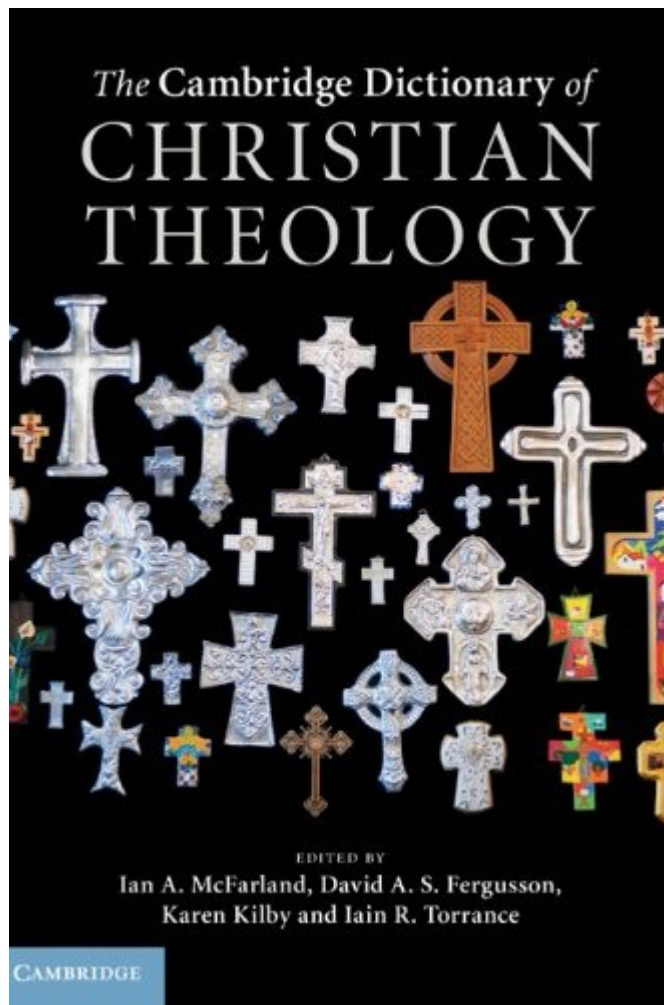


# The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology

Edited by Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby and Iain R. Torrance  
Cambridge University Press

To be a Christian is to be a theologian, because by definition all Christians, lay or clergy, engage in God-talk. The only question is whether this conversation is well informed. For theological conversation to occur, we need the kind of resources that lay out the basic issues, perspectives and players—and what better resource to have close at hand than a comprehensive, up-to-date dictionary that is accessible to both clergy and educated laypeople, a dictionary with breadth of perspective. Such a request is a tall order, but the editors of *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* have attempted to meet the need. As with any such work, the results are mixed, but the fact that the attempt has been made needs to be celebrated.

As far as I know, the only similar resource is the dictionary I've been using since I was in seminary more than a quarter century ago. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, which remains in print, was first published in the late 1960s under the editorship of Alan Richardson; a revised edition was published in 1983, with John Bowden as coeditor. That dictionary has served me well, but if you compare the two, you'll quickly discover how much has changed over the past three decades. Back then there were neoorthodox, process and liberation theologies, and now we've added postcolonial, queer and womanist theologies, to name just a few. The fact that the new dictionary deals with these more recent threads makes it a worthy addition to the libraries of all who wish to be theologically informed. If only the volume weren't so expensive.

Cost aside, the editors and publisher of the new dictionary created it in response to the perceived need for a comprehensive and inclusive one-volume reference work that would cut across confessional lines and offer a "specifically theological examination of each topic considered." The editors note that their intent was for this volume to demonstrate a "generous orthodoxy." That is, it is distinctly Christian but also inclusive. Though they recruited a broad spectrum of contributors, the editors, especially Ian McFarland, contributed a fair number of articles as well.

The articles range from 250 to 2,000 words, with the longer entries designed to integrate the briefer ones. The longest articles, about 10 percent of the listings, focus on what the editors define as core issues. These essays provide the superstructure for the rest of the dictionary. They focus on five areas: key doctrines (including creation, ecclesiology, salvation and the Trinity); confessional orientation (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant); theological style (liberal, feminist, evangelical); relationship with other religious traditions (the editors note that 21st-century

theology will be done in the context of encounters with other faiths); and core academic disciplines (biblical and historical theology).

Slightly briefer articles (from 1,500 to 1,750 words) discuss second-level doctrines and issues (miracles, panentheism, liturgy), along with more localized styles and orientations (neoorthodoxy, narrative theology, Latin American theology). Here is where one might quibble: Why, for instance, is Christology assigned to the second level while deification is of the first order? Biographies are the last area of focus, and these articles range from 250 to 1,000 words and are prioritized according to three areas of concern: persons who influenced core doctrines (Athanasius, Origen), the subsequent history of Christian doctrine (Aquinas), and contemporary theology (Barth, Bonhoeffer). Although it was a wise decision not to include articles about living persons, this means that few biographies of women and persons of color are included in this edition of the dictionary even though such figures are discussed in other contexts.

The dictionary employs a series of aids that enable users to discern the level of importance of articles and provides cross-references to related articles. However, it is unfortunate that there isn't a listing of the core topics. Such a listing would make this dictionary a more usable reference if the point is to use the core essays as a superstructure for theological study.

As with any multiauthor reference work, the quality of the articles varies. Some essays are very accessible to the layperson (the essay on Reformed theology stands out in this regard, and Karen Kilby's essay on the Trinity is as good an introduction to the complexity of the issue as I've found); other essays will leave even the theologically trained puzzled (William Lane Craig's essay on the cosmological argument is so jargon-laden it is almost useless). Some authors take a very broad perspective (Kilby on the Trinity), while others take a narrow, even parochial view. N. T. Wright's erudite essay on the resurrection, which very clearly lays out his own reading of the issue, makes no mention of the contemporary challenges to his view—including the metaphorical perspective of Marcus Borg.

One can quibble with this or that essay, but the very scope of this effort—550 articles from Abba to Zwingli—makes it an important, even indispensable, contribution to the church. This dictionary gives brief but important introductions to the broad spectrum of issues that we struggle with every day as Christians— from sexuality to the nature of God. Still, I'm not ready to set aside my copy of *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. There is value in using both resources.