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REVIEW ESSAYS

## *Review Essays*

*A Short History of Christianity.* By Stephen Tomkins. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. 256 pages. Softcover, \$15.00

*Church History 101: A Concise Overview.* By Christopher M. Bellitto. Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2008. 141 pages. Softcover, \$14.95.

*A Short World History of Christianity.* By Robert Bruce Mullin Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 312 + ix pages. Softcover, \$29.95

### **New Histories of Christianity**

There is no end to the writing of Christian history textbooks. While Gonzalez's two volume *The Story of Christianity* (now available in a one volume version that retains the numbering of the originals) remains the standard in most seminary classes, it suffers from two deficiencies. First, it is nearly twenty-five years old and its scholarship is dated. Second, it sacrifices nuance for readability at many points. New additions to the market are stronger than Gonzalez in some regards. For instance, although not without its shortcomings, *The History of the World Christian Movement*, Volume 1 (Irvin and Sunquist, eds.; Orbis, 2001) provides a more comprehensive global picture of Christianity than the standard Westocentric approach. However, its embrace of Christian pluralism (e.g. they consistently refer to Gnosticism as "Gnostic Christianity") will trouble many evangelicals, who do not share the larger scholarly community's suspicion of "orthodoxy" as a legitimate historical category. For those so discomfited, Everett Ferguson's *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation* (Zondervan, 2005) is a good alternative. Although not quite as readable, it is a remarkable text, integrating social, institutional, and theological history and utilizing visuals (maps, charts, photographs) exceptionally well. Ferguson embraces a rather conventional narrative, but not without engaging recent trends in scholarship, making it a strong option for those who generally endorse a more traditional narrative. In addition, professors will find it valuable for developing lectures. Two problems confront these newer entries. Both suffer from the publishing lag time that is all too common: the second volume has appeared for neither. Second, although most seminaries and divinity schools still require the standard two course church his-

tory sequence, more and more colleges and universities offer the history of Christianity as a single semester course for which two volume histories are ill suited. Thankfully, some recent market entries address this need.

In recent years, a spate of books recounting the history of Christianity in a single volume has been published. With words like “brief,” “short,” or “concise” in their titles, these volumes are a welcome addition to the field. In *A Short World History of Christianity* Robert Bruce Mullin, the Society for the Promotion of Religion and Learning Professor of History and World Mission and Professor of Modern Anglican Studies at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church (New York City), does a good job with a difficult task: writing a world-wide history of Christianity in less than 300 hundred pages. Mullin’s narrative is quite good and despite space limitations, he weaves some interesting and unfamiliar tidbits into the story, helping hold the reader’s interest. The murder of Melchite Bishop Proterius by a monophysite mob is one such gruesomely fascinating account (80); his reminder that Armenia is the oldest Christian nation is another (54).

Like Irvin & Sunquist, Mullin’s approach in *A Short World History* is generous to groups generally considered heretical by the standard treatments of the past. In chapter 3, Mullin notes that in “defending and defining” the faith during the second century, “the paths rejected, some now claim, were lost opportunities” (26). Later he is sharper, referring to the Nicene struggle as “defining and *dividing*” Christianity and, in a play on Catherine Albanese’s phrase, subsequent conciliar decisions bring many Christianities out of what had been one. All of this fits the contours of Mullin’s overall narrative that moves from globalization to globalization. Having passed through various monolithic periods, Christianity is returning to being what it was in its earliest years: a multiplicity of sometimes competitive regional manifestations (xii). For Mullin, the early broad consensus of regional Christianities began to break apart during early definitional struggles and became fully fractured during the conciliar period (87). During the medieval period, as the Eastern Empire succumbed to the Ottomans, the Latin Church emerged as the “dominant community” (105). Soon, although some form of Christianity continued in each European state, the Reformation “shattered” that hegemony (131). Subsequently, the mission efforts of the “great century” (213–28), the independency of post-colonial regional Christianities and decline of Christianity in the West brings the story full circle (261–77). In his words, a new “era of competing regional Christianities has returned (277).” Mullin’s assessment is plausible, and, like Philips Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom* (2003), ought to spur evangelicals to thoughtful consideration of such matters.

Mullin writes well. Concise without being terse, *A Short World History* summarizes difficult thinkers, such as Kant and Schleiermacher (184–186), in remarkably brief paragraphs. Although careful, Mullin does not shy away from interpretation and, even when I found myself in disagreement—such as his equating of pietism, Methodism and evangelicalism as the same “religion of the heart” in different geographical contexts (168)—his interpretations are most often plausible. A few exceptions emerge such as when he interprets the *via media* as Elizabeth’s policy of “inclusivity” (144), an anachronism that would have puzzled both Elizabethan Roman Catholics and Puritans. Along those lines, most evangelicals will be unhappy with his implicit approval of Darwinism and nineteenth-century approaches to the Bible (200–12). At the same time, unlike many contemporaries, he refuses to entirely equate missions with colonialism (214), giving it fair treatment. Likewise, he discusses conflict raised by the global South’s opposition to liberalizing trends, such as the ordination of homosexuals in some fellowships. Although a few factual mistakes are scattered throughout—e.g. the monothelite controversy was not really a compromise aimed at settling the monophysite controversy (81) and Wollstonecraft’s famous book is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, not *Women* (181)—overall, Mullin’s text is solid historically. Finally, Mullin and Westminster John Knox would have improved this product’s utility by expanding the too-short “suggesting readings” list and by adding maps and charts, which are critical to any introductory text. Despite these small issues, it is a good choice as the main text for those pesky one-semester college courses that cover the entire history of Christianity. For evangelicals, the areas of disagreement can become “talking points” around which to orient class discussions.

Christopher M. Bellitto, Assistant Professor of History at Kean University (Union, NJ), contributes *Church History 101: A Concise Overview* to this collection. Physically small (5”x7”) with a mere 141 pages, this volume is the shortest of the short. Bellitto’s work is splendid. The former Paulist Press academic editor targets the Roman Catholic laity, specifically “general readers, parish study groups, RCIA [Right of Christian Initiation for Adults] candidates, catechists and students” (9). Superbly organized, Bellitto offers chapters from each of the standard periods of church history—early, medieval, reformation, and modern—prefaced by an introduction and followed by an epilogue. Across each of the four periods, his subsections are the same: “The Big Picture,” “The Church’s Hierarchy,” “The Church in the Pews,” and “What Makes this Period Unique?” It is hard to imagine a better approach to providing a concise overview. Helpful maps preface each chapter, as does a timeline with important dates from the period. Although they are grayscale, both are visually appealing and readable. At the end of each chapter are questions to answer and suggestions

for further reading. While the questions are broad and overly simple, the reading lists are solid.

Overall an excellent product, readers should be reminded that Bellitto is a committed Roman Catholic and, for the most part, takes a Roman Catholic perspective on contested developments in church history. For instance, the medieval popes “can’t be faulted for taking steps to protect their own interests; the Church needed peace, prosperity, protection, and freedom to keep her theology clear and her officials independent” (59–60). Protestants might demur that the very developments that protected the freedom of the popes vis-à-vis secular rulers allowed the papacy to squelch the freedom of some reform-minded groups like the Waldensians, who Bellitto labels heretics (68). In addition, Bellitto perceives that the Crusades emerged from an effort to protect Christian pilgrims who “were being harassed—meaning robbed and at times killed—by Muslims” (69–70). Yet Bellitto does not ignore church failures. He laments both the medieval pogroms (72–73) against the Jews and raises the question of the Roman Catholic Church’s complicity in the Holocaust (136). Neither does he shy away from difficult topics like papal infallibility or Marian piety (122, 126) nor hesitate to point out the troubling aspects of Protestantism, e.g. how it splintered into a multiplicity of variations “over the next decades and centuries” (82), an issue few Protestants engage in depth. Bellitto’s Catholicism also means that he is fairly orthodox in his understanding of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ and, à la Newman, that he perceives continuity in the development of doctrine, e.g. Vatican II completes Trent (132–33).

Although Bellitto embraces an overt Catholic perspective on historical events, they are usually within the bounds of legitimate historical interpretation. Only in a few instances does this translate to inaccuracy. For instance, his characterization of medieval piety movements that emphasized Jesus’ humanity as “evangelical” (62, 66, 94) and his characterization of Zwingli (a *very* magisterial reformer) as part of the Radical Reformation (83) is perplexing. Besides this, *Church History 101* remains a good book and would be an easy good place to start for Protestants who want to understand how Catholics view Church History.

If Bellitto contributes the briefest short history, Stephen Tomkins provides the funniest in *A Short History of Christianity*. Although he holds a Ph.D. in Church History from the London School of Theology, classroom history bored Tomkins as a boy, and thus, “despite whatever the cover may have led you to believe, this is not a history book. This is a storybook. It is a true story.” Intended to be a fast-moving, humorous account aimed at lay readers who don’t know “their John Paul from their George and Ringo,” Tomkins’ book is very funny indeed. For instance, in describing

the fraudulent “Donation of Constantine,” he notes that it “is called the most successful fraud in history, but one can’t help wondering how we can be so sure” (80). In a later section, he notes that although the appellation “fundamentalist” had “originally meant ‘conservative Protestant’” it “now, if anything, means ‘someone more religious than I approve of’” (224). This type of humor begins on the cover, which is graced with a photo of the “Nativity Kitchen Timer,” continuing through the preface and each of the four major sections: “As It Was in the Beginning,” “The Rise of Rome,” “The Reformation,” and “Globalisation.” Each section contains its own chapter numbering, so that “Trent” is chapter 3 of “Part 3: The Reformation.” This attractive book also contains a brief glossary of technical terms (e.g. “asceticism,” “*homoousios*”) that, although simple, will be helpful to uninitiated readers.

Tomkins is a good writer and his flair for humor makes reading *A Short History* joyful. Aside from the humor, the strength of Tomkins’ recounting is the ease with which he weaves ethnographic and political developments in throughout his brief church history. In addition, other than Hegel (whose absence is curious considering his overarching influence on the late nineteenth century), all the usual suspects appear. The description of many events is ideal. For instance, he succinctly summarizes the events surrounding the council of Chalcedon (65–67) and the crusades (104–16). His ultra-brief description of the development of the European feudal system will find its way into my lecture on the medieval church (85–86).

Evangelicals, not to mention Catholics and Orthodox, will not be entirely satisfied with Tomkins’ assessment of Docetism, Gnosticism, or Marcionism as “rival versions of Christianity” (28) nor his indicative question: “Has the age of councils degraded Christianity into a pseudo-science where knowing precisely who Christ supposedly was is more important than doing what he said?” (71). In addition, Tomkins errs at several points. Three examples should suffice. First, in an attempt to connect to economically-minded contemporary readers, he points to “tax disputes” as the cause of war between the Romans and Jews in AD 66 (22). More precisely, the Roman governor’s attempt to levy taxes *on the temple treasury*, a religious issue that violated the Roman’s own previous policy, was the culprit. Second, although some patristic scholars have viewed the Trinitarian conflict in terms of competing interpretations of Origen’s doctrine of God, describing it as “middle way” between Arius and Athanasius is perplexing (49). Third, Tomkins wrongly asserts that for the continental pietists, “Christianity was not about right doctrine but about spiritual rebirth and godly living” (186). In reality, the pietists wanted right doctrine *and* a vibrant spiritual life. They did not want to substitute the former with latter. After all, in the event described by Tompkins on pages 190–91, it was pietist *par excel-*

lence A.H. Franke that recommended and achieved the removal of Christian Wolffe for deviating from orthodoxy. Such errors occur enough that this volume misses its intended audience. Because of them, neophytes will come away with an erroneous perspective on certain aspects of the history of Christianity. At the same time, experienced church historians should be able to identify these types of errors while enjoying Tomkins' humor.

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***Letter to a Christian Nation.* By Sam Harris. New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2006. 96 pages. Hardcover, \$16.95.**

“Reading Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation* was like sitting ring-side, cheering the champion, yelling ‘Yes!’ at every jab. For those of us who feel depressed by this country’s ever increasing unification of church and state, this little book is a welcome hit of adrenaline.” Such are the words of praise for Sam Harris’s book by Harvard University professor Marc Hauser. *Letter to a Christian Nation* is a condensation of many of the arguments presented in Harris’ New York Times best seller, *The End of Faith*. Harris, one of the so-called Four Horsemen (along with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett) of the New Atheism, sets forth his agenda for *Letter* early on: “to arm secularists in our society” (viii) and “to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms” (ix).

Later, Harris reveals his true motivation for his rants against theism—he believes it to be dangerous. Commenting on the findings of a Gallup poll which suggests that 53% of Americans identify themselves as creationists, Harris claims that America is the only developed nation with such a high rate of religious conviction among its citizens, and sees this as a concern: “Our country now appears . . . like a lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant. Anyone who cares about the fate of civilization would do well to recognize that the combination of great power and great stupidity is simply terrifying” (xi).

Harris’ attack on belief in God generally and Christianity specifically includes nothing new and is juvenile in its level of sophistication, moving from topic to topic with little or no transition. It involves criticism of Christians, defense of atheism and evaluation of belief in God. At various points in the book, Harris chastises Christians for their supposed lack of compassion and intellectual acumen as well as their pride. Amazingly, he claims that Christians lack compassion for human suffering because of their opposition to abortion and stem cell research. Opponents of abortion



expect those suffering from debilitating illnesses (such as Alzheimer's) to wait until alternatives to stem-cell treatment are developed and they expect women with unwanted pregnancies to "suffer" through the delivery process, putting their own health at risk. This, Harris claims, demonstrates a fundamental lack of pathos.

Christians, Harris contends, are either dimwitted or simply dishonest, as evinced by the fact that so many question the established fact of Darwinian evolution. Christian belief in the Bible as God's Word is also seen as a severe intellectual handicap. For example, he attacks the suggestion that the Bible serves as a good moral guide, citing several immoral teachings—those which prescribe capital punishment for heresy, adultery, wayward children, idolatry, sorcery, and the like. He then makes the spurious claim that Jainism is morally superior to Christianity: "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of god for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible. It is impossible to behave this way by adhering to the principles of Jainism" (23). Of course the key words here are "theologically defensible," which is questionable at best. Last, he faults Christians for believing that God loves them and wants to know them, claiming this as evidence of "a level of arrogance simply unimaginable in scientific discourse" (74–75).

Harris defends atheism against charges that it leads to immorality. Unfortunately, he does not do so by addressing the philosophical question of the atheistic basis for morality, but instead by attacking the morality of actions by religious fanatics. He points to the Muslim riots which swept through Europe as a result of unflattering cartoons of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper as example of the general principle that religion leads to violence. Atheism is thereby deemed more moral than religion. After all, he points out, atheists have never rioted because their views were attacked! This sidestepping of a philosophical critique of the atheist worldview is characteristic of the work. Lumping all religious belief together, he asserts that religion leads to terrorism (citing Islamist terror acts as evidence). Not only does belief in God lead to violence, but it is unable to explain why evil exists. Appeals to creaturely freedom, Harris contends, are inadequate explanations.

According to Harris, then, it is religion that is the basis of social ills—abortion, teen pregnancy, homicide, etc. He makes his case by a statistical comparison of secular European countries with the United States. Since crime rates and belief in God, for instance, are higher in the U.S., there must be a correlation between the two. He bolsters this claim by noting the higher crime rates in characteristically religious "Red" states over those of more enlightened "Blue" states, even claiming that the cities with



the highest crime rates are in “Red” states: “Of the twenty-five most dangerous cities, 76 percent are in red states, 24 percent in blue states. In fact, three of the five most dangerous cities in the United States are in the pious state of Texas” (45). Unfortunately for the reader, Harris does not divulge where he gets his facts. It seems that this is clearly a case of manipulation of statistical data. For example, it very well could be the case that the high crime cities found in “Red” states are where the majority of the “Blue” votes in that state come from. There is also good reason to doubt that the crime rate in, for example, New York or Massachusetts is lower than, say, Nebraska.

While Harris’ book is full of polemic, half-truths, and in some cases, what can only be described as deliberate falsehoods, it is not without its moments of clarity. Perhaps the most important of these comes in his criticisms of secular religionists for their continued optimism regarding humanity and religion in spite of the events of September 11th. It is worth quoting him at length:

And yet, while the religious divisions in our world are self-evident, many people still imagine that religious conflict is always caused by a lack of education, by poverty, or by politics. Most nonbelievers, liberals, and moderates apparently think that no one really sacrifices his life, or the lives of others, on account of his religious beliefs. Such people simply do not know what it is like to be certain of Paradise. . . . It is worth remembering that the September 11 hijackers were college-educated, middle-class people who had no discernible experience of political oppression. . . . The truth, astonishingly enough, is this: in the year 2006, a person can have sufficient intellectual and material resources to build a nuclear bomb and still believe that he will get seventy-two virgins in Paradise. Western secularists, liberals, and moderates have been very slow to understand this. The cause of their confusion is simple: they don’t know what it is to really believe in God (82–83).

Harris’ conclusion is perhaps the most astonishing—while much of the book is meant to proclaim the evils of religion, Harris seems to suggest that we invent an alternative to Judaism, Islam and Christianity that can only be described as a secular religion. He writes, “Clearly, it is time we learned to meet our emotional needs without embracing the preposterous. We must find ways to invoke the power of ritual and to mark those transitions in every human life that demand profundity—birth, marriage, death—without lying to ourselves about the nature of reality. Only then

will the practice of raising our children to believe that they are Christian, Muslim, or Jewish be widely recognized as the ludicrous obscenity that it is. And only then will we stand a chance of healing the deepest and most dangerous fractures in our world” (88). This suggestion is fraught with problems.

First, it is self defeating. By offering secular humanism as a religion, Harris undercuts his previous claim that religion is the root of much evil. Second, it admits the need for transcendence, which has no good explanation in a naturalistic worldview. Third, it is too optimistic, something of which Harris chastises liberals, moderates and even fellow atheists. Fourth, it is historically naïve, ignoring the fact that atheistic regimes have not brought peace, but in many cases, more suffering. Harris’ answer is that it is dogmatism and fanaticism which led to the horrors of Nazism and Communism. This contention is inconsistent since he blames religion when it is present. Fifth, his own suggestion smacks of dogmatism insofar as the language he uses is inflammatory (e.g., “obscenity” language indicates that his beliefs are born not out of disinterested rational reflection). It is worth noting that Harris, Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens have questioned why their works have elicited visceral reactions by religious people, seemingly oblivious to the offensive nature of their words, something Harris accuses Christians of on more than one occasion.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Letter to a Christian Nation* is its brevity. A short 96 pages (with reasonable font), the whole of Harris’ argument can be consumed in a single sitting. Pastors, students and laypersons who want to know what the New Atheism is about, but do not have time to read the more lengthy treatises by Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Hitchens (*God is Not Great*), Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*) or even Harris himself will be well-served by this little book. Of course, what it gains in brevity, it loses in depth, and the thoughtful critic may be left with more questions than answers at the end of the day.

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