

Critical Terms for Religious Studies,
edited by Mark C. Taylor

reviewed by [Alan G. Padgett](#) in the [December 2, 1998](#) issue

Edited by Mark C. Taylor, Critical Terms for Religious Studies. (University of Chicago Press, 423 pp.)

Like rock 'n' roll or *Star Trek*, religious studies is constantly reinventing itself. Since its creation in the '50s as the "scientific" study of world religions, the field has had neither an essence nor a fixed method. It consists of the application of various approaches and diverse disciplines to the study of religion. Mark C. Taylor's book is an excellent example of what happens when this ever-changing field encounters postmodernity.

Aimed at students, Taylor's book is part of a series of University of Chicago Press volumes surveying key terms in current disciplines. Taylor, who teaches at Williams College, is a postmodern theologian whose previous books, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology and Altarity*, brought together French postmodern thought and the question of God. Here he presents an impressive array of leading religious-studies scholars who have been influenced by postmodernity. The book does more than introduce a few key terms in religious studies; it traces the impact that postmodern attitudes have had upon religion scholars. For thoughtful pastors or learned layfolk, it is an introduction to postmodern attitudes, criticisms and style.

Although the book contains some traditional terms such as "God," "belief," "value" and even "religion," the terms used here are for the most part deliberately alien to the scholarship of a previous generation. Here words like "transgression," "body," "gender," "rationality" and "modernity" are presented as critical for religious studies. Older terms have been replaced by their newer, postmodern counterparts: "performance" instead of "ritual," "experience" instead of "mysticism" and "writing" instead of "scripture." "Relic," however, has been retained--perhaps as a relic?

Because this text is supplemental rather than authoritative, it should not be used by novices in the field. Too many of its authors neglect to define their terms--perhaps the very idea of definition is abhorrent, given the standards and ephemeral boundaries of postmodernism. But the book succeeds in its deconstructive quest to undermine the expected and settled concepts and methods of an earlier era. Mine it for what is trendy, study it as an example of the impact of an ideology, and you will not be disappointed.