

Book Review

Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, by Diarmaid MacCulloch. New York, Viking, 2009. 1161 +vii pp. \$45

The front pages of *The New York Times Book Review* is not at all the usual place that one first encounters a thousand plus page book on the history of Christianity. In a review written by the editor of *Newsweek*, which reported more on his thinking than his reading, the world was given what was clearly an announcement of a favored book that would be on the shelves of Barnes and Noble the next day. Books like this rarely get that treatment. Once one realizes, however, that its author was the host of a six part television series on the subject produced by BBC last fall, the interconnections of the large scale, for-profit, left-hand-always-knows-what-the-right-hand-is-doing media become clear; one starts to understand how this project escaped the confines of the world of university press publishing. But with that revelation made, it is then somewhat of a pleasant surprise to find out how serious and respectable an undertaking this book really is. It is decidedly not the typical non-scholarly presentation of Christian history written with an eye towards sensationalizing that history or using it to pay tribute to the contemporary idols of the tribe. It is not an attempt to give the world "the real story." It is a monumental and thoroughly researched book that is written with a professional scholar's expertise. It is, for the most part, written in a crisp, open style that moves the reader along the many paths and many, many side paths of Christian history.

MacCulloch himself is, indeed, the genuine thing. Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford, his specific field is the English Reformation. He is the author of the lauded work *The Reformation*. As to his religious sensibilities, he admits to being the son of a clergyman, but now describes himself now "as a candid friend of Christianity." Making no claims about the truth of Christian claims one way or the other, as an historian he writes with a historian's critical eye. Any number of writers overplay that role and become imperious about what the reader ought to think about the subject, telling him or her what the story *really* is about. MacCulloch, however, for the most part plays the role of historian straight. He thus presents a book, as he says, that will "help readers to stand back from Christianity...and see it in the round." At that, he is quite successful. Necessarily, he has to rely on the work of others to present the large swaths of Christian history that are not his own particular provenance. He uses them fairly, and with a good eye to what is generally accepted among respectable scholars. He does not go for speculative filling in of holes in the interest of slanting the story as a whole. The result is a thorough, even somewhat nuanced, one volume history of Christianity that is admirable and eye opening in its breadth.

That is the great reward for the reader, and anybody who gamely sticks it out to the end will come away a much better informed person. Few people actually know much of Christian history or its real breadth and diversity. Christianity is largely the local church that they attend. Even the characteristics of their own denominations tend to escape them. To go through *Christianity*, one is forced to realize the extent of Christianity, its variants, and the long path it took to establishing First Church of *N.* where the reader actually worships. MacCulloch is thorough in marching us to the Orient with the spread of the earliest Christian missionaries, as well back there again in the later missionary efforts of both Protestants and Catholics of more recent centuries. He covers Christianity in Africa, South America, and does North America very well, along with the normal presentation of the development of Christianity in Western Europe. Eastern Orthodoxy is for once treated as fully as western versions of the faith. One really will understand a lot more about this sprawling, millenia old movement that began with the simple preaching

of Jesus -- although MacCulloch starts his reader in both ancient Israel and Greece: hence the three thousand years. One will understand a lot more about world history, too.

MacCulloch's history is largely that of Christian institutions and events. He uses the physical and institutional markers of Christianity to illustrate and punctuate the flow of the story. Here, one can sense the BBC project in background in his frequent references to physical churches (which are pictured in numerous inset plates.) One can easily imagine him standing in front of, say, St. Peter's in Rome or the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople as he intones on the scandalous behavior of the Medici popes, or the desperate and rare acts of some reforming patriarch. It is effective in its own way. But the history of institutions and events can also be limited, and where it is, is in the underplaying of Christian thought. By no means does MacCulloch ignore it. All the names, ancient and modern are there. In roughly three page sections, he faithfully reports on significant Christian thinkers along the way: Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, etc.. He brings us up to date with Barth, Bonhoeffer and von Balthasar. Let it be said, though, that this is not a history of Christian thought or theology.

While every author in telling such a large, multi-faceted story needs to make choices about he or she is going to present -- no one can do everything, especially in a single volume, MacCulloch's choice not to present a history of Christian thought needs to be mentioned about *Christianity*. It is one that sets certain limits to its presentation. One can see these limits in two particular areas.

First, the underplaying of Christian intellectual history means that it is somewhat difficult for those who accept his invitation "to stand back from Christianity to observe it in the round" to see why exactly this whole thing ever got off the ground. People in this history are extremely active, sometimes admirably, sometimes rather shamefully. But their motivations seem curiously absent, and we aren't given much help on discerning them. While many of MacCulloch's précis of great thinkers are accurate and succinct (he does a very good job on Calvin, for example) they are weakest in the beginning just when they might shed light on the inner dynamics of the movement. Not that this is a particularly flat portrayal of the events. But what drove people is not all that clear. One misses, for example, penetrating assessments such as Bultmann's succinct claim in *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* that, spiritually, the ancient world was " a dark and noisome cave" that people desperately sought to escape. That makes sense of why people listened to Jesus' message. Here, though, Jesus is the reported Jesus of the written word; thus we see less of the man who made the impression, and we study him from the record of the impression. We don't see deeply into the hearts of the writers of the record. Good methodology, but there is no punch line. The section on Paul, whom MacCulloch does see as terrifically important, is not particularly strong, nor is it particularly insightful; MacCulloch can be glib here. We don't see what Paul saw that made him the dominant interpreter of the Christ event and that made thinkers like Augustine and the Reformers draw from his well so deeply. The same might be said about the section on Augustine, even though it is lengthier. But despite the extra pages, how Augustine influenced more than a thousand years of Christianity, beyond the fact that he did influence it, is not front and forward. In both cases, what particularly seems missing is the sense of the utter gratuitousness of grace as their motivation. MacCulloch can name the idea later in those who followed them; he just doesn't explain it and get the reader to see what might be in it. Such is the problem of the distanced reporter.

Second, all this has an effect on how the chapters on ancient Christianity as a whole come across. After its early promulgation, ancient Christian history *is* the history of the development of doctrine. While MacCulloch is quite thorough in reporting all the arguments that took place, and who won, and who

dissented, he doesn't quite get us to understand what was going on in the minds of these people. To the modern person, especially a modern American or Brit, all the haggling over the precise terms for the Trinity or the two natures in Christ can seem terrifically wearisome. We don't understand what their problem was and it doesn't get better the longer it goes on. Now, it certainly is not MacCulloch's fault that we have this problem, and he is better than many church historians who simply and cheaply resort to modern answers to clear it up; for example, many simply make this a political struggle. Well, there were politics, but it wasn't *just* politics. To get at what is going on, it is necessary to somehow get into the thinking of the ancients and the way that they were committed to the faith. This is what is just not all that clear in *Christianity*, and it can make the early centuries a tough slog for the reader. Here, an alternative as to how it can be done better might be seen in Jaroslav Pelikan's well known five volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of The Development of Doctrine*. Pelikan, in the volume on the early church, for example, usually is able to root doctrinal distinctions and disagreements in the actual practices of the early church; thus one can see why certain changes were taken so seriously for a single term could mean a change in the way that one actually worshiped. Belief was not as we so misleadingly put it, "a system of belief", but a matter of perceiving the world, and a matter of the heart.

With this said, however, MacCulloch is wonderfully thorough, and he does not become impatient and dismissive. Fortunately, once he hits the period around the Reformation, the pace picks up and he clearly finds a more congenial voice. Not only are the problems in later periods the sorts we have, and thus we have an easier time than understanding from our present perspective, this is also his expertise and here he has done the first hand research. At this point the writing is crisp and with perspective, and often with a light touch of humor. Here now is a writer who clearly knows his subject, and who can come up with *le mot juste* that gives the reader some insight. Even beyond the Reformation period, he continues on in a style that is accessible and quick paced. He is frequently enlightening, drawing together numerous strands in such a way that the reader can make important connections. He covers the side tracks of Christian history, such as Mormonism, in a very helpful way. While again the history of thought is not his usual target, as to the significant events of Christian history, he covers them all, including Vatican II and its aftermath in the present Catholic church. Few will come away not knowing a lot more than they knew when they started. Few will come away not knowing that Christianity is a lot bigger and a lot stranger and a lot more diverse than the ongoings of the First Church of *N*.

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