Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • December 1992• Number 19

Writing Christian History

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The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity. Edited by John McManners. *Oxford University Press. 724 pp. $45 cloth.*

This is a handsome book, and a weighty one, too, at over seven hundred glossy pages. But was it necessary? Should the general reader trouble himself to know the history of the church?

The answer is, that without a grasp of the history of the Christian church, no thoughtful person can hope to understand the spiritual, moral–even the geopolitical–world in which he lives. The reasons for this are at least two. First, the church was the dynamic force transforming the classical world from Roman Empire to Christendom, just as the church's dismemberment dynamically transformed Europe in the sixteenth century. Second, Christianity continues to manifest a dynamic vitality in appearing, renewed and changed, in various parts of the world, where it may again be the agent of change–as it was in Eastern Europe in 1989.

Since, then, a knowledge of at least the outline of Christian history is essential, every personal library should have at least a one–or two–volume history of Christianity. Whether the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* is the most useful treatment to own and read is a matter that will depend upon the predilections, patience, and tolerance of the reader.

John McManners, a historian, has assembled eighteen other professional historians to write the chapters of this book. All but two are English, and the majority–ten–write from Oxbridge, where many of the chairs are still under ecclesiastical (Anglican) control. Three are themselves ecclesiastical officials, two being no less than bishops.

The editor has aimed, he tells us, to avoid partisan or confessional opinions. As he writes in the Introduction, "The writers of the various chapters of this book belong to the confraternity of professional historians of the 'scientific' kind; whatever as individuals they believe about human destiny, whatever spiritual contacts they expect or do not expect in their own lives, they write, within their lights, impartially, with detachment from their convictions." And later: "A religion is a social institution and, as such, a routine subject for analysis. . . . Both Christianity and the church are the subject of the historian's investiga–tions." This means that the reader can be assured that the book is pure of sectarian or theological contamination as it follows the by–now quaint–sounding criteria of a history objective and scientific. Perhaps the traditional allegiance of the authors (many of whom are practicing Christians of one stripe or another) operating under the strictures of secularist history accounts for the cautious sound of McManners' Introduction as well as the conservative structure of the book–for despite its eschewal of "private" beliefs, the book for the most part still adheres to the ecclesiastical version of the history of "great men." It describes the actions of notable leaders and thinkers, although it occasionally chronicles popular Christian religiosity or opinion where the historical sources are available.

The book is divided into three sections. The first proceeds chronologically, giving an account of Christianity's growth from earliest times to 1800. The second discusses the church in particular areas of the world from 1800–1990. The third, interestingly, departs from McManners' cautious viewpoint and *does* try to assign meaning to the history of Christianity. This section, "Christianity Today and Tomorrow," contains four essays on belief, community, moral theology and social ethics, and the future of Christianity. Here the book moves beyond history to theology, journalism, and, finally, to prophecy. Indeed, in this final section the essays are openly opinionated: Maurice Wiles expresses theological preferences and Bryan Wilson, despite his sociological approach, editorializes about "genuine community."

The book has many attractive passages, and whole chapters are occasionally distinguished for comprehensiveness or freshness of approach. Henry Mayr–Harting's chapter on the "age of conversion" in the West (the former "Dark Ages") is particularly clear and well–stated, and Jeremy Jons' essay, "Christianity and Islam," is a useful orientation to the theological challenge of Islam as well as to the more familiar political and military threats of Muslims to the late–antique and medieval West. McManners' own contribution, the chapter on the Enlightenment, is particularly good, arguing that Christians of the period (1600–1800) continued the efforts of the Reformation to make religion sink in–to render it less a formal, social obligation and more a spiritual and personal reality. Another fascinating chapter is

Frederick Pike's on Latin America since 1800, wherein the suggestion is offered that liberation theology's "ahistorical" character comes from its Neoplatonist strain–ironically, one of the most radically transcendental philosophies available as a basis for religious life and theology.

The *Illustrated History*, so its jacket proclaims, is the "uniquely authoritative history . . . for the general reader." And certainly, the book appeals to the hand and eye of a reader looking for an easily digestible meal of ecclesiastical history. The editor has, as a rule, not let more than two pages pass without an illustration and accompanying caption. The pages are glossy and restful white space abounds, surrounding the smoothly written text. The authors of individual chapters are seasoned scholars whose prose has been edited into a mellow whole.

Like another well–intentioned volume of church history, *The Christian World* (1982), this is the *National Geographic* version of church history, or, to follow the culinary metaphor, the *Gourmet* magazine edition of it. It is sweet or savory, nouvelle or ethnic, depending on the chapter, but served up, above all, to appeal–not to burden or, unfortunately, nourish. Missing are troublesome discussions of primary documents and their significance, of contested interpretations of events (or of interpretive theories themselves), or of the book's predecessors in the long and illustrious genre of ecclesiastical history.

This volume, like others in the Oxford Illustrated series, is a kind of denouement of church history, just as the volume on the classics represents a popularized handbook of classical studies for those without firsthand acquaintance with the discipline. These books give the appearance of learning, and the satiated feeling of a meal, without actually forcing the reader to suffer through preparation, cooking, and chewing.

That aside, the present volume cannot be considered a really comprehensive reference book: it is uneven in its coverage of the great personages, events, and documents of the history of the church and selective in its attention to popular Christianity. At the same time, it is not basic enough to be a reliable introduction to the field and to the body of knowledge that is church history or the history of Christianity.

Some readers, though, may be encouraged by the *Illustrated History* to look once more at, listen harder to, and ponder the meaning of the men, women, and events that have made our own religious world.

II

The pattern of interaction between the history of the church and secular history took shape in the early fourth century. When the later Roman Empire, from Constantine in the early fourth century to Justinian in the mid–sixth, learned to live in institutions formed by, if not always true to, the Christian vision, the population of Europe and parts of Asia were fated to become in degrees Christian too. Once Christianity ceased to be a sometimes–persecuted, illicit religion, and by degrees became the state religion of the Empire, the religions of "Hollones" (pagans) and Jews became, increasingly, tolerated but private affairs (as that of the Christians would later be in Muslim lands). Now culture and civilization centered around Christ and his church; literature, political ideals, mores, and innermost imagination were transmogrified, not uniformly and transculturally but according to how individual cultures–whether of Armenia, or Nubis, or Kievan Rus'–already had expressed themselves in their pre–Christian past.

Such are the more obvious reasons for a knowledge of Christian history: the history of the West, considered *in toto* or by region, is incomprehensible without it. Any tourist in any European city knows this. Yet there is another reason for learning the history of the church, which is that Christianity is itself a religion in which history has its own profound meaning as an expression of supernatural purpose. Christopher Dawson wrote that "Christianity transfers the meaning of history from the outer world of historic events to the inner world of spiritual change . . . [with] the latter . . . conceived as the dynamic element in history and as a real world–transforming power." History, on this classical Christian view, has meaning that is veiled, yet may partially yield to prudent investigation.

Partisanship has always been part of the writing of church history. In this, as in other disciplines, critical scholarship and authorial ability have coexisted with the partisan viewpoint. Church historians have often been apologists, more or less frankly. Yet their works also serve a higher, if less well proclaimed, function: they explain religious change on a massive scale, change in what it has now (following the French) become fashionable to call *mentalitea*. Early church historians beginning with Eusebius, that revisionist of ecclesiastical history for the court of Constantine, wrote in opposition to their pagan counterparts to describe the rise of Christianity as the proof of God's providence, and to demolish the pagan notion of fate as controlling historical events. Presumably such an approach had the effect not only of controverting pagan arguments against Christianity, but also of combatting the long–lasting attachment among Christian converts to astral determinism and magic–a form of belief that appears repeatedly in the use of Christian amulets and charms on the popular level.

Not long after the beginnings of Christian historical writing, ecclesiastical history also began to serve the purpose of justifying sectarian differences. In the early fifth century, the Arian Philostorgius wrote a history of the church to justify the viewpoint of a group that, in the mid–fourth century, looked like it might come to dominate Christian theology. Similarly, the fifth–and sixth–century historians Cosmas Indicopleustes (a Nestorian), Zacharias Rhetor and

John of Ephesus (Monophysites), and Evagrius Scholasticus (a Chalcedonian) all wrote their histories in part to justify the views of their particular movements, and in the process collected documents attesting to the foundation of those movements as separate churches sprung from the Great Church of the fourth century.

At the same time, church histories also lent themselves to fuller theological expressions. An apposite comparison could be made between the seven turgid books of the *Historia adversus paganos* (417) of Orosius–a universal history ending with the triumph of the church over the pagan empire–and the magnificent *City of God* of Augustine. In the latter work, Augustine attempted to put forward not just a controversialist view to refute pagan charges that the conversion of the Empire had led to its downfall, but a philosophy and theology of history. In it he traced the interwoven, but differently destined, tales of two cities, the City of God and City of Man, in order to refute not only pagan charges against the church but also that naive Christian optimism which held that the visible church was to be identified with the kingdom of heaven. Augustine's work, however, is unique in the early history of ecclesiastical history. Far more prevalent was the viewpoint, expressed in the Latin West as well as the Greek East, that the history of the kingdom of God was to be identified with the history of the Christian *imperium* or *basileia*. The nation and the church, in these church histories, melded into a two–sided whole in which God's handiwork was visible and identifiable.

This viewpoint dominated the works of medieval church historians, East and West, with the interesting exceptions of those churches which had separated themselves from Byzantium, or had been separated from it by force of Muslim arms. It was God's work, according to Bede (d. 735), to have brought the English peoples into the church of Christ–rather, the church of Rome–and Gregory of Tours (d. 594) took a similar position with regard to the Franks. Interestingly, the early medieval kingdoms of the West had largely abandoned universal histories in their accounts of the history of the church; these were largely local stories of bishops, petty kings, and princes, with varying degrees of awareness of events in churches outside the ethnic domains.

In the East it was different. Despite the Byzantine church's steadily shrinking size throughout the medieval period, its historians continued to take a cosmic point of view, regarding the patriarch of Constantinople as the center of the Christian world and the Byzantine Emperor as God's earthly viceroy. Here they were following a precedent established long ago by Eusebius (sometimes even labelled the "Eusebian" view of church history) and reaffirmed by the Emperor Justinian himself. Farther to the east, of course, church historians rejected the imperialist interpretation of church history because they felt that their churches had been betrayed by imperial decrees and by "ecumenical" councils sponsored by "heretical" emperors. Thus Armenian Christian historians wrote the history of the church from a national point of view, with the special task of writing their histories to flatter one or another leading feudal family, and Syriac–speaking church historians, if they were Monophysites, wrote from the point of view that Chalcedon and the Byzantine church were a catastrophe (or, if they were Nestorians, from the view that the Byzantine church had no jurisdiction in non–Roman realms).

Although the writing of ecclesiastical history continued in the later medieval period, it was a comparatively minor and regional literature. Not until the rise of Renaissance humanism and the disruption of the reforming movements did church history once again become an important way of understanding the changes that had come about in a once–familiar religious world. The landscape at the end of the sixteenth century was at once familiar and completely altered by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (i.e., the religion of the realm follows the religion of its ruler). The church was still marked by regional characteristics, but no longer was it led by the Bishop of Rome, and no longer were religious practices and beliefs similar from one part of Europe to another. Although sudden changes had sundered the reforming churches from the Catholic Church, it remained for historians to perform again the task of explaining and justifying religious change.

The most famous cases of such massive church–historical undertakings are the Lutheran Centuriators, authors of the *Magdeburg Centuries*, and the Catholic Caesar Cardinal Baronius, who wrote his twelve–volume *Annales Ecclesiastici* at the instance of St. Philip Neri in order to refute the *Centuries*. The Centuriators, six historians led by Mathias Flacius Illyricus, produced both an apology for Lutheranism and the changes it had set in motion among Christians and a condemnation of the Roman church as corrupt, even Satanic. Baronius labored from 1568 to 1607 to produce his *Annales* as a rejoinder, and even so did not get farther chronologically than the end of the twelfth century. Both works were composed as official church histories, that is, to identify the true church and expose her enemies as false claimants to the title. Each took the view, hallowed since Eusebius, that the primitive apostolic church had preserved whole the intentions of Jesus–who had himself warned of the divisions that would ensue when heresy would penetrate and corrupt. Yet later impostors had corrupted the church; the major difference of opinion between Lutherans and Catholics was as to their identity and the date of their corruptions. Thus the sixteenth–century church historians maintained the view of their patristic and medieval predecessors. But they also, unwittingly, set the agenda for church historians up through World War II and, arguably, the decade of the 1960s.

Unbeknownst to Illyricus and Baronius, they were not writing histories of the universal church–they were writing denominational church histories. With the proliferation of churches and sects following the Reformation and its divisions, each church needed its accompanying historical justification as well as–somewhat more innocently–certain special information that would be of less interest to nonmembers of that particular church. Now it was not the national or ethnic church histories of the medieval period but denominational church history that was the dominant genre. And although they adopted the critical–historical approaches developed after the eighteenth century, following von Ranke, Mohler, and Semler, ecclesiastical historians tended to cultivate their own gardens.

This approach is familiar to anyone who has taught church history in a denominational institution, and is familiarly called the "railroad train" method. Among Catholics, it has been common to chronicle the development of the church in part by noting, at specific dates, which group disembarked at this or that stop–never to be seen or heard from again. Thus the Monophysites disappeared after 451, the Greeks after 1054 (though they pop up again at the Council of Florence), the Lutherans (after considerable annoyance) after 1530, the Old Catholics after Vatican I, and so forth. Anglicans, Lutherans, Mennonites–all have had their own versions of the train, with disembarking passengers varying accordingly.

III

Ecclesiastical history is still taught in some places in this way, but it is not very often written in this way. The isolated and self–confident denominational church historian has been replaced, or will soon be replaced, almost universally by a figure of a different sort. Beginning in nondenominational or public institutions, and influenced by changes in the historical craft more generally, church history has almost entirely given way to the history of Christianity. No longer does the subject have to be, verifiably, the True Church; the history of Christianity may deal with any and all individuals or groups calling themselves Christian. No longer does the historian assume that the hand of God has specially guided his own denomination, whether embattled or triumphant; in fact, God's hand has become a fainter and fainter presence over the past 150 years of ecclesiastical history–writing. If the historian discerns God's hand, he had better do so quietly. Instead, questions of providence, authentic development, and orthodoxy have been bracketed, for the most part, or ceded to denominational polemicists. The historian of Christianity often cultivates a small and specialized field, well aware of developments in nonreligious history, and eschews the assignment of divine praise or blame as obscurantism, at best. This task it leaves for ecclesiastical triumphalists–and thus the remarks of McManners cited earlier.

This new form of the genre, although it is less accessible, and sloppier, then the old–fashioned church history descended from Illyricus and Baronius, has the virtue of displaying wider coverage. Descending sometimes to the faddish, it has spawned sub–specializations and sometimes egregious excursions into the interpretive wilderness. Yet it is here to stay, and the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* is a good example of both its defects and its strengths.

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