In 1993, the so-called Christian Philosophers Group, meeting biannually in Pembroke College, Oxford, decided to become a registered charity under British Law and to change its name into ‘British Society for Philosophy of Religion.’ The idea behind the change of name of this group was, that not only Christians engage in the philosophy of religion, and that those who are not Christians but are interested in the philosophy of religion should know that they are welcome in the Society. What this story shows, is that philosophy of religion and Christian philosophy are closely connected, and that in practice it is often difficult to distinguish between them. That is confirmed by the fact that the main American society in the field of philosophy of religion is the Society of Christian Philosophers, which publishes one of the main journals in the philosophy of religion: Faith and Philosophy. One would expect, therefore, that when in one series two reference volumes appear, one on the philosophy of religion and the other on Christian philosophy, the editors of both volumes explain how these are complementary, not rivals. In the philosophy A–Z series Patrick Quinn published a Philosophy of Religion A–Z volume, while Daniel J. Hill and Randal D. Hauser now publish a Christian Philosophy A–Z volume. Hill & Rauser, however, in no way attempt to make a proper distinction between the philosophy of religion and Christian philosophy. Their three-page introduction draws attention to the revival of Christian philosophy, mentions the names of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Brian Leftow and Paul Helm, but does not discuss the question how to distinguish Christian philosophy from philosophy of religion. The selection criteria mentioned in the Introduction make that omission even more strongly felt, since they make clear that not only Christian philosophy has been included: ‘We have included particular terms, movements, theories and individuals based on two criteria: either they put forward a distinctively Christian philosophy or they suggest a distinctively Christian reply’ (10–11). To make matters even more complex, ‘Christian philosophy’ itself is not a lemma that is included in this book. ‘Philosophy of religion’ is, but that is defined most unfortunately as ‘the philosophical analysis of the claims of religion, particularly the claim that there is a God’ (160). This limitation of the philosophy of religion to claims, that is to say to propositions, goes against the common understanding of the subject. As it is most commonly understood, the philosophy of religion also includes, e.g., the questions of the nature and essence of religion and the analysis...
of religious experience.

I have used this new work of reference for several weeks, and looked in vain for a number of entries: absolute, act/potency, apophatic/kataphatic, contingency, Dawkins, Richard (who should have been included as one of those who ‘suggest a distinctively Christian reply’ (xi), methodological naturalism, philosophical theology.

One question that must always be discussed in reviews of books like this, is the question whether there are any rivals for the book under review. Apart from Philosophy of Religion A–Z I know of four such rivals: Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints & James K.A. Smith, 101 Key Terms in Philosophy and their Importance for Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), C. Stephan Evans, Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion (Downers Grove, Ill 2002) and Anthony C. Thiselton, A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion (Oxford 2002). The books by Clark a.o. and Evans have a smaller scope and less scholarly pretensions, so we will leave them out of consideration. The book by Thiselton is about twice the size of Hill/Hauser, and in many respects to be preferred. The quality of Thiselton’s definitions is generally much higher, and he includes a number of philosophers that are not included by Hill/Hauser: pseudo-Donysius, Albert the Great, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others. One would expect the just-mentioned philosophers in Hill/Hauser rather than in Thiselton, since they are Christian philosophers but not philosophers of religion: Philosophy of religion emerged only in modern times. It goes without saying that Thiselton includes more Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist philosophers. There is one respect in which Hill/Hauser is superior, however: It includes many more of the contemporary Christian philosophers: William P. Alston, Marilyn McCord Adams, Robert Merrihew Adams, Cornelius van Til, Merold Westphal. This feature gives the user of this dictionary clue to where its authors stand: They very much sympathise with the US Society of Christian philosophers. That can be seen in many ways. Their entry on theodicy, for example, provides a definition of the concept and, subsequently, Plantinga’s distinction between theodicy and defence; it ignores that theodicy is a term introduced by Leibniz, that it is used to indicate a typically modern approach to the problem of God and evil, and that this approach has been severely criticised by Terrence Tilley and others. This is the type of information that is provided by Thiselton.

Philosophy of Religion A–Z had the same size as Christian Philosophy A–Z. Like Thiselton, it does not include the contemporary Christian philosophers mentioned above. It provides useful information on a number of religious and theological terms that may be less well-known to philosophers: e.g., Bible, Jesus, Job, Judaism, Lucifer, Papacy, parables, priesthood, shamanism and witchcraft. Its orientation is more towards the Roman Catholic world, less towards the American protestant Christian philosophers. The quality of the entries is generally somewhat less than that in Hill/Hauser; still, I cannot see how, in the absence of a clear demarcation between Christian philosophy and philosophy of religion, the new volume by Hill and Rauser, can be a necessary addition to the same series.

Finally, let’s substantiate this judgment by checking five central lemma’s in

Those who own the Encyclopedia by Thiselton will hardly want to buy Hill/Rauser; those who own Quinn but not the others do best to buy the book by Thiselton. University libraries, of course, should own all three of them.