

John BOWKER, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 1111 pp. 30 pounds (UK) ISBN 0-19-213965-7.

THE *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* is a comprehensive and balanced work of over 13,000 entries that covers the world's major religions and philosophies, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. There are many articles on various "primitive" religions, including an excellent piece on "Voodoo." There are also a considerable number of articles on important nonreligious figures, such as Chiang Kai-shek and David Ben Gurion, concerning their influence on religious life in their respective nations.

There is excellent coverage of the religious traditions of Asia. Entries on Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Korean religion and philosophy are comprehensive, clearly written, and of a level that will satisfy the general needs of both the scholar and layman. There are, however, some surprising omissions. There is, for example, virtually no mention of the Legalist school in China and its chief writers, Han Fei Tzu and Li Ssu. There is likewise little mention of the religious traditions of such important states as Vietnam and Thailand.

The entries on traditional Japanese religion are in general quite good. The lengthy article on "Japanese religion" provides a comprehensive overview of the complex development of religious life in Japan, but is noticeably weak in its characterization of postwar religious history. Indeed, the bibliography for this article lists only one post-1975 work and ignores more recent scholarship by leading scholars in the field such as Ian Reader. There is a piece on "New Religions in Japan," but the information is dated. The coverage of "new" religious activity after World War II is quite good. However, there is virtually no mention of the so-called "new New Religions" (*shin-shin shūkyō*) of the 1980s and 1990s, although some additional information is available in the next entry, "New religious movements."

Articles on specific aspects or leading figures in Japanese religious history fare much better. The full one-and-a-half-page piece on Shinto presents a clear statement concerning the religion's basic characteristics, its influence on Japanese culture, and its very diverse history. Supporting articles such as

“Sect Shinto” provide important supplementary information. The full-page “Nichiren” article presents a superb and detailed portrait of the religious leader and his teachings, while the piece on “Nichiren Shōshū” is an excellent analysis of the history and doctrines of this controversial sect. There are also excellent in-depth articles on such Japanese religious figures as Kūkai and Saichō.

There are some faults, however, with articles focusing on Japan’s New Religions. The “Sōka Gakkai” entry, for example, mentions only two works on the Gakkai written in the late 1960s and ignores James White’s classic, *The Sōkagakkai and Mass Society* and other books written on the movement since 1970. There is little mention of Sōka Gakkai’s religious philosophy and nothing about its historic break in the early 1990s with Nichiren Shōshū. The pieces on “Reiyūkai” and “Risshō Kōsei Kai” are weak on the organizations’ history and have outdated bibliographies, but give good overviews of their doctrines. On the other hand, the entry on Aum Shinrikyō is quite good considering its very recent rise to public notoriety.

The main strength of *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* is its coverage of traditional religion and philosophy. It is less helpful concerning current religions, as articles on Japan’s “New Religions” and Sōka Gakkai might suggest. Nevertheless, the *Dictionary* would be a worthy addition to the collection of every student and scholar of religion.

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