

# Christianity. The First Three Thousand Years.

Colleagues,

This week's post is a book review by Dean Lueking, who (surprise! surprise!) is also pictured on the graduating class photo of Concordia Seminary 1954 where I show up too. He's now retired after a long term of service as pastor at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. Dean has been involved in "world" Lutheranism for most of his life, beginning with his two-year seminary internship in Japan during our student days [he can still manage a homily in Japanese when he's back visiting there], continuing throughout his years at Grace, River Forest, and now going full-tilt during his alleged retirement. Most recent item that I know of was a gig in Mexico earlier this year.

Before not too many more ThTh postings appear, we hope to bring you a review of Dean's own recent book, a report of the faith and life of Lutherans around the world presented in their own words and viewed through their own eyes. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Diarmaid MacCulloch: CHRISTIANITY.  
The First Three Thousand Years.  
New York: Viking Press, 2009.1161 pp.**

The price of this book is \$45 (\$25 paperback). Its 1161 pages make it for sure a lengthy read. It is authored by a historian

not (yet) widely known on this side of the Atlantic. All that notwithstanding, I took the plunge anyway, ordered it, read it through at a leisurely pace, and recommend it wholeheartedly to any and all interested in an innovative telling of the story of the Christian church.

Let me cite an example of what caught my eye when initially picking up the book and randomly opening it to p. 948. Tucked away in a paragraph summarizing the significance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a ten line tribute to a church sexton in an Austrian village, Franz Jaegerstaetter, who refused to support his country's absorption into Hitler's cause and paid for it with his life. "He was beheaded in Berlin in 1943 and the inclusion of his name on his village's war memorial after the Second World War was the subject of heated local argument" is a seemingly dismissable detail. But it impressed me that MacCulloch could dig that minor event out of some remote historical dust bin and turn it into a telling hint about the continuing ambivalence with which Austrian villagers deal with their years under Hitler.

If a detail of that order could be vacuumed up to add value to a massively inclusive narrative of three millennia of church history, I grew curious about what else this British historian can teach us through his frequent, illustrative references to people, well known and little known, who personalize a church history that can too easily remain impersonal. My curiosity was well rewarded. MacCulloch's CHRISTENDOM is amazing in its scope and method, moreso than any other church history I can recall reading.

First, the title. Christendom's first THREE millennia is the author's way of calling attention to the preceding thousand years of history in Israel, Greece, and Rome that he sees as foundational for understanding the two millennia of Christianity

in the world. I don't know of a church historian who devotes his opening section to such a subject with more skill and clarity. It is his way of helping the reader to "stand back from Christianity, whether they love it or hate it, or are simply curious about it, and see it in the round" (p. 12). Throughout his book he avoids the clutter of over-quoting primary sources (though the final 112 pages of bibliography testify to his knowledge of them). What MacCulloch gives us in seven major sections is an admirably condensed synthesis of the current state of historical scholarship on the persons, movements, and eras he treats, gracefully told in such a way that attracts and holds the attention of a larger audience too often bewildered by if not dismissive of church history altogether.

Diarmaid MacCulloch describes himself as "a candid friend of Christianity." This personal statement is more than anecdotal. It defines his stance as a historian who purposely writes not from within but from outside the church whose story he tells. This strengthens his credibility as a scholar who sees his task not as pronouncing on God's existence and ways of working in history. Rather it is to approach the story of Christianity as a meticulous researcher (and faculty member at Cambridge and Oxford universities) and teller of a complicated and varied history who strives to avoid the extremes of triumphalism on the one hand and oversimplified debunking on the other. Thus he can be unsparing in exposing the criminal follies that darken the church's history as well as genuine in citing the highest achievements of goodness, creativity and generosity of those who have borne Christ's name through the centuries.

McCulloch offers a unique framework in his overall structure of Christian history. After beginning with the millennium of Greece, Israel, and Rome from 1000 BCE – 100 CE, he devotes Part II to the coming of Jesus, Paul, and the shaping of the early church and key personages and movements up to 451. The Council

of Chalcedon remains his point of departure for his next three major divisions of the book because he chooses that decisive, problematic Council as a measure for how the eastern and western church thought and expressed itself on the divine and the human nature of Jesus Christ. Thus Part III spans a thousand-year arc from Chalcedon to 1500 A.D., with particular attention to the eastern church, the impact of Islam, and the church in Africa (that millennium that Philip Jenkins aptly describes as *The Lost History of Christianity* (2008, Harper). Part IV covers the same millennium in the western church. Part V again begins with Chalcedon in 451 and tracks among a host of other things the importance of the development of Orthodoxy and the emergence of Russia as the Third Rome. Part VI incorporates the various reformations from 1300-1800 (his treatment of Luther and what began at Wittenberg seems disappointingly thin; of greater value is his attention to Christianity becoming a worldwide faith in Africa, Asia, and America during these three centuries). Part VII is another giant leap from 1492 till the present, with detailed sections devoted to the Enlightenment in its varied forms, the Protestant world mission, the church's fortunes under colonialism in Asia and Africa, the Catholic renaissance of mission, "A War That Killed Christendom" (1914-1918, MacCulloch's striking depiction of the impact of World War I), followed by further World War II testing under Nazism and Communism, leading to the ecumenical realignment of world Christianity and the dramatic shift of Christian growth to the global South.

This bare outline of MacCulloch's unique periodization of church history hardly does justice to the richness of the content he weaves into these sections. Nonetheless, let it serve as a commentary on a main strength of his book: keeping his historical scope worldwide at every stage. This is especially important for readers like me and my woefully inadequate

knowledge of the course of eastern Christianity in the first millennium of church history. Example: if one were to speculate on where the most important center of Christendom would be as the 8th century began it would be Baghdad, not Rome. Example: the early expansion of Christianity after the Book of Acts was more successful in Asia than in the west. Example: the dire effect of the Crusades hurt the eastern church more than the west. Example: the modern globalization of Christianity is not a new phenomenon in Asia and Africa as much as it is a returning home to those regions where the faith was born and grew in its earliest years.

Here are other insights not found in the church histories with which I am familiar.

Colder climatic change and thus worsening living conditions in northern Europe from 1200-1400 contributed to the flowering of distinctive Western devotional life that stressed God as actively intervening in his creation and a more personal exposition of the human reality of Christ and his Mother. . . . When the worried townspeople of Oslo, Norway, endowed an altar in their cathedral for St. Sebastian as a protector against the Black Death it didn't put up an impressive performance; in the next five years between one third and two thirds of the population of Europe died of the bubonic plague. . . . Biblical genealogies which bored or baffled pious Europeans were the delight of Africans whose societies relished such repetitions and who often took the Bible more seriously than the missionaries in the sense that they confidently expected concrete results from the power of God. . . . The sufferings of the Russian Orthodox Church during the seventy years from 1922 – 1992 represent one of the worst betrayals of hope in the history of Christianity, stoked by a Bolshevik leader/thug who was possibly the bastard son of a priest, who never fulfilled his mother's hopes that he would become a bishop, who, as an

expelled seminarian, adopted the pseudonym Josef Stalin. . . In the fifth century Syrian Orthodox Church there evolved a particular form of sacred self-ridicule or critique of society's conventions: the tradition of the Holy Fool – exemplified by Simeon who dragged a dead dog around, threw nuts at women during church services and gleefully rushed naked into the women's section of the bathhouse of the city of Emesa. Such extrovert craziness is an interesting counterpart or safety valve to the ethos of prayerful silence and traditional solemnity which is so much a part of the Orthodox identity. . .

These samplings are cited not to suggest that the book dotes on historical oddities or undue emphasis on bizarre practices in remote places. They are matters of interest for the sake of the larger meaning MacCulloch is after, as well as being tributes to the author's art of bringing broad swaths of historical movements into focus through real people living in real time. He does that again and again, often with a well-chosen adjective or a sly jab of humor. Another benefit of his focus on the meaningful individual is the manner in which he will return to that person's ongoing significance much later in the Christian story. By this method he keeps teaching us how inter-related people and events are in the long march of the church's centuries.

MacCulloch's personal agenda sometimes shows through. As a faithful gay Christian, one raised in an Anglican manse and headed for ordination but derailed by his church's position on homosexuality in the 1980's, he can allude to the mostly negative attitudes and actions of the church toward gay persons in a tone that carries only the slightest hint of a barely discernable acerbic cast to what is said. Given the circumstances of his earlier aspirations for a calling in the Church of England, his reserve is as noteworthy as his candor in naming matters that continue to be painfully unsettled.

I've made the point that the book is indeed immense in its scope. I add that it is exhaustively documented for pinpoint accuracy in the most minute detail (including the weird spelling of early Syrian dynastic regimes). To underscore his meticulous care in documentation, I must mention the only inaccuracy I came across in over a thousand pages of text. He states that the 1980 assassination of the Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero took place "in his own cathedral" (p. 996). Actually, it occurred in a small Catholic hospital chapel in San Salvador.

Let my smugness in even mentioning such a minuscule matter serve only to underscore the overwhelming excellence of Diarmaid MacCulloch's CHRISTIANITY. THE FIRST THREE THOUSAND YEARS.

Dean Lueking