

REVIEW ARTICLE

# *Upgrading an Old Classic: The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*

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*The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*. 4th edn. Edited by Andrew Louth. Previously published by Oxford University Press, 1957, 1974, 1997, 2005 (3rd version rev.). 2 vols. I: A–J; II: K–Z. Pp. lx + 1058, xviii + 1059–2143. New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. £195. 978 0 19 886789; 978 0 19 886790 6

Is the era of the reference book coming to an end? Publishers evidently don't think so. Not only have we seen an explosion in the number of handbooks, companions and dictionaries produced by the mainstream academic press in recent years, but even older, well-established 'brands' continue to flourish. Here is the fourth edition of Oxford University Press's 'flagship' *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church (ODCC)*, considerably expanded and revised from the third edition. Yet although libraries continue to buy works such as this, and academic colleagues to use them and refer to them, students often – if my experience is anything to go by – prefer the easier, cheaper, faster route of online sourcing, and particularly Wikipedia. A review of this edition of the *ODCC* has to reckon, then, not only with evaluating the content of the work itself, but, more sharply than perhaps was necessary before, with the questions of who exactly is likely to use it, and how it stands up in comparison with the competition.

First, this author has to declare an interest: he is himself a contributor to the *ODCC*. This is hardly surprising, though, since the panel of some 350 contributors must include a high proportion of the experts on particular fields of Christian history, theology and spirituality in the English-speaking world. Indeed, finding a suitably qualified reviewer who had not contributed to this edition of the *ODCC*, or even to the most recent predecessor, the third (1997) edition, might prove quite difficult. If use of successive editions over a long period is a useful quality in a reviewer, I can at least claim that.

In size, appearance and format, this fourth edition of the *ODCC* is a marked departure from its predecessors. It now comes in two large, heavy volumes, each of over 1,000 pages. Like the third edition, it also exists in online form, and this is surely how it will be accessed by most students and academics registered with a university library which pays the relevant subscription. The hard copy is expensive and unwieldy, but none the less overall a bargain in comparison with the price of many monographs. The first edition had around 6,000 articles. That number remained roughly the same for the second and third editions, but here it has increased somewhat to around 6,500, partly in order to accommodate areas in which the publishers advertise the expanded scope of the *ODCC*. These include more and fuller entries on non-Western Christianity, and especially covering North America, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific rim. Extensive updating of entries has occurred across the board, with attention paid particularly to new controversies and themes in global Christianity, and to new perspectives on well-established themes. But the expansion in scope is not reflected only in the increase in size, however, because here, unlike for example the late Colin Matthew's practice for Oxford's revision of the *Dictionary of national biography*, the policy adopted has not been to avoid all deletion of earlier entries, but to cut or shorten as appropriate, giving more space for new or longer entries. As the editor explains in his preface, this has been done partly because the growth of theological dictionaries since the first edition of the *ODCC* has obviated the need for so many biblical entries, and also – a little more controversial, this – entries on other faiths.

For a clue to the intellectual rationale of this monumental undertaking, the editor's preface is essential reading as a concentrated essay in historiography, supplemented by inclusion of the prefaces to the first and third editions. As he notes, there has been a vast change in the worldwide Church since the first edition was conceived in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Not only decolonisation, and the Second Vatican Council, but the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the Global South has fundamentally altered the context in which Christianity is to be interpreted today. The first editor, Frank Cross

<sup>1</sup> A. Louth, 'Preface', *ODCC*, i, p. vi.

(1900–68), was an Anglican canon and professor in Oxford, whose conception of the Christian world was High Anglican and English-centred – hence the patristic leanings of the original volume, as well as the oddity of having national entries on ‘Christianity in’ for many countries except England, for which instead there was an entry on ‘Church of England’ (but strangely no entry on the ‘Anglican Communion’).<sup>2</sup> The ‘Anglo-Catholic bias’ did not, however, inhibit the almost universal praise with which it was received, with, as Louth acknowledges, its Anglican-centric view seen ‘as a forgivable, even amiable, idiosyncrasy’.<sup>3</sup> The second edition, in 1974, under the overall guidance of Cross’s former assistant, Elizabeth Livingstone (1929–2023), was advertised as a complete revision, with a significant shift in emphasis towards greater inclusion of Catholic subjects, amongst others, reflecting perhaps the influence of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5). This process was to be taken even further by Livingstone with the third edition in 1997, with another and generally younger group of contributors. It is a pity that Livingstone’s own death just after the publication of this new edition meant that her obituary could not also be included, since her achievement in maintaining the overall quality and relevance of the *ODCC* since Cross’s death was itself remarkable. With successive editions, then, the *ODCC* had adjusted scope significantly away from its original Anglican, English moorings. Even so, anyone searching for a perfectly balanced, neutral assessment of personalities, concepts, institutions and events in World Christianity would have been bemused by, for example, the way the entry on the Anglican Christian Socialist J. M. Ludlow (1821–1911) was the same length, bar the bibliography, as that on Gregory of Nazianzus.

It is not difficult to enumerate the processes by which the worldwide Christian Church as Cross and then Livingstone knew it has changed dramatically over the last half century. The rise of the Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches across the globe, the impressive growth of Protestantism in parts of Latin America, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite Communist regimes leading to church revival, the expansion and sometimes rebirth of Christianity in east Asia, the growth of Christianity in Africa, the changing ‘centre of gravity’ of world Christianity away from the West to the Global South, the continuing institutional decline of the older denominations in the West – these are the more salient features. Much of this change has been tracked in the successive editions of the *World Christian encyclopedia* first published in 1982, and revised in 2001 and again in 2020.<sup>4</sup> There the broad-brush statistics of the

<sup>2</sup> The obituary of Frank Cross, which first appeared in the second edition of 1974, is also included here.

<sup>3</sup> Louth, *ODCC*, i, p. v.

<sup>4</sup> D. B. Barrett (ed.), *World Christian Encyclopedia: a comparative study of Churches and religions in the modern world, 1900–2000*, Oxford–Nairobi 1982; later editions were edited by Barrett with T. M. Johnson, and then by Johnson with G. Zurlo.

ebb and flow of church growth have depicted the changing shape of world Christianity in a way which has impacted on the content of the *ODCC* slowly yet surely. Accordingly, as Andrew Louth notes, the revision and expansion of entries has required better coverage not only of regions and traditions, but also of liturgical practices and intellectual currents which are a far cry from the concerns of the original edition.

In addition to maintaining relevance, however, another challenge for the *ODCC* has been that of quality. From the very beginning, reviewers were almost unanimous in praise of it. A few indicative assessments will suffice. Of the first edition, the reviewer in the *Catholic Historical Review* acknowledged that it ‘justifies fully the claim ... about its outstanding qualities’.<sup>5</sup> Gordon Rupp called it ‘one of those rare volumes which in a few weeks takes its place as a work of reference so valuable that it merits the term “indispensable”’, even though, as he noted, it was weighted ‘on the side of Anglican history’, and especially Catholicism rather than Protestantism.<sup>6</sup> Clifford Dugmore, in this *JOURNAL*, called it ‘an amazing achievement’ which could not fail to be ‘a standard reference book of immense value’.<sup>7</sup> Assessments of later editions were equally laudatory. Geoffrey Wainwright, reviewing the third edition, called the *ODCC* ‘itself practically part of church history’.<sup>8</sup> Gervase Rosser, in this *JOURNAL* again, said he approached that edition ‘with a sense of awe’, and noted the ‘evenness of treatment across a staggering range of subjects’.<sup>9</sup> Overall, it needs to be said, all these qualities have been maintained in this fourth edition. The range is indeed astonishing, and the gathering together of so many experts across such a wide field, with due editorial conventions and control, mean that there is no diminution in the overall excellence of the *ODCC*, and everything which follows, including critical comments, has to be read in the light of that fundamental judgement.

## I

So how have the proposed changes been made, and how well do they work? First, then, there is the question of what changes. Despite the clear shift in focus and scale, those familiar with earlier editions will quickly feel themselves at home here. This *ODCC* retains much of the spirit and approach of Cross and Livingstone, although the engaging of a larger pool of contributors perhaps give it a rather more collaborative feel than its predecessors.

<sup>5</sup> M. R. P. McGuire, review, *Catholic Historical Review* xliv (1958), 165.

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Rupp, review, *EHR* lxxiv (1959), 95.

<sup>7</sup> C.W. Dugmore, review, this *JOURNAL* ix (1958), 229.

<sup>8</sup> G. Wainwright, review, *Church History* xlvi (1998), 211.

<sup>9</sup> G. Rosser, review, this *JOURNAL* l (1999), 314–15.

The earlier policy of anonymity has been largely abandoned, with the use of initials for most entries, and a key to the initials in the prefatory material. This is probably justified on the grounds that the sheer diversity of intellectual and historiographical studies in church history and theology today makes it harder to project an image of authoritative, dispassionate objectivity than might have seemed possible in the 1950s. The *Revue de l'histoire des religions* had noted perceptively in 1959 that the *ODCC* was ‘principalement historique’, and that remains the case with this edition.<sup>10</sup> There are many thematic and doctrinal entries, but the bulk of the *ODCC* is made up of biographical, institutional and regional entries dominated by historical description.

As suggested above, the updating of the *ODCC* has been achieved first of all by the writing of many new entries – too many to list in full here, of course. Since the policy of the *ODCC* generally is not to include living individuals, except popes and one or two others (Jürgen Moltmann was one of these, since he was still alive at time of publication), quite a number of people whose omission might have seemed remiss in any case now rightly have an entry, including Tissa Balasuriya, Kwame Bediako, Anthony Bloom, Louis Bouyer, James Cone, Peter Maxwell Davies (a surprising inclusion to my mind), Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, René Girard, Billy Graham, Geoffrey Hill, Trevor Huddleston, Sebastian Kappen, Gordon Kaufman, Emmanuel Levinas, Donald MacKinnon, Yusuf Mangunwijaya, Eric Mascall, Sun Myung Moon, Milan Opočensky, Raimondo Panikkar, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Paul Ricoeur and Mother Teresa, amongst others. If that list preserves something of a Eurocentric outlook, none the less the inclusion of names from the Global South is significant. There are many new thematic entries reflecting the desire to widen the scope of the *ODCC*. Again, there are too many to list here, though a few examples might suffice – ‘Alpha Course’ (unfortunately Andrew Atherstone’s excellent history appeared too late for inclusion in the bibliography),<sup>11</sup> the ‘Anglican Church in North America’ (a ‘continuing’ church; this entry is already out of date as ACNA has had its orders recognised by the Church of England), ‘Batak Christian Protestant Church’, ‘disability’, ‘ecological theology’, ‘fantasy [literature]’, ‘gay and lesbian theologies’, ‘megachurch’, ‘meta-narrative’, ‘Minjung theology’, ‘New Wine’ and ‘queer theology’. Another class of entry which has seen many additions – and this is a very welcome development for students of world Christianity – is that on Christianity in particular nations or regions. Many of these new entries are outstanding – see, for example, the entry on ‘Namibia, Christianity in’.

<sup>10</sup> A. Guillaumont, review, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* clvi (1959), 240.

<sup>11</sup> A. Atherstone, *Repackaging Christianity: Alpha and the building of a global brand*, London 2022.

In addition to the writing of new entries, substantial revision has taken place, in some cases to the extent of virtually replacing the older entries. Sometimes this has been done quite lightly, though well. The entry on 'Grace', for example, has been expanded by the addition of paragraphs on twentieth-century theology and Orthodoxy. The entry on the 'Great Awakening' has added an account of twentieth-century revivals. The long entry on 'marriage' inevitably required updating in the light of contemporary arguments over same-sex relationships, but this has been done in such a way as to retain the very substantial body of material on pre-twentieth-century marriage. The entry on John Henry Newman, revised and partially rewritten, includes his canonisation in 2019. The entry on 'Notre-Dame, Paris' necessarily has been amended to include the 2019 fire. Occasionally this modest updating misses the mark. The entry on 'mission', for example, includes just one short paragraph on the association of mission and European imperialism, and yet, given the highly contested historiography of mission and its association with increasingly powerful post-colonial criticism, this seems a missed opportunity. Occasionally, it seems, entries have not been revised as thoroughly as they might have been. A surprisingly dated entry is that on animism, which speaks of 'primitive peoples'. The entry on Eric Gill – admittedly short – makes no mention of the scandal of his sexual abuse of his daughters, as disclosed in Fiona McCarthy's 1989 biography.<sup>12</sup> Is this of relevance to modern users of the *ODCC*? Arguably something ought to be said about it, since it is a key feature of the contemporary reception of Gill's work. Incidentally that also reflects what is I think a serious omission – any entry for clerical abuse, including sexual abuse.

So far I have dealt largely with the intended updating and expansion in scope of the *ODCC*. A reader with no prior knowledge of this work might have two further questions in mind, coming to it for the first time. Both are concerned with the target audience or readership. The first we might call the question of level, that is to say, whether entries are introductory, on the one hand, or on the other, summary, authoritative statements for a well-informed, even specialist readership. There is some variation between entries, but in essence – and this is the real strength of the *ODCC* as a reference work, to my mind – the great majority of entries manage neatly and judiciously to combine the two. It is of course the cross-referencing which, on the whole, enables this remarkable balancing act to be achieved so consistently. In the online edition, cross-references are enabled by a digital link, making it especially easy to navigate through an entry, picking up useful explanations as you go. I suspect a

<sup>12</sup> F. McCarthy, *Eric Gill*, London 1989.

lot of readers will be delighted at the way they can wander through the dictionary at will this way, learning much unexpectedly as they go.

But this first question is related to the second, namely who is the readership assumed in the construction of the *ODCC*? To state the blindingly obvious, it is an Anglophone audience, since it is an English-language work. But whilst attempting broad, even comprehensive coverage of the worldwide Church – at least, and this is a crucial qualification, as that idea is understood in much of the Anglophone world in the early twenty-first century – the notion that there is an independent, neutral standpoint from which such a work could be constructed is clearly something of a fiction. If the *ODCC* is not so obviously now a product of Oxford Anglicanism as was its first incarnation, none the less it is still helpful to think of a bias here working outwards from a Western, English-speaking audience, and especially an Anglican one. Thus the Anglo/Anglican-centric lens of the *ODCC* has not gone altogether. The entry on the Oath of Allegiance, for example, simply takes the reader directly into the question of the Promissory Oaths Act of 1866, and would make little sense outside the English, Anglican context. The entry on ‘apostolic succession’ has two paragraphs, one of which is largely about the Anglican position. The short entry on ‘North End’ is one of a number which uniquely refer to Anglican issues. Quite a few entries clearly assume that a significant part of the readership of the *ODCC* will be Anglican clergy, students or interested lay people. Why else have such a long entry on the modern Church of England liturgy, *Common Worship*, for example? Why else have an entry on the English coronation rite, but no entry on coronations more widely? Why else is there such a long article on Archbishop Fisher? These and other entries reflect a justifiable editorial decision to keep an important part of the original target audience of the *ODCC* in view. Stand back from that audience, and take a prospect from an altogether different sector of world Christianity, however, and the impact of this strategy on the adequacy of some entries becomes apparent. There is an entry on ‘religious orders in Anglicanism’, but although there are naturally entries on all the main Catholic orders, and on monasticism in general, it is perhaps surprising that there is not at least a brief entry directing the reader interested in non-Anglican orders to all the relevant links. The entry on ‘parish’ exclusively addresses the British context, and says nothing of parochial history and organisation elsewhere in the western Church. Surprisingly, in addition to a main article on ‘Anglican Communion’, there is a separate entry on ‘Anglican Communion: administrative structures’, and there is indeed some overlap. Perhaps the – to this reviewer – most salient example of this bias are the extraordinary articles devoted to the late poets Geoffrey Hill and R. S. Thomas, respectively four and five paragraphs of brilliant assessment by Rowan Williams, and yet way out proportion surely to any resonance of their work outside a

quite restricted readership, or in comparison at least with some other contemporary writers featured here (or, indeed, omitted, such as W. H. Auden, Barbara Pym and Stevie Smith).

## II

Consideration of readership prompts, for me, two further, related reflections, which can be characterised as consistency of compromise, and usefulness. Even a dictionary of this size could not possibly provide a completely comprehensive overview of the history, theology and present constitution of the worldwide Church. Bringing into consideration the target readership of the *ODCC* highlights just where one would expect to find a compromise between scope and usefulness. But is that compromise consistently sustained? That is perhaps one of the two key tests of the *ODCC*'s success. In general terms, it seems to this reader, it is. But it is not difficult to identify some variation.

The country profiles are certainly somewhat variable, presumably depending in part on the expertise available to the editor. The entry on Argentina, for example, is surprisingly quite short. There is an entry on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, but no entry on Christianity in Ethiopia as such: plainly the latter could be largely subsumed in the former, but there are some other Christian communities in Ethiopia today which would merit a passing reference. Amazingly, there is no distinct entry on Christianity in Germany, even though there are several other entries which cover much of the ground; here, one would have thought, there was at least a case for a brief, overarching entry which would direct the reader to the relevant entries. In some countries of Eastern Europe, the complexity of religious history is somewhat elided by a heavy concentration on the (admittedly itself tangled) history of Orthodoxy. The entry on Romania, for example, mentions Lutheranism in passing, but says nothing of the tradition of the fortified churches and the flight of Lutheran communities from parts of Romania after the collapse of Communism. There is no separate entry on Ukraine; that on 'Ukrainian Churches' is essentially an essay on the varieties of Orthodoxy there, with nothing said at all about the presence of Protestantism. Likewise, there is no separate entry on 'Russia', although there is one of the longest (and much extended) entries of all in the *ODCC* on 'Russia, Orthodox Church in', a particularly fine summary of a complex history and culture with an extraordinarily full bibliography. These last three referenced entries, and others, are evidently part of the deliberate and welcome policy of redressing the neglect of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. Likewise, the addition of new entries on Armenian Orthodoxy is very welcome, as is a new entry on 'Caucasian Albania', which has little to do with the history of the present state of Albania, but represents an



ancient form of Christianity associated with the Udi people in and around present-day Azerbaijan. However neither this entry, nor the one on Armenia itself, indicate that the scope and existence of this ‘Albanian’ or Udi Christianity is a matter of real contestation today.

Probably the clearest indication of the limits of this test of ‘compromise’ are the inevitable omissions, and it needs to be said that every reader is likely to have his or her expectations confounded at some point in use of the *ODCC*. The student of modern Anglican history might be surprised to find the following given no separate entry: R. J. Campbell (nor is there an entry for the ‘New Theology’), Nathaniel Dimmock, William Goode, Gabriel Hebert, William Huntington (though he is referenced in the entry on the Lambeth Quadrilateral), Kelham Fathers (not even as the Society of the Sacred Mission), Conrad Noel, and the ‘settlement’ movement (and there are no entries either for Toynbee Hall or Oxford House). The compromise test seems solid on a number of these, but both Hebert and Huntington arguably are figures of enduring importance in modern Anglicanism, the former as the foremost advocate of liturgical renewal (the omission is all the more surprising, considering the inclusion of an entry for the Alcuin Club), the latter as one of American Anglicanism’s most prominent theologians. Although, as noted above, there is a new entry on ACNA, there is no entry on the Global Anglican Future Conference or Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (GAFCON). But it would be churlish, perhaps, to take the editor to task for even these omissions, when they fall in the very category which was arguably over-represented in the original edition of the *ODCC*, and to some extent subsequently.

Yet some omissions seem more significant, and potentially more serious. There is a short entry on ‘sociology of religion’, but although Max Weber merits a brief entry, there is nothing separately on Emile Durkheim, nor is there an entry for Gabriel Le Bras, whose influence on the French school of the historical sociology of religion was immense. Here the *ODCC* seems to me to fall short. There is no entry on the ‘Oxford Group’ nor on Frank Buchman, which seems a pity given potential confusion with the Oxford Movement. Likewise, a number of modern critical perspectives which have profoundly influenced theology, church history and even church policy are under-represented or missing altogether – there is no entry, for example, on postcolonialism or post-colonial theory, and no entry on ‘Orientalism’ nor on Edward Said. Nor, as I said above, is there anything on sexual abuse and the associated scandals.

Although much ground is now covered on modern Charismatic, Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, none the less there are still significant gaps. In Anglophone circles, for example, students may often encounter reference to the ‘Rapture’, the idea common in some Evangelical circles that living believers will be taken up to heaven before

the end time, but there is no entry here. There are new entries for key individuals, such as Minnie Abrams, an early Pentecostal missionary, but overall the extended coverage of Pentecostalism is still quite thin. There are no separate entries on, for example, Peter Anim, Thomas B. Barratt, Alexander Boddy, David du Plessis, James McKeown, Charles Parham and William J. Seymour, though a few of these are mentioned in the main entry on Pentecostalism. Likewise there are no entries on the Church of God of Prophecy, Elim Pentecostal Church, the International Foursquare Church and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, nor are there any on some prominent aspects of modern Pentecostalism, including 'Finished Work' Pentecostalism, the Latter Rain movement, and Oneness Pentecostalism. One could probably extend this account of remaining gaps further still. Although there have been many welcome new entries on the Oriental Orthodox churches, it is surprising not to see a separate entry on the Coptic Pope Shenouda III, who died in 2012 after a pontificate of over forty years, and was a towering figure in the shaping of Coptic Christianity in the modern Egyptian state, and in the ecumenical movement.

All these omissions, which are perhaps an inevitable consequence of the point at which compromise has had to be drawn for practical reasons (though I come back to those long entries by contrast on Geoffrey Hill and R. S. Thomas), turn our attention to the principle or test of usefulness, by which I mean the degree to which the *ODCC* is actually likely to be used by Anglophone students of the worldwide Church today. Here, despite everything I have said so far on omissions and limitations, working with this new edition over many months has convinced me that its general value remains at the highest level. Admittedly, my own reading and writing tends to fall particularly in the fields of Western and especially Anglican church history, but I am confident that students across the range of Christian studies will continue to find the *ODCC* a vital tool for their work, especially when the detailed bibliographies for the majority of entries are taken into account. Prepped to find weaknesses, it is not difficult to do so, of course. There is an entry on 'Process theology', for example, but no separate entry on A. N. Whitehead, which may be justifiable in terms of length, but is more problematic for students who may only encounter the personal name, and will almost certainly be driven to Wikipedia in consequence. It seems odd to me that there is no entry for 'magisterium', a word which theology students will encounter commonly in their reading but which is, after all, a technical term with a particular field of reference. There are entries on 'Calvin and Islam' and 'Luther and Islam', but although there is a sentence on Luther's notorious but influential views on Judaism in the long entry on 'Jews, Christian attitudes to', curiously there is no reference to this at all in the long and otherwise excellent entry on Luther himself. Thus, a student looking for a handy

summary of Luther's work and influence might miss something actually rather important for his modern reception. The entry on 'Old Catholics' is an outstanding, succinct outline of Old Catholic history and theology, but it does lack a warning that there are many small churches which take the name 'Old Catholic' and which do not actually have any direct relationship with the three main branches mentioned in the entry, leaving a reader trying to establish the background and authenticity of one of these small churches a little adrift (and there are no separate entries on such bodies as the Nordic Old Catholic Church, nor on the Union of Scranton, which established a relationship of communion between some of these groups). The entry on 'orders and ordination', apart from cross-referencing Anglican ordinations and ordinals, says very little indeed on the subject in Protestant Churches since the Reformation, and feels again therefore likely to be the beginning of a frustrating search through multiple entries for some students, though some ground is made up in the bibliography. One of the most serious 'misses', in this reviewer's opinion, is the entry on 'papacy', which is a single paragraph, and has no bibliography. Although there is an excellent entry on the 'Roman Curia', there are no additional entries on, say, 'papal primacy', or 'bishop of Rome'. In comparison with the length and fullness of many others entries, this is disappointing.

### III

Probing the limits of the scope and usefulness of this fourth version of the *ODCC*, as I have done here, is important as part of an exercise in assessing the relative success of the process of revision, but it should be kept in proportion. The vast majority of entries are a triumph of concision, and the ground covered is, as a result, breathtaking. Moreover, as has always been recognised, one of the great strengths of the dictionary is the extraordinary fullness of the bibliographies attached to around two-thirds of the entries. These have been updated along with the entries themselves, and remain a very important starting point for anyone looking to undertake a particular piece of research or reading. This strikes me as one of the sharpest points of comparison with the competition, such as it is.

So what of that competition? There is no single work of reference to which one can point as a practical substitute for the *ODCC*. It remains, overall, without parallel. The handbooks and companions published by the presses of Oxford and Cambridge naturally contain much more information and opinion, but they are pitched at an altogether different level from the *ODCC*, and a student is unlikely to turn to them for a quick, authoritative overview of a subject. The *Oxford companion to Christian thought* (2000), excellent as it is, is mainly conceptual in content, and has not been revised since it was first published. There are the useful SCM

dictionaries on various aspects of Christian thought and life, but again these have mostly not been revised recently, and anyway each covers narrower ground than the *ODCC*. There are many other examples, from other presses and from other countries, but none come anywhere near touching the success of the *ODCC*. Anglican ordinands looking to buy a useful, comprehensive reference work on the Christian Church often used to be steered towards the *ODCC*. So good is this fourth edition, despite its cost and size, that I hope that that will remain the case.

There is, however, a different possibility, and that is the ease with which online equivalents can be accessed. This is all too tempting for students and researchers today, especially when a hunch needs to be checked, a half-remembered phrase or name confirmed, or a quick impression drawn. Inevitably in this context one has to mention Wikipedia, which may be the bane of many university teachers' lives, misleading and incomplete as it often is, but which has the merit of being free and easy to access. There are other online options too, including the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia. Despite its poor reputation with academics, Wikipedia has some remarkably good entries in the field of Christian life and thought, along with some indifferent or bad ones. And it does have the great merit of near-unlimited, ever-expanding coverage. Almost all of the omissions I have identified for this edition of the *ODCC*, for example, can be rectified by turning to Wikipedia. If any free, open-access website is going to spell the end for the traditional reference book, and even the possibility of a fifth edition of the *ODCC*, it is Wikipedia, for good or ill – so much is surely obvious. In the meantime, for those with access to online subscriptions, there is also the online version of the *ODCC* itself, which if anything is an advance on the hard copy because the bibliographies have links attached which may take you directly to an online source or to the catalogue reference in your local university library.

Leaving the online version to one side, these two large volumes, cumbersome as they are, and expensive, none the less remain the outstanding reference work on the history and life of the Christian Church worldwide for Anglophone readers. The process of revision, for all its flaws, has been a triumph of organisation and editorial control. Andrew Louth has produced an edition of the *ODCC* worthy of comparison with those prepared by Frank Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone.