inculturation” (originating among African and Asian theologians). Other articles on both “Liberation Theology” and “Contextualization” expand on other aspects of these two movements. This double treatment reflects the occasional practice of presenting different treatments of similar themes in multiple articles. The *Dictionary*’s system of *see* and *see also* references facilitates the readers’ tracking this process.

In addition to articles on specific doctrines, the *Dictionary* includes substantial articles on differing theological traditions, including “Lutheran Theology,” “Reformed Theology,” “Wesleyanism,” “Anabaptist Tradition,” “Charismatic Movement,” among others. A few of these articles (e.g., Anabaptists, Lutheran) indicate the global aspects of these traditions; others, such as Wesleyanism and Reformed Theology, limit the discussion to origins and theology and assign the global developments to a related article (such as “Arminianism” or “Evangelical Theology”). Again, the system of cross references proves necessary to study the topic thoroughly.

The articles on regional theologies form the backbone of the volume (despite its alphabetical arrangement). Each continent, including Europe and North America (i.e., the United States) has its own article, as do a few Asian countries and South Africa. Theology in the United States is further subdivided by ethnicity. Feminist Theologies include a section on “Feminist Theology outside the North American and European Context” (320-21). Some theologies that have originated outside the West, such as “minjung theology,” have their own articles in addition to briefer mention within their national context. Within these regional theologies, one finds discussions of regionally important theologians; unfortunately, the treatment is uneven since the length varies from a few words to several columns. Fortunately, an article’s bibliography links these theologians with at least one of their published works. Despite the *Dictionary*’s use of cross-references from a person’s name to the relevant article, the personal name index at the back of the volume provides the surest way to identify and locate which persons are discussed.

Several articles address ethical issues across cultures. In addition to the western standards such as “Creation and Ecology,” “Marriage and Family,” “Power, Racism, and Sexism,” there are also articles on “Capitalism,” “Children at Risk,” “Face,” “Globalization,” “Shame,” and “Technology” that address the issues from a global perspective. Some articles follow the pattern used in the articles on doctrine. For example, “Marriage and the Family” begins with a biblical and historical treatment of marriage concluding with issues faced in the west; the second part of the article focuses on the Christian view of marriage as understood in the African context. Other articles take a “universal” approach to the topic; examples include “Sexuality,” which presents a biblical view of sexuality without referring to local cultures, as does the article, “Racism,” with its critique of racist theologies. Some ethical topics have their roots in other cultures. The idea of “Face,” though prominent in eastern cultures, has, the author argues, application in all cultures when understood as maintaining one’s self-esteem in social relationships. The *Dictionary* labels Shame an important concept overlooked by western theologians, and challenges anthropological misconceptions, while exploring its biblical expressions and calling for further consideration in its relation to guilt and salvation. Some articles on ethics advocate a particular approach (usually “biblical”) to the topic. The article “Children at Risk” counters instances of exploitation with the Bible’s stress on the importance of children within the Kingdom of God. In “Technology” the author observes that technological advancement within a society is not without implications for the global Christian.

The major thrust of the *Dictionary* and the intent of the editors—“that theology is by nature contextual” (viii)—is not without its critics.¹ A series of articles on “Cross-cultural Theology,” “Contextualization,” “Theological

¹ Cf. Keith E. Eitel, “Evangelical Agnosticism: Crafting a Different Gospel,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49 (2007): 150-67.

Method,” “Revelation and Scripture,” along with others, acknowledge these objections and offer counterarguments. For example, both views acknowledge biblical revelation as central to theology, but one group looks to the Bible for propositional truths while the other group finds truth in the narratives. Context, in the form of culture, has influenced both.

In conclusion, the editors have indeed provided a helpful “resource for the worldwide church.” *The Global Dictionary of Theology* advances the westerner’s knowledge of Christian thought and practice outside Europe and North America. At the same time, it informs those in the “Global South” of the central doctrines developed in the West that enables them to distinguish clearly their own Christian reflections from the other religions that have influenced their culture as profoundly as Christianity has influenced western culture.

Librarians can appreciate the volume for its bibliographies as a tool for collection development; its indexes make it a ready reference about Christianity throughout the world (this review has only hinted at the range of topics discussed). Its lengthy treatment of major doctrines equals those found in standard theological dictionaries. Faculty can use it to assign significant readings on theological method and on the relation of Christianity to culture. Some may find fault with its pervasive evangelical bias, especially toward ethical issues, but should appreciate the even-handed treatments within the summary articles. Recommended for library or individual purchase.

Robert Phillips
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

