



Reviews



A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, Diarmaid MacCulloch, London: Allen Lane, 2009, pp. xxi, 1161, ISBN 978-0713998696. £35.00

*Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles
son of Peleus, that brought countless ills
upon the Achaeans.*

So begins Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, composed nearly three thousand years ago, thus betraying the long-standing centrality of 'narrative' within the domain of human creativity. Humankind has been recounting stories of the past even beyond the point that the earliest written accounts bear witness. Indeed, the very perdurance of the narrative form of storytelling throughout history up until the present day simply conveys the fact that human people are those who recount the past.

Such narrative tendencies do not simply relegate themselves to the recording of the bare facts of existence; throughout history, many amongst the ranks of the philosophers or religious groups have used historical narrative to almost ascend above the mundane and the quotidian. One has only to read the pages of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* to comprehend such an approach to historical narrative. Nevertheless, whilst historical narrative can on occasion be used as a means to transcend history, the startling claim of the Christian is a radical reversal of such a tendency: there is talk not of an ascent up *above* history, but a descent *down* into history. That is to say, the message of Christianity is not that one should seek to study history so as to determine those nodal points within its flow whereby one might speculate upwards towards the divine, but rather involves an appreciation that God himself came into time and, as a result, genuinely embraced history as an authentic aspect of being. Consequently, for all those who see themselves within the domain of Christian existence, the realisation must be that historical narrative is vital; not simply because its validity is attested to by its being created by God, but precisely

because of the realisation that God came down into the history of the world to redeem it. In sum: history matters because it is the domain in which God acts upon and through humanity.

To this end, the appearance of Diarmaid MacCulloch's *magnum opus*, *A History of Christianity*, can only be seen as a great gain to the field of Christian literature. If there is one aspect of this work that stands out, it is the sheer enjoyment that MacCulloch takes from recounting the past. In fact, such an attitude from one who will candidly admit his gradual eschewal of the pews of British Anglicanism can only condemn many of us who, whilst happily confessing our involvement in the Church, will often disregard the wonderful particularity of the history of the Christian faith.

As the subversive subtitle (*The First Three Thousand Years*) suggests, MacCulloch's approach to the history of Christianity is expansive. This breadth is not simply temporal, although he traverses the history from 1000 BCE right up to the contemporary milieu, but also geographical, including many aspects of the history that remain unknown even to those with a good grasp of the development of the Christian faith. In this way, MacCulloch introduces the reader to the anti-Chalcedonian Church's growth in Africa and Asia, the early spread of the Church to the East (even as far as China in the seventh century), the shift of the centre of Eastern Orthodoxy from post-Byzantine Constantinople to the distant city of Moscow, even to some of the more recent developments in Africa and Asia of which there is little awareness in the modern-day Western Church. The upshot of this appreciation of the diversity of centres within Christianity is that MacCulloch does not try to squeeze different arms of the Church into a 'one size fits all' straitjacket of interpretation. This can be seen at the outset of the book as MacCulloch ties together the disparate roots and influences upon the Christian faith, without simply producing a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* neatness about the whole account. The same is true of his exploration of Augustine: whilst MacCulloch does often side with the underdog throughout the book, in his treatment of Pelagius, he is careful not to countenance the popular assumption that Pelagius was simply a proleptic enlightened rationalist much like ourselves. In this respect, MacCulloch is a careful historian who has a lot to offer in the line of chronological exactitude.

The book is divided into seven ‘parts’, each of which corresponds to a general area of history. The first section explores the background out of which the Church arose, including an attempt to explore exactly what it was that led to the attractive nature of the Christian message within the tail-end of the Roman Empire. From here, MacCulloch walks us through the issues that defined the early church in Part II: the development of orthodoxy, the influence of Constantine upon the Church, the Ecumenical Councils. Part III is one of the most fascinating sections of the whole work, as MacCulloch explores two under-appreciated aspects of the history in the spread of the post-Chalcedonian Church to the South and to the East, and the importance of the rise of the Islamic religion for Christian history. The following three sections overview the history of the ‘Big Three’ players in contemporary Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. MacCulloch concludes his account with an exploration of the world of modern Christianity in Part VII, entitled ‘God in the Dock’. Although it might be simply overlooked as a matter of course, the structure of the book holds the work together in many respects. As a result of not being too scared to return to periods already discussed elsewhere in the volume, MacCulloch is able to present a coherent picture of a complex body that is too often glossed with the crude *nomen* ‘Church’. By taking this into account in the structure of the book, MacCulloch avoids the ‘flattening out’ of histories that too often occurs in overly-sequential accounts of the Christian story.

Within the body of the text, MacCulloch evinces an uncanny knack of spinning a good yarn. Quite simply, the fluidity and clarity of the prose allow a book that, at over a thousand pages long, could be quite daunting to seem far more manageable in the reading. Part of this is explicable from the fact that MacCulloch throws in interesting historical anecdotes along the way. Particularly memorable in this respect is the account of the parrot taught by its master to recite particularly contentious theological formulas; a fact that so amazed one hearer that he promptly wrote a poem in eulogy of this talented bird.

MacCulloch is not completely free from error in the book. There are (understandably) a number of errors of detail along the way (particularly his anachronistic reference to the ‘Black Death’); and

there are a couple of ‘sins of omission’, again understandable in such a colossal account (there is no reference to Dante, for example). Furthermore, as has already been alluded to, MacCulloch feels very keenly his own situation with respect to British Anglicanism, and there is a slight tendency in his writing to side with the underdog on issues of orthodoxy, something that makes the reader wonder if he almost projects his own experiences onto these disagreements. Additionally, MacCulloch’s account of Christian history operates out of a background of Protestantism, and a reader from a different context might pick up on this slight weighting in his version.

That said, the work is, quite simply extraordinary. There is little doubt that the book will become a standard point of reference both within contemporary society and within the academy. Having used the book as a basic textbook in an undergraduate module, I have seen the ease with which MacCulloch’s book makes itself both interesting and functional for the non-specialist. However, lest it be relegated to the status of ‘introductory text’, the book provides a view onto a multi-faceted vista, in which even the most experienced of church historians may take in some detail not previously seen, and marvel at the intricacy of the history of Christianity.

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Reformation: The Dangerous Birth of the Modern World,
Harry Reid, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2010
(Hardback 2009), pp. xlviii, 399, ISBN 9780715209370.
£9.99

Harry Reid announces that he has written a ‘personal interpretative survey of aspects of a momentous century of religious and political tumult in Western Europe’ (p. 371). He sweeps through the Empire, Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England, landing breathlessly on Scotland before another broad tour of the ‘context’. Reid writes out