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Christianity: A Social and Cultural History

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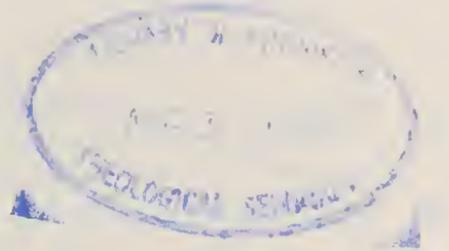
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THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN



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The author has a point of view, though he qualifies it continually. One might call it, in his terms, a moderate "biocentrism," as distinguished from the "anthropocentrism" that he finds too often in the Christian tradition. Living things have rights, rooted in God's good creation which includes them, as well as human beings, in the divine love. But these rights are not absolute. There must still be a hierarchy of goods that determines policy in case of conflict (though with a proper understanding of love, conflict can be minimized). Biological individuals have rights, but they must be balanced by a concern for the species and the ecosystem as a whole. All of this is the substance of justice, which must be sought in a "covenant of relationality" that includes all living things and anticipates the redemption of the whole cosmos along with humanity.

Such a perspective is so balanced that it is not easy to argue with. The author proceeds dialectically. He states a radical view, then modifies it with critical considerations that turn it into a centrist position. He probably makes a mistake, in the light of his whole argument, in opposing the biocentric to the anthropocentric and in criticizing the concept of stewardship as expressing human domination and pride. He can only escape the primacy of the human by a doctrine of the image of God that oddly fails to mention Christ, and by a treatment of the Holy Spirit that separates it from the control of the person of Christ. He sometimes overreacts against theologies that leave too little place for responsibility toward nature. But then, in his qualifications, he pulls himself back. This book will make good and provocative reading wherever thoughtful Christians meet, in a congregational study circle, among pastors, students (college or seminary), or scholars in any of the fields on which it draws.

Charles C. West

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Kee, Howard Clark, Emily Albu Hanawalt, Carter Lindberg, Jean-Loup Seban, and Mark A. Noll. *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*. New York: Macmillan, 1991. pp. 792. \$33.75.

Jacob Burkhardt, the great historian of culture in late antiquity and the Renaissance, might have liked much of this "fresh analysis" (p. v) of the first two thousand years of Christianity and its declared preoccupation with society and culture, what Burkhardt termed human "pathology." A product of a respectable band of scholars (one of whom, Jean-Loup Seban, is a former member of the Princeton Seminary faculty), this textbook offers a sensitive foray into the diversity of the Christian movement and into the actuality of the past.

There are five parts and an epilogue. Each part treats a successive chunk of time, from before the rise of Christianity to the dawn of the third millennium after Christ. Very good maps—with shifting perspectives and uncluttered by excessive information—illustrate the text. There are also twenty pages of photographs with commentary.

The preface tells us that the authors were "free to offer an analysis of his or her period in what seemed an appropriate style" (p. vi). What we find is that every part stands on its own, almost to the extent that each could have been published separately. Part five even has its own preface! The differences of style prove to be differences of historical demeanor, even method. The favored sources of part one are traditional: theological literature. Part two ("The Christian Empire and the Early Middle Ages," by Emily Albu Hanawalt) is a synthetic narrative describing past societies in chronological sequence and drawing from broader sources, which is more typical of contemporary historians. Part three ("The Late Middle Ages and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century," by Carter Lindberg) continues in what is now the common style of historical narrative. Following recent trends, this section treats medieval and Reformation history as a continuum, and it concentrates more deliberately on the plebeian sectors of European society, especially in its treatment of the economy and poverty. Part four ("European Christianity Confronts the Modern Age," by Jean-Loup Seban) begins with a broad statistical and political comparison of Ottoman and European societies in the late sixteenth century, and the reader faces for the first time a map of the world. It is indicative of the variety that seized European Christianity in the last four hundred years and of the author's passion for the total history of civilizations. Although more restricted to religious history, part five ("Christianity and Culture in America," by Mark A. Noll) continues this sensitive exploration of cultural diversity.

The authors have expanded the content of church history textbooks, thankfully. Did they expand it enough? It is striking that part one does not really integrate early Christianity into the general social and cultural history of the Roman Empire. We might attribute this to the social insignificance of Christians before the third century, except that the author (Howard Clarke Kee) believes otherwise: "So serious were [Christianity's] social and political dimensions that the Roman authorities sought to stamp it out" (p. 32) as early as 64 C.E. This will strike some as making Christians more significant to the Romans than they possibly could have been. But even assuming that they were, one might expect a study of them to require more of the religious and social history of Roman civilization (as is the case in much recent scholarship). A more accurate report of persecution comes later (pp. 130ff), but here, too, the sources might have been subjected to greater criticism. For example, Kee repeats the old Christian allegation that Jews provoked hostility against them before Roman tribunals, a charge that was foremost an expression of Christian hostility toward Jews. Those seeking greater inclusion in their textbooks will notice that the role of women in the early churches is mentioned (pp. 52, 60; the latter reference would strike some as repeating a negative stereotype of Jewish women), but the reader must wait for Emily Albu Hanawalt to give women serious consideration (p. 165) when treating the fourth century. Ironically, Christian women accomplished more in the previous centuries.

Hanawalt's introduction to the Christian empire and the early medieval west is well rounded and a pleasure to read. Nevertheless, in this total history of the churches, she might have briefly extended her sights a little farther, for example, by including the Armenians in her discussion of the rejection of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The movement of Nestorian Christians into Asia could also appear, perhaps in conjunction with the fall of Persia (pp. 190-191), which impelled their migration to new eastern frontiers. For that matter, Byzantium, Armenia, and Asia could figure in Lindberg's part three, as well, even in a history of Europe: Byzantium surely for its own sake, Armenia at least for the sake of papal negotiations with it in the fourteenth century, and Asia for the sake of Mongol power and the bold missionizing of friar John of Piancarpino and his Franciscan successors at the court of the Great Khan. Similar opportunities were not missed by Seban in discussing the Jesuit missions to Asia and Latin America and in Noll's account of the diversity of North American religious life.

What of the accuracy of their accounts? In so massive a book questions inevitably arise, most of which are fairly minor, some of which are not, and many of which might imply that a revised edition is in order. I am only permitted to note some examples, part by part.

Part one appears to assume an early monarchy of bishops (pp. 112-113); Ignatius is the evidence, but Ignatius was uniquely autocratic for the early second century. Part one also treats church property for the first time in conjunction with Constantine, although good evidence for such property (and the upward social mobility of Christians) may be found over a half-century earlier.

Part two (which I generally found excellent) refers to the Roman claim to be the see of the apostle Peter as a "medieval tradition" hatched by Pope Damasus in the late fourth century (p. 184). By Damasus' day, the claim was held by the Bishop of Rome for over a hundred years (and used by Pope Stephen against Cyprian of Carthage in a famous exchange), even if it only became western argot in the fourth century. We are told, "No author was more widely read throughout the western Middle Ages than the Venerable Bede" (p. 218), but the honor of such a claim would better go to Augustine. If we could actually calculate how many Europeans read whom in the entire Middle Ages, I am quite sure the tally would ascribe more readers to Donatus (the grammarian) than to Bede. We learn, maybe by a slightly careless formulation, that Otto I initiated the lay investiture of bishops (p. 239). Otto did masterfully execute his ambitions, in part, by investing bishops, and he tried to impose his sovereignty on the papacy in the same way. But he did not invent the practice; he excelled in it. Again, "serfdom almost vanished in France, Spain, Italy, and western Germany" after the year 1000 (p. 240). As a categorical statement, this is said many centuries too soon. Perhaps we should read "*slavery* almost vanished," which is generally true, but downplayed by most historians, because the lot of the progeny of

slaves—the serfs—was still awful. Finally, I allege parsimony when the Norman Conquest receives only one sentence of seventeen words (p. 241).

Part three is crowded with surprising perspectives, some of which I did not find helpful. Was medieval anti-Judaism really a “religious reaction to the new profit economy,” and were the clothing restrictions imposed upon Jews by the Fourth Lateran Council really attempting to limit usury alone (pp. 273-274)? Papal legislation aptly portrays the extent of the church’s program; it was also concerned with the commerce of Jewish and Christian prostitutes (and, by implication, the potential progeny), where Christians bought meat, how Jews sold meat, and a well-known array of social relations. Was humanism really a response to “the disasters of famine, plague, and war” (p. 326)? By way of response, the humanists are said to have created individualism (p. 326). One thinks of the strength of the individual in Somalia: the connection with humanism is by no means self-evident. Individualism is also said to produce the Renaissance popes (p. 327). Italian politics had something to do with them as well. If government and politics were granted their proper place in society and culture, the Avignon papacy of the fourteenth century, whose fiscal policy enjoyed unprecedented success, would not be judged as a “decline” (pp. 307, 313). We are told that “the Franciscan movement offered [beggars] a transition from secular to religious begging accompanied by security and respectability” (p. 296), but it is well known that the class background of Franciscans (and all mendicant friars) was mostly like that of St. Francis: their poverty was by no means necessary. The first universities are described as urban institutions (pp. 297-298). Before the late fourteenth century, this can only be said accurately of Bologna. Ulrich von Hutten would be angry to learn that knights had become “obsolete” by the sixteenth century (p. 336). Descartes would have been shocked to learn that Protestant orthodoxy led to the Enlightenment (p. 418).

Part three tries to connect religious ideas with society. It seems that frequent references to ideology are expected to do the job. So for example, the “epigrammatic formulation” of the scholastics, “faith formed by charity,” is allegedly the result of the “ideology of poverty” (p. 276), which I find an intriguing claim, but one that will strike intellectual historians as empty. The “ideology of poverty” (poverty-virtue) allegedly becomes the antagonist of reform, preventing the cities from eliminating the poor and “undercut by Luther’s rejection of charity as a means of salvation” (p. 345). We miss the economic and social factors so painfully real to the poor.

As to theology, we learn that “the rational view of the world and the confidence in theological system-building exemplified by the age of Thomas Aquinas was severely tested, if not destroyed,” by the plague (p. 322). It would then seem ironic that Thomism only became a concerted intellectual movement *after* the plague. An unmistakably Dionysian view of hierarchy is attributed to Augustine (p. 274). The doctrine of papal infallibility is presented as a “subjective assessment of the personality of the pope” developed by Franciscans (p. 306), but it was simply a Franciscan attempt to limit papal sovereignty, which Brian Tierney proved twenty years ago.

Parts four and five will cause the reader less trouble, although Seban's contribution may strike some as more difficult than the other sections of the book. His French style of historiography is accompanied by some French-sounding prose. Its intensity is rewarding. Seban's statistics add a new precision to this study. But at two points I found the presentation unclear. A massive migration to Spain's "American colonies" (p. 430) could not include the northern Spanish colonies, which Spain never effectively populated. The population figures on page 443 must refer to Germany rather than Europe (cf. p. 430). On page 432, the "Bohemian Brethren" are the "Moravian Brethren." Noll's contribution graces this volume with consistent precision.

In spite of my criticisms, many minor, this book accomplishes a lot—a significant attempt at a synthetic history of Christianity. Hanawalt, Seban, and Noll have accomplished this best, in a way that is passionate for human culture, or, in the best sense, "pathological." There are risks in the endeavor, and not all of them have been avoided. But as a whole, this volume is constructive. It has extended the boundaries of its discipline's general surveys.

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Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992. Pp. xii + 324. \$44.95.

H. O. Old's second major monograph on Reformed worship (following *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* on the Lord's Supper), treats Reformed baptismal teaching practice, 1523-1542. This investigation offers an excellent example of what the Reformed tradition meant by "worship according to scripture." The Reformed story is appropriately developed in the context of the wider confessional discussions of baptism by medieval Roman Catholics, Martin Luther, and early Anabaptists.

The book has two major sections, a historical block of six chapters and a topical group of four chapters, with a conclusion and several fine bibliographies. Old begins by sketching the practice of baptism in the early and medieval church to explain what the sixteenth century inherited, emphasizing what Protestants found problematic. Chapters two and three deal with the first major change, the use of the vernacular in worship, and the shaping of the first Reformed liturgies.

Next comes the key theological argument over baptism, namely, should infants be baptized? Old examines in some detail a variety of "Anabaptists" (including Thomas Müntzer, Conrad Grebel, and Balthasar Hübmaier) who challenged infant baptism and points out particular issues (such as soteriology and biblical hermeneutics) on which Anabaptists and Reformed differed. Reformed theologians defended infant baptism with arguments from Christ's command and the apostles' example, (Old Testament) typology, covenant theology, Christian nurture, the work of the