

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

Brendan N. Wolfe et al., eds. *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. University of St Andrews, 2022–. <https://www.saet.ac.uk>. Accessed February 7, 2026.

Before the ubiquity of generative AI and hyperbolic promises of more productive and efficient research, the Internet offered a more modest and tangible promise. Web 1.0 saw the explosion of static web pages that provided enormous quantities of information available to anyone with an Internet connection. Digital though that information had become, the promise was recognizable as that of universal, accessible knowledge—the very promise toward which libraries strive. A glance at the website for the *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology*—a useful but incomplete and long orphaned online theological encyclopedia—demonstrates the partially filled status of this promise in theology and religious studies.

The *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* (SAET) is a project that demonstrates what it would look like to make good on that promise. A fully open-access online resource, SAET takes the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as its basic model. Academic editor Rebekah Dyer and principal editor Brendan Wolfe lead the editorial team that produce this multi-author work. They explain the unique publishing process initiated by the desire to provide an open-access theology reference work with particular view towards “those for whom access to resources through traditional academic publishing is restricted by cost, lack of institutional affiliation, or limited library resources” (Dyer and Wolfe 2023, 1). The goal of the project is to provide a major theological reference work that is freely accessible, discoverable, and preservable. In their article, the editors detail the unique publishing process that adheres to the Digital Curation Centre’s Duration Lifestyle Model, aimed at ensuring that digital scholarship is effectively managed, curated, and preserved. SAET is sustained by grant funding and receives institutional support from the University of St Andrews.

Though loosely structured, the SAET is organized “primarily by concepts rather than sources, periods, or people” (“Christian theology in the Encyclopaedia”). It consists of five sections, each of which engages a different theological tradition. Theology is defined as “inquiry into the nature of divine or ultimate things, grounded in the metaphysical, epistemological, and normative commitments of particular religious traditions or practices” (“About the project”). This definition is broad enough to include not only Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, but also Buddhism, a tradition that typically eschews the language of “theology.” The Christian section launched the project in 2022, and it continues to see the most consistent growth. At the time of this writing, it accounts for about 78% of the entries (175 out of 225). Users can track the progress of SAET’s development through the “Latest articles” section that highlights recent contributions for each category.

The vision for an encyclopedia that covers the major world religions while still operating predominantly in a theological mode is unique, and it distinguishes SAET from an established encyclopedia like *Religion Past and Present*. Authors in SAET take a consistently “emic” or insider approach to their subjects, rather than the “etic” approach of a mere observer or disaffected researcher. While the articles demonstrate rigorous and critical scholarship, they do so from the perspectives of practitioners with lived experience of the traditions they write about. This approach is particularly important for a project that attempts to bring non-western religions into conversation with various Christian traditions. The SAET provides the opportunity for a student at a small Christian college, who may have had little exposure to the theological perspectives of the world religions, an opportunity to learn about the liberative practice of yoga from a Hindu scholar/practitioner. This perspective sits

alongside content on Latin American liberation theology, drawing connections between religious traditions by exploring the theological ideas and practices that enliven them.

In the Christian section, denominational perspectives are not distributed evenly to this point. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and Methodism are each represented by multiple entries that treat specific aspects of those traditions. There are, as yet, no entries that specifically treat issues from a confessionally Reformed perspective, though there are entries authored by theologians from the Reformed tradition. Another quirk of the section on Christianity crops up when browsing or searching for entries dealing with Black theology. There are entries on “African American Pastoral Theology,” “African American Preaching,” and an excellent article by Diana L. Hayes on “Womanist Theology.” Hayes’s article is worth mentioning because, in addition to charting the history and themes of Womanist theology, she embodies the ecumenical character of the project by observing that Womanist theologians, “though predominantly part of the Protestant churches, are also comprised of individuals from the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, and Buddhism, among others, who seek to explore many of the same issues first brought out by their Protestant sisters” (29 in PDF). However, there is currently no article dedicated to “Black Theology” or “African American Theology” more generally.

The *SAET* reflects the institutional strengths of the University of St Andrews, which houses the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts. That connection is reflected in entries like “Christian Theology,” which closes with a discussion of theology and the arts, “European Literature and Christian Theology,” “Film and Christian Theology,” “Music in the Western Theological Tradition,” and “Performing Arts and Embodiment in Christian Theology.” This interdisciplinary approach is evident throughout.

SAET includes contributions from both established and emerging scholars. It includes entries from such recognizable names as N. T. Wright, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Milbank, and Oliver O’Donovan. Such name recognition serves a valuable purpose for an open-access project. Despite the fact that various modes of open access are an established part of the academic publishing landscape, confusion persists among academics. Librarians can attest directly to these misconceptions. I have had the experience of pointing out open-access results in a database search during an information literacy session, only to have the professor explain to the class that these “free” resources are not the “peer-reviewed” resources that they should use for their paper. For those still wary of any resource that can be turned up with a Google search and accessed online free of charge, an encyclopedia article by an established name in the field can identify an open-access resource as recognizably scholarly. Hopefully such name recognition will also encourage other scholars who may be less comfortable with open-access models to contribute to the project.

In terms of its functionality, *SAET* demonstrates precisely why reference works are such good candidates to demonstrate the value of digital publishing formats. Digital versus print debates never quite seem to die, no matter how accustomed we should all be to toggling between different forms of media. *SAET*’s different sections can be searched separately or collectively. A search for “justice” in the section on Christianity will turn up Wolterstorff’s discussion of predominantly western notions about “Justice and Rights” alongside Alfred Sebahene’s African Christian perspective on “Justice and Corruption.” Expanding that search to include all sections will introduce Eugene Korn’s discussion of justice in “Jewish Ethics” and Alessandro Giudice’s treatment of justice in “Law and Religion in Brahmanism” into the mix. Hyperlinked topics—similar to those found in Wikipedia articles—allow users to make connections between different traditions and serve the task of comparative theology. HTML versions of each article allow for these connections, and PDF versions allow for easy download and distribution. Articles can also be browsed alphabetically—again as either individual sections

or a whole—but the work is largely organized around its very usable search features. A clean and intuitive user interface allows readers to navigate *SAET* confidently.

If one of the challenges of open-access projects is to match the rigor of traditional academic publishing formats, another challenge is the discoverability of those projects. The editors note the importance of integrating *SAET*'s articles “into the academic information ecosystem” (Dyer and Wolfe 2023, 22). This is one task with which librarians can help. *SAET* deserves to be heavily featured in our theology and religious studies LibGuides. Its search features, filters, and sorting tools help to reinforce the research strategies that we teach when demonstrating database usage in our information literacy sessions. Its articles could effectively be incorporated into class readings on world Christianity, comparative religions, and any number of other areas. In addition, it freely provides high quality theological scholarship to those who have access to the internet but lack the library benefits that come with institutional affiliation. In this way, *SAET* is a project that works toward the promise of Web 1.0. Anyone invested in theological education at any level would benefit from using it and monitoring its development.

It should also be noted that, as yet, there is no entry in *SAET* for “Theological Librarianship.” It would be exciting to see a member of the Atla community take up this challenge and propose an article to the project's editors.

Andrew C. Stout
University of Missouri–St. Louis

REFERENCES

- Dyer, Rebekah, and Brendan Wolfe. 2023. "Open-Access Theology: Introducing the *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*'s Digital Publishing Model." *The Journal of Electronic Publishing* 26 (1). <https://doi.org/10.3998/jep.4254>.