Review Article

The Lessons of History

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This review article looks at seven recent books on church history to see how solid and how useful they might be for the church. The first four are overviews of the last two thousand years; the last three cover just the last century or so.

The Compact Guide to Christian History
Stephen Backhouse
Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011 208pp. £10.99pb ISBN: 978-0-7459-5506-3

Not Angels but Anglicans: A History of Christianity in the British Isles
Henry Chadwick and Allison Ward (eds.)
Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010 304pp £25pb ISBN: 978-1-85311-878-4

Heroes and Heretics: Pivotal Moments in 20 Centuries of the Church
Iain D. Campbell
Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009 237pp £8.99pb ISBN: 978-1-85792-925-6

The History of Christianity: The New Lion Handbook
Jonathan Hill
Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009 560pp. £16.99pb ISBN: 978-0-7459-5381-6

In recent years it has become popular to teach a 'Bible overview' course of some kind in churches. This has been a useful way of remedying a perceived lack of basic biblical literacy amongst members of our congregations, who don't perhaps pick up sufficient background information about the plotline of the scriptures as a whole from our preaching. Very quickly it has become apparent, of course, that there is more than one way to present such an overview of God's dealings with humanity over the years c.4004 BC(?)–70 AD. Different themes can be emphasized as we select what we think are the most important aspects of the word to focus on at any given time and for any given congregation.

A similar issue faces us with Church history from 70–2010 AD. There is a basic lack of literacy (and not just in the pews) about ecclesiastical goings on over the last two millennia. There are various competing theories as to which is the most helpful way of dividing up the vast array of material that could be gathered in

a presentation of the whole. Yet it remains as important as ever for the church not to lose sight of where it has come from, to be inspired by the great examples of the past as well warned by the mistakes that we are in danger of repeating.

The four recent books on review here are just a sample of the many that are available for those wishing to improve their grasp of church history as a whole. They all purport to offer an overview of the last twenty centuries, and each has its strengths and weaknesses which should be borne in mind by any pastor seeking to help their congregation see these things more clearly (as we surely must from time to time if we are not to drift into a superficial and anchorless cult driven entirely by the methods and madnesses of the present age).

Not Angels but Anglicans takes its title from a humorous twist on something Pope Gregory the Great is reported to have said about some young, blonde-haired, Anglo-Saxon slaves he saw in Rome one day. Asking about their origin, he replied that they were 'Not Angles, but angels,' and then apparently put in motion the mission of Augustine of Canterbury to re-take England for the Roman religion. This book boasts a stellar cast of contributors from the world of church history, including Henry Chadwick, Gillian Evans, Euan Cameron, Dairmaid MacCulloch, Patrick Collinson, and even Rowan Williams himself. It originated as a series of articles in the weekly Church Times, and so it is not surprising that it claims to be 'written with the affection and exasperation that the Anglican Church generally evokes'.

The book covers all the main bases, from pre-597 England, through monasticism, Reformation, the irrepressible John Wesley, and up to the modern day. Patrick Collinson claims in his chapter that the '-ism' of the Anglican settlement was not coined before the nineteenth century, an old myth which is not quite true; as I showed recently in *The True Profession of the Gospel*, 'Anglianism' (a variant of Anglicanism, and referring to the same thing) was being used as early as 1616. Yet he is helpfully clear that Anglicanism was originally designedly Reformed (or 'Calvinist') and by no means a *via media* between Geneva and Rome. Rowan Williams then provocatively argues that the difference between Richard Hooker and the Puritans was their attitude to history (as powerful an incentive to make sure we study our history as we might need!). The reader may sense something of contemporary church politics behind the Archbishop's deliberate juxtaposition of 'the slow growth of wise

practice in history' and 'the kind of Calvinism that ignored growth, struggle and doubt in the Christian life'. What is he getting at, I wonder?

Although this book comes, here and there, with the Church Times signature disapproval of the Reformed faith, it also contains some useful historical analysis from expert practitioners. The chapters are, given their journalistic origins, not too long, and the book is well illustrated (though not 'lavishly') with occasional charts, maps, and chronologies. This makes it a good quick reference guide and perhaps something to inspire through annoyance, much like its parent publication.

Since Lion's *The History of Christianity* is mostly by a single author, Jonathan Hill, it is able (unlike Not Angels but Anglicans) to give a more coherent focus to the whole of Church history, a strong narrative thread. It is a much more glossy and beautifully presented volume, though also a much more wordy one. The narrative of the church's progress is described in lively and engaging ways in the first part of the book, with brief glimpses at some of the especially interesting people in sidebars by an array of experts such as Peter Walker on Jesus, Thomas Weinandy on Ignatius and Cyril, David Lindberg on the condemnation of Galileo, Carl Trueman on Geneva, 'the Protestant Rome,' and Peter Nockles on the nineteenth century Oxford Movement. The general history is generally very competently tackled, though enjoyment is occasionally disturbed by seeming inaccuracies; I think it is leaving it too late, for example, to say that the church did not consider the apostolic writings as equivalent in importance to the Old Testament scriptures until the time of Tertullian. Surely this underplays the evidence of the apostolic fathers, not to say 2 Peter 3:15-16 and 1 Timothy 5:18? Whitefield is jumped over too quickly in favour of Wesley, and the seventeenth century gets a raw deal, but then one can't cover everything, even in 500 pages (with 4-5 columns of text per page)!

The second part of the book (the last 100 pages or so) takes a look at the modern church in various parts of the world (Europe, America and Oceania, Asia, and Africa). This is a treat, and a great corrective to the often European-centred histories which have led the way in the past (and which Dairmaid MacCulloch attempts to correct in his recent magisterial one-volume history too). Overall this is often an inspiring book and also has some passages of great apologetic value (as one would expect from Jonathan Hill's other

publications). It doesn't have quite the profundity of MacCulloch, but it is aimed at a less informed audience. The view of Anglicanism here is that it is a 'moderate Protestantism' which 'left a lot of wriggle room.' But there is an error here concerning intentional design and imperfect execution of course. It is not true to say that the Thirty-nine Articles, and those which came before them like the Forty-two Articles, 'tried to capture a basic faith that everyone could agree to' (nor that the Articles are entirely silent about 'the reprobate'). Yet it is sadly all too evident that a considerable variety of theological opinion has been tolerated, practically-speaking, within Anglicanism. Irritations like this are inevitable in a work of such breadth and boldness by one individual, who will inevitably rely in many areas on the courageous simplicity of the summariser and on occasionally spurious secondary literature.

The next two books both take a straightforward approach to chapter division, basically dividing themselves into one chapter per century. *The Compact Guide to Christian History* is (apart from the cover) a delight to the eyes, and a smorgasbord for the mind with short, pithy descriptions of all the main events in Christian history (both in Europe and elsewhere) for each century. Iain Campbell relies on no pictures at all and has only brief charts of key dates. He does, however, alone of all the books surveyed here, have a considerable number of endnotes documenting where his ideas have come from, and it is interesting to note a number of Reformed theologians and church historians have clearly shaped his thinking about the men and movements in church history. It is unclear which of these two things is responsible for it (the discipline of endnotes or the nature of his conversation partners), but Campbell is more reliable theologically and historically as a result. He manages to read both theology and history, and to look at how the Bible was being handled as well as making judgments on the past from the standpoint of his theology.

A case in point would be his description of the iconoclast controversy in the eighth century. Backhouse describes the events well, and there is a half-page picture of a mosaic depicting the pro-icon Empress Irene. The judgment of the Council she called at Nicea in 787—that veneration of icons was not idolatrous - is reported, but no comment is made upon it. Campbell, on the other hand, not only describes what happened but concludes that this Council, 'showed the departure from the Bible which characterised the medieval church of this period.' It would perhaps be good to have a little more theological

reflection on this major moment in church history, not least since Rowan Williams and others have of late encouraged the use of icons through their publications about them and some preachers take icons as their 'texts' in preaching, a practice defended even by several bishops. Campbell is at least willing to steer the thoughts of eager Christian readers in the right direction, though, and this I think is to be commended in an introductory text like this.

Ideally, we need a glossy, lavishly illustrated, historically accurate and theologically sharp overview of church history which is not afraid to tell us the story 'warts and all' as well as assess the biblical faithfulness of the various movements which have intruded themselves into the narrative. None of these books does it all, and none are quite as helpful theologically as they might be. There is a legitimate debate about how far we as mere humans can know God's perspective on the history of his people, and we must of course be careful not to blindly identify the cause of God and truth merely with our own peculiar party interests and emphases. Christian men and women from the past, like those from other countries, can often challenge us about our own preconceived ideas and unacknowledged biases, and this is one of the great blessings of studying history. With the judicious and discerning use of these books, and perhaps William Cunningham's *Historical Theology*, it could also be of great advantage in teaching our congregations an overview of church history.

England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church 1900-2000 (Oxford History of the Christian Church)
Keith Robbins
Oxford: OUP, 2010 508 pp £25pb ISBN: 978-0-19-957031-7

The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform 1948-1998
Andrew Chandler
Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2009 542pp £25pb ISBN:978-1-84-383501-1

The Baptists: Key People in Forming a Baptist Identity—Vol. 3: The Modern Era
Tom Nettles
Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2007 462pp £17.99hb ISBN: 978-1-84550-211-9

These three books cover the most recent history of the church, and give an

overview of how we got to where we are. An understanding of this is crucially important for those who are involved in shaping or trying to change the direction of the churches into the twenty-first century. It is not simply (as the old axiom has it) that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. These histories help put our often fragmentary understanding of parts of the church we know best into a wider perspective, and shed light on the origins of some of the modern church's quirks and peculiarities, including perhaps our own. This may help equip us in the vital task of continuing reform and persevering in evangelism, at national, diocesan, and parish levels.

The *Christian Church 1900-2000* from Oxford University Press is an example of modern history writing that seeks to integrate English history with that of the so-called Celtic fringe. This 'archipelagic' approach can be useful in highlighting various strands of influence and impact, and here it is also helpful in bringing out shared beliefs, behaviour, and problems in each nation and its collection of different churches. One of the issues faced by all the churches here of course has been the rise of various non-Christian religions over the period covered. But this book is pleasingly realistic and down to earth in many of its assessments, realising that things don't just happen because of sociological trends, large-scale movements, or the mass media. As the author says, 'why people participate in the life of one church rather than another may depend as much on the 'accidentals' of family tradition or friendship, not to mention a good or bad heating system or the proximity of particular buildings on winter evenings.' There are many such knowing and often witty comments throughout the book which make it rather more than a dry and dusty study of national ecclesiastical structures, and which could help someone moving from one part of the British Isles to another to appreciate the similar but subtly different cultures across the 'archipelago.'

This book's early chapters force upon the reader the realisation that we have come a long way in a hundred years. The sights, sounds, and smells of the church are different from what they were, and the doctrines and practices, once centrally important in public discussions between Christians, have in several instances been greatly downgraded in importance. David Cameron is unlikely to appoint a Royal Commission to investigate which churches are using candles and incense so that they might be disciplined, as Prime Minister Balfour did at the start of the twentieth century, and Robbins is adept at

bringing out these surprising changes in expectation, though often without fanfare so readers are left to make imaginative connections themselves.

He looks at the continuities of life after the First World War as well as the idea that it was an utter catastrophe for Christian religion, when it has sometimes been supposed that it was merely the latter. There are fascinating details here about how the BBC used to foster Christian values (how things have changed!), how criticism of Nazi anti-semitism 'could often be accompanied by a "but" which criticized Jews as either Bolsheviks or bloated capitalists,' and on the discussions behind the scenes for the visit of John Paul II. A clear link is maintained throughout between what was happening in the economy and national politics with the life of the church, so that it is portrayed as a human institution in a human context. This can be very illuminating, but it also has the potential to obscure the greater reality behind the human face of the church, of course, though God's providence is notoriously difficult to read at this historical distance. Perhaps it is better to leave each reader to discern the divine hand in events themselves sometimes, rather than reading recent history too tendentiously. The most up-to-date chapters on 'The Perils of Prosperity, 1953-1975' and 'Pluralism's Puzzles, 1976-2000' are aptly named, and Robbins tells the story of the swinging sixties and women's ordination (and evangelical ambivalence about it) with an eye for both detail and lasting effect.

This volume has only three illustrations (oddly chosen) but is lavishly footnoted by a scholar who knows his onions and has written widely on nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, both secular and religious. It is beneficial that OUP has now released a paperback edition, since it is well worth a read but the hardback is considerably overpriced.

The Church of England in the Twentieth Century is a different sort of book, and not merely because of its tighter denominational focus. It actually begins half way through the century, and gives a huge amount of attention to the internal politics and economics of the national church establishment itself. It is an intricate and well-researched example of the sort of institutional history which would be indispensible for anyone involved in General Synod or even in senior diocesan roles (or who hopes to be). It splits the half century up into the primacies of successive Archbishops of Canterbury (Fisher, Ramsey, Coggan, Runcie, Carey) but does not just focus on clerical, even episcopal, involvement

in events, but gives us an insight into how the ecclesiastical 'civil service', especially at the Church Commissioners, functions. The book is based on in-depth research into the papers of that august body, which must have been mind-numbingly dull at times, but has resulted in a useful work.

Andrew Chandler demonstrates how important 'establishment' often was during this period for the Church of England, in ongoing, practical ways. He also shows how the work of the Church Commissioners, particularly 'the maintenance of unexciting necessities,' was one of centralising and standardising everything from stipends and pensions to bishoprics and properties. Many areas of reform were immensely beneficial, though the seeds of disaster were also sown. There is a warning here that for all its perceived faults, the Board of the Commissioners (pre-1998) was actually far more representative than the current Archbishop's Council, which comes in for some blistering criticism near the end of the book. But the alleged loss of £800 million by the Commissioners is also steadily examined by a historian with an eye for detail and a certain boldness of expression. This is ideal reading for anyone interested or forced to be concerned with the Church as an institution, and would be especially useful for those whose job it is to be bothered about things like money and property on behalf of the wider church. There are signs that lessons have not been learned elsewhere in the Anglican world about what constitutes an acceptable risk strategy in this regard. It is also important for ministers and PCCs to appreciate the stresses and strains of such institutions so that criticisms which may be levelled at national bodies from time to time can be better aimed and more informed, as we seek to reform the church to win the nation for Christ.

The third book here *The Baptists—Vol. 3: the Modern Era* is well worth reading alongside the others because the history of other evangelical denominations can often illuminate both the struggles we have as Anglican Evangelicals and also the problems we encounter within pan-evangelicalism and parachurch movements today. It covers 19th century English Baptists and 20th century Americans mostly, and only those who would call themselves 'Baptists', not those who have adopted the 'believer's baptism only' position but are actually affiliated to other denominations or none, such as Pentecostals, many Brethren and, strangely, some Anglicans. Still, the book is none the less useful for that, and provided we make the necessary cultural adjustments and remember that, for example, Southern Baptist Americans are

not at all like, say, the suburban English in many respects (in their attitudes to alcohol and guns for example!) there may still be things of value we can learn.

This book is helpfully more theological in tone than the other volumes reviewed here, without sacrificing historically rigorous research. It covers a slightly longer period, beginning with the ministry of Charles Spurgeon and the irrepressible liberal, John Clifford. Many of us appreciate Spurgeon for his passionately Reformed and powerfully effective preaching, but here Spurgeon's strongly baptistic identity is also well drawn out, as well as his insistence that baptism ought to precede participation in the Lord's Supper. Though Tom Nettles reminds us that Spurgeon 'gloried in Anglicans Whitefield and Toplady,' he also narrates his quarrels against Evangelicals in the Church of England, his inaccurate (I have to say) reading of the Anglican formularies on baptism, and his accusation that 'every churchman is morally responsible for all this iniquity' - though he allows that it is possible to discharge oneself from the responsibility by expressing strong dissent from such things. Clifford, a General Baptist, was more tolerant in his approach and Nettles poignantly comments that Clifford's 'winsomeness and zeal, however, combined with doctrinal romanticism and minimalism provided the avenue for the encroachment of liberalism into the Baptist Union.' In the Downgrade Controversy, it seems that the majority in the Baptist Union 'preferred unity at any cost rather than obedience to Scripture.' Where have we heard that before?

Nettles switches to the other side of the Atlantic and shows how these same tensions existed in American Baptist circles in the time of A. H. Strong, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and E. Y. Mullins. There is some cautionary material on 'Landmarkism', a movement in Baptist circles which drives the logic of their polity and ecclesiology into every area of theology so that non-Baptists are viewed as outside the kingdom of Christ. The confrontational but influential ministry of John Franklyn Norris (one must, it seems, have three names to be a big league Baptist celebrity) is also examined, and cautions against a relentlessly pugilistic approach to denominational politics. There are hints throughout the book, too, of tensions between Calvinists and Arminians which persist to this day within Baptist circles, though that is perhaps too contemporary an argument to be fully covered in what is after all a work of history.

One of the most beneficial parts of this book is a look at the astonishing

takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention by conservatives in 1979, orchestrated by Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler. They carefully worked out the best way to influence the political machinery of the Convention so as to turn it around to their more conservative theological agenda, and pursued their goal vigorously and persistently. One might question whether a commitment to biblical inerrancy alone is quite enough theologically to define a conservative: do inerrantist Arminians and inerrantist Calvinist really have sufficient in common to keep them together for long in truly gospel unity? Still, there is some material here which would be immensely useful for all Anglican Evangelicals who hope to reform their own denomination along more biblical lines to meditate on. Nettles looks closely at the Moderates' self-examination after that conservative takeover too, all of which makes fascinating reading and one cannot help but ponder the lessons we might draw from those events for our own situation in England and in the Anglican Communion.

Alongside the story of the conservative resurgence in the Lutheran Missouri Synod, re-told in *The Anatomy of an Explosion* (1977) by Kurt E. Marquart, this case study would be literally worth more the price of this book if an attempt to emulate the Baptist conservatives' success was ever to be endeavoured or even dreamed about. It shows the importance of holding onto theological colleges (R. Albert Mohler's work in this regard in well examined) , of meticulous knowledge about and tenacious use of the political system which needs to be stuffed full of reliable men and women with theological conviction and relational acumen, and of making sure money is forthcoming and rightly used where necessary. There must be a sense that theology ('conscientious confessionalism') matters, and a laity educated in it to back reform. It is the role of pastors in every church, of course, to play their part in making such things a reality, through preaching and teaching, prayer, and the encouragement of those with the necessary gifts to be involved.

A visit to another country can often help us see our own in a new light. As someone once said, the past is a foreign country, and people do things differently there. These three books of modern church history may give us, therefore, a fresh perspective on our current situation and, perhaps, suggest some old ideas worth trying again in a new situation.

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