
Pro Rege

Volume 29 | Number 4


Article 3

June 2001

Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America (Book Review)

Paul Otto
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Otto, Paul (2001) "Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 29: No. 4, 28 - 29.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol29/iss4/3

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America. General Editor, D. G. Hart. Consulting Editor, Mark A. Noll. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1999). Xxix, 286 pages. Reviewed by Paul Otto, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

Reviewing the *Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America* is a special task for me because my religious background reflects a kind of Presbyterian and Reformed ecumenism. My mother was raised a Baptist, my father a Lutheran, and when they married, they compromised by becoming Presbyterians. As a result, I have grown up in and attended a variety of Presbyterian and Reformed churches (both mainline and conservative), was educated in a Christian Schools International middle and high school, and attended and now teach at Dordt College, a decidedly neo-Calvinist school. My study of history has taught me about religious developments in the United States, including those of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, and my research in early modern Dutch colonization has made me familiar with Dutch reformed thought and practice and its transplantation from the Netherlands to North America. In short, my experience has embodied the diverse Presbyterian and Reformed experience in modern America.

Thus, when the opportunity to review the *Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America* came along, I was eager to do so. According to its cover, the book promises to offer insight on a wide range of lay and ordained leaders, beliefs and practices, denominations and institutions, and historical developments. In their introduction, the editors write that this book is about more than just Calvinists on their knees: "it is about Calvinists on their feet, at repose, at work, at play and in worship" (xiv). In fact, this volume offers a lot. Most influential figures in Reformed and Presbyterian circles can be found here. Other well-known figures who were Presbyterians are also included, such as Elias Boudinot, Thomas Jonathan ("Stonewall") Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, and John Foster Dulles. The reasons such figures are included relates to the volume's strongest aspect—its broad historical approach. Most entries are treated historically, providing context and relating the subject to broader historical developments. In fact, the editors demonstrate this commitment in their preface: "the primary method of assessing the Reformed tradition in this work is historical" (viii). The addition of the individuals named above reflects the editors' intentions of making these broad historical connections and showing that the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition was not an isolated and removed religious practice, but one that intersected, at various points, with mainstream American society.

The best example of this historical approach can be found in the variety of thematic entries found in this volume, including "Presbyterians and the American Revolution," "... Capitalism," "... Science," and "... Social Reform," among many others. The entry on the American Revolution, written by editor Mark Noll, serves as a good example of an entry that demonstrates the prominence of Presbyterians in American history. Noll points

out their role in many ways: a religious and political outlook that tended towards revolutionary thought, their significant participation in writing state constitutions and serving in the military, and the promotion of the war effort made by several ministers from the pulpit. On the other hand, many Presbyterians remained loyalists for reasons unique to their religious and cultural background.

But as much breadth as these thematic entries offer, the dictionary remains oddly narrow on many counts. While most of the major denominations receive separate consideration, others—either denominations, small federations of congregations, or immigrant congregations—are mentioned only in relation to these or not at all. These include the American Presbyterian Church, the Free Church of Scotland, the Free Presbyterian Church, the Église Réformée du Québec, the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Reformed Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church (General Assembly), the Reformation Presbyterian Church, the United Reformed Churches in North America, and the Upper Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The list of individuals includes primarily ministers, theologians, and missionaries with a few others, but prominent names such as Joseph Bayly, Hendrickus Berkhof (influence of), G. C. Berkouwer (influence of), Edwin H. Palmer, Alvin Plantinga, H. Evan Runner, Roussas J. Rushdooney, Paul Schrottenboer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Bernard Zylstra are left out. While the range of thematic topics is quite broad, the volume could benefit from additions on abortion, Native Americans, and women. Among general topics, there are entries on the American Council of Christian Churches and the World Alliance of Churches, but no references to the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council or the International Council of Reformed Churches. Most of the reformed confessions all have individual entries, but there are no headings for the Three Forms of Unity or the Canons of Dordrecht. Important historical developments and turning points can be found, including the Adopting Act (1729), the Auburn Affirmation (1924), the Auburn Declaration, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, neo-orthodoxy, the New Measures, the Plan of Union, and the Portland Deliverance (1892), but where is the Half-Way Covenant and Keswick movement? And while some important theological principles are explained under the headings Arminianism, Calvinism, covenant theology, election, and predestination, one will not find the regulative principle, Biblical inerrancy or infallibility, presumptive regeneration, federal theology, double predestination, and theonomy or reconstruction.

Many, but not all of these, are mentioned in other entries, or they are discussed in the introduction to the volume. However, if one was to use this dictionary strictly as a reference tool (what one assumes of a volume calling itself a dictionary), one would

be hard-pressed to find many of these entries at all, or would have to search out several entries before finding the definitions for some of these terms. This could have been remedied by including an index or a more complete cross-referencing system to assist the uninformed. Many theological, worship, and polity principles are alluded to in various entries, but they are not fully explained even there.

The weaknesses are not simply organizational. Many of the omissions seem related to the editors' overall understanding of what the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition includes and does not include. As I noted before, the editors claim that this dictionary "is about Calvinists on their feet, at repose, at work, at play and in worship" (xiv). They also claim an effort "to do full justice to the pluriformity of the Reformed tradition in North America" (vii). Yet they also state that "our first decision was to highlight individuals and communions while neglecting institutions. Though schools, publications, seminaries and parachurch agencies have been very influential, we believe the lives of individuals and the histories of churches offer a better barometer for reading what it means to be Reformed than do the activities of religious organizations" (viii).

Omitting discussions of institutions such as colleges and seminaries and identifying them as "religious organizations" ignores a significant component of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition while placing the editors in a different branch. Many Reformed and Presbyterian individuals, as Calvinists, have expanded their vision of what it means to be a Christian. One movement "neo-Calvinism" gets some coverage (for example, entries on Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd), but it is largely ignored because of the editors' apparently more narrow view, which defines Reformed or Presbyterian in largely ecclesiastical terms. For example, there is no recognition in this volume of the Christian day-school movement (including such institutions as Christian Schools

International), or its related higher education equivalent in the founding of such schools as Calvin, Dordt, Kings, Redeemer, and Trinity Christian Colleges, or the Institute for Christian Studies. Another significant area of Calvinist involvement largely excluded from this book is politics and labor. In Canada, Neo-Calvinists have created a Christian labor union. Both Canadians and Americans have developed political organizations, such as the Center for Public Justice. The Presbyterian and Reformed tradition has also given rise to a significant and active publishing industry, perhaps most notably the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, but neither the founder nor the publishing house is included in the volume. Finally, the editors have largely excluded scholars and academicians (other than theologians) as somehow not reflecting the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition (an ironic twist given the very scholarly emphasis of the work).

In retrospect, while I found much of value in this book, I kept asking myself how the editors defined the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition and where I and my own experience fit in it. Growing up and being involved in a variety of reformed institutions, I found that my experience is only partly reflected by this volume, and therefore the volume is incomplete. While such an analysis is obviously subjective, it should be clear from the examples I have provided here that much is missing which could be included in the work. Other examples could be added. As a thorough-going reference tool on Calvinists in North America, the volume remains lacking. I still value the volume, but my own knowledge and experience make it more accessible to me than other readers. Those on the periphery of the tradition or within the tradition but less familiar with its history than I am may not find the answers to their questions on a number of the topics that form a part of the rich and varied Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in America.

The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning, by David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000). xv + 233 pages, paperback, \$15.00 [U.K.£9.99]. Reviewed by John Struyk, Emeritus Professor of Foreign Languages.

Very few (Christian) colleges require the study of a foreign language as an integral part of the general education curriculum. In *The Gift of the Stranger*, Carvill and Smith demonstrate that the study of a foreign language can help the student grow in her preparation for useful Kingdom citizenship. The book is divided into three sections that are entitled "Background, setting the stage," "Aims, embracing the stranger," and "Practice, implications for the classroom." Its basic tenet is that the study of a foreign language has the potential to make one a better host or guest to the speakers of that language, to those who can be considered strangers.

This goal is developed in contrast with other goals in the chapter "For Profit, Pleasure, and Power?" Smith works with three questions for determining the motives for foreign language education: 1) What kind of person should the student become?

2) What kind of relationship with the members of the target language is presumed? 3) Is the speaker of the target language viewed as an image bearer of God, "one who hopes, thinks, suffers, trusts, and weeps, and whose sighs and laughter are just as audible to God as our own?" (107). In other words, one should not study a foreign language merely for economic motivations, nor only for persuasive reasons (although telling others about the truth of the Gospel is a very good reason for studying a foreign language). Seeking inner enrichment or an emotional and cultural high is another inappropriate central motive for studying a foreign language. Most foreign language textbooks consider students as prospective tourists, which is one reason why the texts very often emphasize the ordering of food, a room, and a ticket, as well as asking directions (what the foreign language profession often refers to as culture with a small "c",