In this significant expansion of their 1990 dictionary of theology, O’Collins and Farrugia continue their service to students of theology. A wonderful collection of theological phrases, movements, heresies and liturgical terminology are each explained in a single paragraph. While the authors aim to avoid ‘jargon’, this is not always possible. In most cases, however, a word or phrase that may be unfamiliar to a reader more than likely has its own entry and can also be looked up.

The word ‘authors’ must be used quite deliberately with regard to O’Collins and Farrugia, for, unlike the situation with most dictionaries of this sort, they have not simply edited the contributions of other scholars. Instead, the authors have painstakingly worked through each entry, researching the nuances of various topics and seeking the best way to explain often difficult or obscure concepts to the uninitiated. The great advantage of this approach is an evenness of style and consistency in quality and accuracy of entries that other dictionaries often lack.

In order to keep the dictionary truly concise, the authors have chosen not to treat any theologians, saints or other historical figures. Other reference works exist that treat these topics quite thoroughly. Yet many famous figures in the history of Christian thought have had such influence that their names will inevitably appear in connection with ideas associated with their work. Hence the authors have added in this latest edition a handy index of names that will allow the reader willing to do a bit of detective work to learn a great deal about a theologian, heretic or saint previously unknown to them.

When readers pick of a dictionary of theology by two Jesuits, they may be forgiven for assuming that this is going to be a volume that is of use primarily for Roman Catholic readers. This, however, is far from the case. While a number of entries explain concepts and traditions of special interest to Roman Catholics, there are also many entries that treat events and ideas generally associated with Protestantism, such as ‘evangelical’, ‘Lutheranism’, ‘Liberal Protestantism’ and ‘Pentecostals’. All entries specific to a certain tradition within Christendom, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox, are written so as to be accessible to those outside that particular tradition. The absence of polemics is especially appreciated in a work of this nature. Whatever the authors may think of a particular movement or theological concept, their language gives little hint of any implied valuation of their subject matter.

Many of the entries are quite general and may be familiar to most readers, such as ‘image of God’, ‘person’ ‘the Devil’, ‘secularism,’ etc. Yet even these often contain fresh language and nuances that will be of benefit even to the reader already familiar with the concept. At the other end of the spectrum there is also no shortage of concepts and terms that even more studied theologians will find new. For instance, this reviewer regrettably admits to no previous knowledge of the ‘Pentecostarion’ (a book of liturgical propers used in the Byzantine liturgy), ‘Parrhesia’ (the Greek word for boldness in speaking), the ‘Octoechos’ (another liturgical book of the Greek church), ‘Josephinism’ (an attempt by the state to control church affairs),
‘Acoemetae’ (the name for monks who sought to pray without ceasing), and
‘Viaticum’ (the Latin term for the holy communion given to those facing death).

There is no doubt that even the seasoned reader of theological literature will find
some new concepts in this little dictionary. Yet the main value of the work is clearly
as a resource for the new or struggling student of theology, who is often hindered in
his or her reading by unfamiliar words and phrases. At just over 300 pages, this
dictionary is a welcome and easy-to-use addition to the library of any budding student
of theology — Catholic or Protestant. It is also useful for teachers of theology looking
for some creative and fresh ways to describe familiar concepts.