

Scott W. SUNQUIST, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001. xliii + 937 pp. \$75 cloth, ISBN 0-8028-3776-X.

NOTHING IS HARDER to review fairly than dictionaries and encyclopedias. The volume and range of material disallow the usual standards of critique, leaving one no choice but to forsake the forest for the trees. *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* is no exception. To hold this exquisitely produced and yet reasonably priced volume in your hands is to feel one's critical senses go numb. A decade of work culminating in 937 pages with 1,260 entries by more than 400 authors and weighing in at 2 kilos is not the sort of book you settle down with in an easy chair to read through cover to cover. I suppose that the persons whose high praise for the book is cited on the back jacket of the volume were similarly humbled and, like me, had to generalize from a very limited scrutiny of the material. If my conclusions differ from theirs, it is not because I reckon myself on solid ground, but because I measured it against my own needs.

As it happens, when I received the book I was in the process of preparing a lecture on inculturation, which has been a major issue in Asian Christianity both at the theological and practical levels for at least the past two decades, and whose history reaches back to the earliest history of the Christian mission in this part of the world. I directly flipped through to read what the *Dictionary* had to say on the topic. There was no entry. So I turned to the back of the volume to look in the index, thinking it might appear under a different name. There was no index. Then I turned to the front to see if there might be a thematic outline of the contents. There was no outline. These are not minor blemishes; they are major scars.

As I was also putting the finishing touches on a book on religious pluralism and the dialogue with Buddhism in the Asian Churches, I decided to change directions and went to the entry on “Interreligious Dialogue” in search of some historical information. What I found was a scattering of theological generalities about the topic—nothing of any use to me, and no mention of the most numerous centers and publications around Asia devoted to the dialogue. I tried my luck on “Buddhism,” where I was happy to find two columns treating relations with Christianity. My discomfort with the lack of proper qualification in the account of Buddhism as a whole, with the broad generalizations made about the nature and history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and with factual details, are a personal matter. On the whole, the main ingredients were there, but served up in such a manner that they could not be quoted as a scholarly reference. The bibliographical references were reasonable, but there were no cross-references to other entries in the *Dictionary* where one might turn for further help.

A few days later, I stumbled on “Contextualization,” where I found short allusions to ongoing interreligious dialogue in Asia and a few references to the problem of inculturation, including one new bibliographical reference that I tracked down and found useful. I am not used to flipping around references books in this manner, hoping to find what I need for want of proper indexing and cross-referencing.

The *Dictionary* deals with cross-referencing by marking with an asterisk items that have their own entries; items that are treated under another name are passed over. If it is annoying to find the names of major Asian countries marked again and again, it is more annoying not to be directed to really useful references. And then, there are words marked that do not have an entry at all (e.g., Raimundo Panikkar, 213).

My list of petty quarrels with the editorial process is too long to detail here. I mention only a few points. The English is uneven and in some cases needs serious rewriting. The order of Japanese names are jumbled up throughout; even in the same paragraph we see family names followed by personal names, and then vice-versa (104). The principles for selection of living persons are not given but there seems to be a fair degree of arbitrariness at work. The treatment of associations and religious groups is equally arbitrary. The Indonesian Bishops’ Conference is given its own article, whereas those for Korea, Japan, and other countries are not. Opus Dei takes up a full two columns (without a hint of any suspicion about the group), while the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are only listed in the more critical article on “Cults.” The same article includes half a column on the Unification Church, even though that group is also given its own one-column entry. Perhaps the most serious editorial choice of all is that much of the material on Japan was simply lifted from the 1988 *Historical Dictionary of Christianity in Japan* (which I assume to be a translation of 『日本キリスト教歴史大事典』, whose editor is *not* Ebisawa Arimichi, and whose date of publication was omitted in the front material). And so on, and so on.

Among the gems I happened across is the essay on “Minjung Theology”:

balanced, informative, and academically solid. No doubt there are more like it that slipped my notice. On the basis of what I have read, however, my overall impression is that the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* is not a tool sharpened to the needs of the workaday academic. As for whether it will serve as a “basic reference to help students” (xxi), only much more time and attention than I have been able to give to it will tell.

**James W. Heisig**

*Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*