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BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Early Jr. *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey*. Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2015. xx + 504 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-7221-7. \$39.99.

Joseph Early Jr.'s *A History of Christianity* is a single-volume overview of church history. Producing such a work is, of course, a daunting endeavour. The historian is confronted not only with the perennial issues of interpretation, selection, and bias but also the almost impossible task of summarizing two thousand years of diverse and complicated history into one manageable volume without leaving out anything essential. Early has done a commendable job of negotiating these obstacles and has produced a highly useful and respectable text.

In describing the beginnings of Christianity, Early outlines, in chapter 1, some contextual realities such as Hellenism and Pharisaism before giving a very brief introduction to Jesus of Nazareth and the apostle Paul. In chapter 2 he sketches trends of growth and persecution in the early church up to the year 200 and introduces some of the key Christian teachers and documents during this period, such as Justin Martyr and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Early then turns his attention to the theological struggles and developments within the early church. He devotes the entirety of chapter 3 to heresies and schisms, dealing with ideas and groups as diverse as Marcionism and Donatism. The discussion of these theological and ecclesial issues gives a sense of the shape Christianity was taking during this period, and this picture is filled out with material, in the following two chapters, on the development of early orthodox Christianity. Early discusses realities such as apostolic succession and the canonization of the New Testament, introduces

key ante-Nicene fathers such as Irenaeus and Origen, and outlines some aspects of Christian worship such as baptism and the Eucharist.

Chapters 6 to 9 cover the consolidation of Christianity during and after the Nicene period. Beginning with the Diocletian persecution and moving to the era of Constantine, Early sets the background for the great theological showdown that was the Arian controversy. Without being preoccupied with the details of imperial politics, he explains multiple dimensions of this legendary confrontation and outlines the proceedings of the Council of Nicea and also the ongoing tensions and struggles that followed. After this he explains the later Christological debates and the councils, such as the Council of Chalcedon, that addressed them. He also devotes a considerable amount of space to introducing influential Christian leaders, including Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, and explains important aspects of Christianity during this period, such as architecture and the church calendar.

Early then turns his attention, in chapters 10 to 15, to the medieval period. In relating the history of the Western Church during the Low Middle Ages, he begins with the collapse of Rome and the pontificate of Gregory the Great and traces the Church's development during such eras as the Carolingian Dynasty and through such struggles as the spread of Islam. In treating the High Middle Ages, he gives considerable attention to the sensational papal dramas and the crusades but also focuses on less theatrical realities like monasticism and scholasticism. In addressing the Renaissance period in chapter 14, Early details papal decline, the Western Schism, some pre-Reformation protests, and humanism. Early also provides some material on the Eastern Church. He tells of Christianity's rise to prominence among the Slavic peoples but focuses more on theological concerns such as the iconoclastic controversy and hesychasm.

Following this is a rather detailed treatment of the Protestant Reformation that comprises chapters 16 to 19 of the book. This section begins with a chapter on Luther, which consists mainly of the familiar story of his personal struggles, the shifts in his theological thinking, and his legendary struggles with the Catholic Church. After this, Early turns his attention to Zwingli's

reform movement and to its offshoot, Anabaptism. Then comes a chapter on Calvin and the development of Reformed Protestantism, focusing both on key events and prominent doctrines. The final wing of the Reformation discussed here is that of England. Here Early focuses on politics and the Puritans. Chapter 20 then details the multivalent and multifaceted Catholic Reformation, touching on events such as the Council of Trent and the founding of the Society of Jesus.

In chapters 21 to 26, Early addresses some other developments that took place during or after the age of the early Reformers. He tells of the European expansion into the New World and then details the rise of intellectual opposition to Christianity in the Western world, which was connected to phenomena such as the Enlightenment and the rise of deism. A large amount of attention is then given to religious developments in America and England, with a focus on revivals, missions, and the formation of new religious groups and sects. Chapter 26 is given to describing the fortunes and struggles of various denominations in the “New World”—by which Early mainly means “America.”

The book having arrived at the modern era, Early describes, in chapter 27, some developments in Roman Catholicism as it has interacted with the changing Western world, developments such as liberation theology and the changes implemented at Vatican II, and offers a few words about Orthodoxy. Then, in chapter 28 he explains some recent trends and developments in Protestantism, such as the emergence of theological liberalism and the increasing prominence of biblical criticism. In the final chapter Early takes a look at Christianity across the globe with a particular interest in its changing shape as growth occurs in the Global South.

In evaluating this work, there are a number of aspects that deserve commendation. For me, the most appreciable is his decision to focus mainly on factors internal rather than external to the church. Of course, he does focus on some external factors, such as the political and religious milieu in which Christianity emerged, but he prefers to focus on significant ideas, people, and events within Christianity. This is seen especially clearly in his

treatment of the fourth and fifth centuries. He gives considerable attention to theologians and their ideas while skipping over many details of Roman politics and military endeavours. Some historians might not appreciate this approach, as external factors have undoubtedly had a significant impact on the shaping of Christianity throughout the centuries. However, it must be remembered that Early's task here is not primarily to explain why things happened but to introduce the reader to Christian history, presumably with further learning being held as a distinct possibility, and it is also worth keeping in mind that many of the readers will be students of Christian theology. For someone endeavoring to learn about Christian history, especially in the context of broader theological studies, it will likely be more beneficial to have a working knowledge of, say, Augustine's thought than of the impact of climate on migration in Europe. This decision, then, helps to maximize the effectiveness of this book as an introduction to church history.

Early also ought to be commended for the fact that he refuses to let history become an exercise in polemics. In his treatment of all traditions and denominations he is charitable and fair. While his selection of material certainly suggests that he is a Protestant, I suspect that many Catholics and Orthodox would still enjoy and appreciate this book. He is especially to be commended for his treatment of the early church. There is a well-known temptation among historians to fashion the early church after their own particular denominational traditions, and in his resistance to this temptation Early displays the firmness and purity of Anthony the Great. Despite working at a Baptist institution, he is frank about certain aspects of patristic thinking that contrast with popular Baptist belief, such as the theology of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In fact, he even provides a direct quotation from Ambrose about the Eucharist that would be engaging to many Baptists (118).

One aspect of this book deserves both applause and disapproval: its treatment of the Eastern Church. The applause is fitting because Early has given more attention to this wing of Christianity than many Westerners do in their treatment of church history. Also appreciable is his discussion of Eastern

theology, which helps students get a sense of some ideas and concerns in Eastern thinking that are unfamiliar to most Western Christians. However, a certain degree of disapproval is appropriate because even though he focuses on the East more than many do, this focus is still too small, especially with regards to the last few centuries. There have been huge developments in Orthodoxy during this time, and they deserve a more thorough treatment than what is given in this book.

One element of this book that is disappointing is the disproportionate emphasis on Britain and especially America in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. Early gives a tremendous amount of attention to the details of American life, religion, and politics while neglecting huge movements outside of America like German Pietism. Also, as mentioned above, the material on denominations from the Old World in the New World focuses mainly on America. Many, especially non-Americans in the New World, will find this frustrating. Of course, America is important largely due to its sizable population and its tendency to produce new Christian groups, but the lack of attention given to phenomena in other nations is unjustified. What about the rise of Baptists in Canada? What about Anglicanism in Australia?

The work also contains some frustrating inaccuracies. They are minor, but they are nevertheless detrimental to the quality of the work as a whole. One inaccuracy that I find particularly poignant is Early's reference to the worship of Mary and "Mariolatry" in the church. His presentation of this alleged practice implies that it was an established part of Christianity and that the term "Mariolatry" was an accepted word used neutrally or perhaps warmly to describe how Christians viewed and treated Mary. Here is the full sentence containing "Mariolatry": "[Jerome's] arguments for the perpetual virginity of Mary contributed to the cult of Mary, which came to be known as Mariolatry" (104). This is simply inaccurate. Christianity has always, at least officially, opposed the worship of anyone or anything except the one God, and it therefore has never come to accept the worship of Mary. "Mariolatry" is a pejorative term used for the purpose of negatively characterizing the behavior of

certain Christians and Christian groups with regard to Mary, and it has no place in Early's otherwise amicable and non-polemical book. Another case of imprecision is his discussion of the Christian acceptance of the Old Testament. He says that the church accepted "the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament" (44) and then moves on to the more controversial and drawn out history of the canonization of the New Testament. Here he fails to acknowledge the Apocrypha (or, if you please, the deuterocanonical books), which has traditionally and historically been read alongside the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament and has been accepted as a canonical (or at least deuterocanonical) part of the pre-Christian Scriptures by a huge portion of the church throughout its history. This oversight oversimplifies and misconstrues the ways in which the church has understood its sacred Scripture.

In all, Early's work is a welcome addition to the introductory literature on church history. To be sure, there are some faults, but the merits of this book certainly outweigh them, making it a useful resource for all those who wish to learn more about this highly important subject. I suspect it will be especially appreciated by church history professors looking for a recent textbook for a survey course, as its clarity and wise selection of material makes it a great resource for students who need to learn about the names, events, and ideas that have shaped the Christian religion.

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