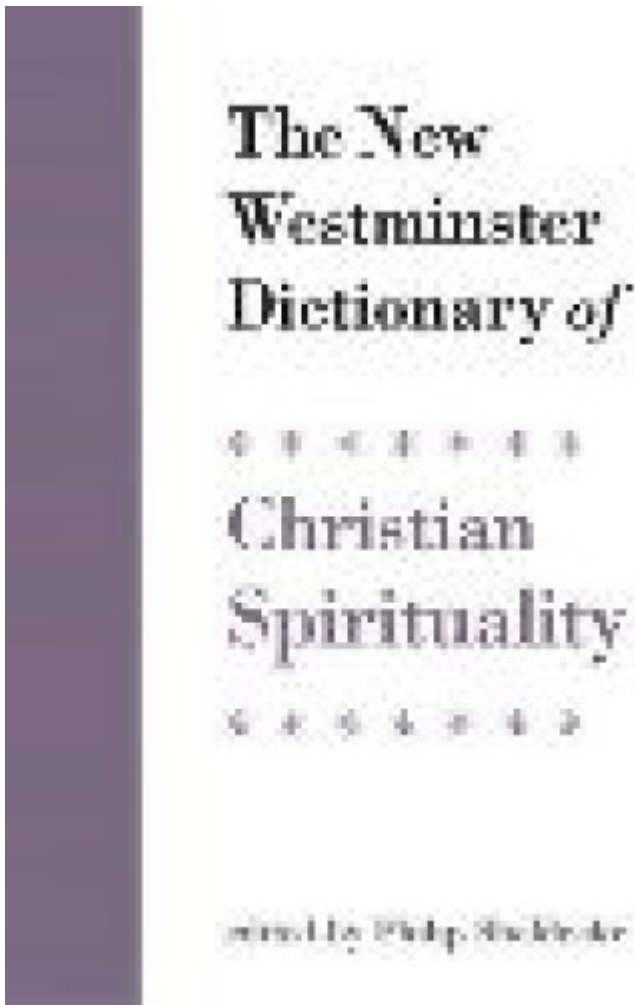


The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality

Philip Sheldrake, ed.

Westminster John Knox

Gordon Wakefield, the editor of this volume's 1983 predecessor, began his introduction with the observation that the word *spirituality* is "very much in vogue among Christians of our time." What a difference a quarter century makes: the interest in spirituality has extended even farther, and in every imaginable direction.

It would not have been possible to adequately address such tremendous and, in many ways, intriguing growth with a cautious, incremental revision of a standard guide such as the Westminster (or, in the UK, SCM) dictionary, so it is heartening to see that editor Philip Sheldrake, of the University of Durham, has taken a bold approach. This new version is about 300 pages longer, includes more than 200 new entries, and brings even more contributors into the project—upward of 180.

Other changes are every bit as welcome. Sheldrake defines *Christian spirituality* as "the ways in which the particularities of Christian beliefs about God, the material world, and human identity find expression in basic values, lifestyles, and spiritual practices." Recognizing the need to outline the content and method of the current study, he has included more than a dozen introductory essays in the first 79 pages (one, by Bernard McGinn, is on mysticism). These provide a foundation and framework for the shorter, A-Z entries that make up the bulk of the book. Sheldrake notes that the limits for what can be considered spirituality have expanded in recent decades, and he places increased emphasis on material culture, ethics and the arts as expressions of spirituality.

Although the new edition is broader in scope in some ways, it is narrower in other ways. For example, biographical entries on individuals have been dispensed with (though the index of names and titles makes it possible to find related information by other means), while more space is given to themes and movements.

The editor accepts that the primary readership of the dictionary will be in the English-speaking world, and the length and distribution of entries reflects this. So, for example, "Daoism and Christianity" gets a shorter entry than "Scottish Spirituality." Most entries are of intermediate length—somewhere between those in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* and those in a multivolume historical or theological dictionary. Sheldrake achieves a commendable balance between topics of more recent emergence and those that have long been at the core of understandings of Christian spirituality, and in every case the discussions are up-to-date and provide bibliographic resources for further study.

This fine revision has taken the measure of a burgeoning field of interest and, instead of surrendering to its built-in unwieldiness, has provided a guide that is both intelligent and balanced for readers of almost every level. The study of Christian spirituality will be greatly enhanced by its availability.