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THE ESSENTIAL HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

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In writing this book I have necessarily drawn on a wide range of secondary literature as well as primary sources. The most useful of these are listed in the references and suggestions for further reading at the end of this book, but I am of course indebted to many more than those. I hope that I have acknowledged all quotations, but I am uneasily aware that, over several years of teaching this material, I may have inadvertently adopted someone else's phrasing as my own. I apologize in advance if that is so.

On a more personal level, I gratefully acknowledge my book group (Laura Mazzoli Smith, Anne Bennett, Mary McMahon, Angela Woods, Marita Grimwood, Rachel Volland and Corinne Holmes) who have given me the invaluable support and encouragement of fellow readers and writers, as well as help with childcare as the deadline approached. The members of the Ecclesiastical History Seminar of Durham University, especially my co-chair Alec Ryrie, have also been a supportive and reflective group, and a pleasure to know. Finally, I am especially grateful to my husband Phil, not simply for his tireless love and support but also for his time and care in reading and commenting on this entire book in draft form. This book is for him.

Introduction

The history of Christianity can seem a dauntingly large one. It covers 2,000 years – more, if its roots and Judaic prehistory are to be adequately accounted for. It covers virtually every corner of the world, and not simply sequentially but in a complex and overlapping sequence of movements, retreats and conflicts. And, as it has been received into different cultures and periods, it has been refracted – like a rainbow in a prism – into a dazzling spectrum of different shades. As a result, there is never a time at which we can point to one, monolithic grouping and say 'Look – there is Christianity as it originally was; now let's see what happened to it'. Right from the beginning, the movements inspired by Jesus were disparate in geography, outlook, cultural and religious background, social class and nationality.

Theological differences in emphasis and in substance were the inevitable result. This seems to have been a logical result of a religion which began, so its adherents believe, with the incarnation (literally, the 'en-fleshing') of God in one particular time and place. This is a religion whose main doctrine has never – contrary to much popular opinion – been contained between the covers of a book, but in the lived experience of a human, historical person. It follows logically and inevitably that there is no one 'correct' form of Christianity, but as many different relationships to that person as there are people in relationship with him.

Logical and inevitable this kaleidoscope of faith may be, but it remains dauntingly complex. Nevertheless, if we allow our focus to move away from the intricate historical detail, and instead zoom out to the big picture of the past 2,000 years of Christian history, clear story-arcs, themes, and contours of development can be seen.

This is important not just because it enables us to understand what has gone on in the past, but because the past has shaped the present reality. Understanding the big picture of Christian history therefore helps us to understand what has shaped our present experiences of churches, religion, spirituality and religious conflict. It also gives us important clues as to what might happen in the future.

The aim of this book is for you to gain an overall understanding of the broad sweep of Christian history. The book is not primarily concerned with facts and dates, but with trends, long-term developments, and the context of particular events. There will of course be some facts and some dates: these are examples, evidence that has helped historians to pick out the trend that is being illustrated. They will not be exhaustive, but I have tried hard to ensure that they are representative. That is, while this is necessarily a summary of a very big subject, the examples given have been chosen to be typical of the periods and developments being discussed. Please don't be afraid of the dates involved – you are not expected to learn them! If you want to refer to a particular fact or date again, it will be right here where you left it. Should you want more detailed information about a particular period or subject, you will find suggestions for further reading at the end of the book.

I hope that you enjoy this book, that you will be inspired and intrigued, and perhaps moved to pick up some of the suggestions for further reading. And I hope that you will be left, not with a mind full of dates, but with a sense of the shape of the landscape, understanding and appreciating the view, and with some clues as to what might be around the next corner.

Ways to use this book

Individuals

This book is a quick and easy read. It is short enough for the whole book to be read in one or two evenings, to give you a quick overview of the whole of Christian history. Or, if you only have small slivers of time available, the short chapters mean that it can be read in several brief bursts.

In writing this book, the main audience I've had in mind is Christians who want to deepen their knowledge and understanding of Christianity. You might be reading simply for your own pleasure, or you might be undertaking some formal further study, perhaps training for ordination or to be a reader, or taking an evening course. In that case, I hope that this book will provide an overview of the context into which more detailed study will fit. While some will read it as a whole, from start to finish, others will no doubt dip into a

particular chapter to provide some context for an essay or other piece of study. The chapters have therefore been written so as to be largely self-contained, and cross-references given where necessary to relevant material that can be found in other chapters.

Groups

In testing early drafts of this book with members of local churches, several people suggested that they would value using the book for group study, either as a Lent course or as the basis for a series of cell group meetings. For many such groups, and particularly for Advent or Lent courses, a series of four or five meetings is the most common pattern. I have therefore suggested, on page xii, four 'pathways' of selected chapters, three of five weeks and one of four weeks, which can be used in this way. The bracketed chapter in each of the first three pathways can be omitted to provide a coherent four-week alternative. You might also, of course, choose to use the entire book, perhaps split into the two blocks suggested by Path 1 and Path 2; or make up your own selection based on the interests of the group.

Over several years of teaching church history to ordinands, clergy, readers and undergraduates, I have found that most people are nervous of the subject, as being too vast to do justice to, but also tend to know more about it than they give themselves credit for. Where they struggle is in relating the various facts that they know to one another, and putting them in their historical contexts. We often begin a new course with a long roll of paper, on which I write at one end '0' and at the other '2000'. I then invite the group to call out facts or incidents that they know of, and together we agree on whereabouts on the makeshift timeline they should be placed. People usually begin the evening feeling that they know nothing about Christian history and that it is too big a subject to be easily grasped, and end the first hour or so surveying the timeline – now crowded with writing – in disbelief that they knew so much.

You may like to try this exercise for yourselves, in your first group meeting. You can use old wallpaper or a children's art paper roll, or simply several sheets of A4 paper taped end to end. It might help to begin by writing the events or incidents that come to mind on sticky notes, so that you can reposition them easily. This can also represent any uncertainty as to where exactly things go; knowing that they can

be easily moved can help to remove any 'performance anxiety' associated with this exercise. You might like to keep your timeline, and refer to it again when you've read the rest of this book.

Path 1: Early Christian history

Week 1: Chapter 1: Christian beginnings
Week 2: Chapter 2: The imperial Church
Week 3: Chapter 3: European conversion
Week 4: Chapter 4: Western Christendom
(*Week 5*: Chapter 5: Beyond Western Christendom)

Path 2: Modern Christian history

Week 1: Chapter 6: Reformation and Counter-Reformation
(*Week 2*: Chapter 7: The longest Reformation)
Week 3: Chapter 8: The modern period
Week 4: Chapter 9: Globalizing Christianity
Week 5: Chapter 10: Christianity after *c*. 1900

Path 3: The history of the Church in and of England

Week 1: Chapter 3: European conversion
Week 2: Chapter 4: Western Christendom
Week 3: Chapter 7: The longest Reformation
Week 4: Chapter 8: The modern period
(*Week 5*: Chapter 10: Christianity after *c*. 1900)

Path 4: Christian mission through history

Week 1: Chapter 1: Christian beginnings
Week 2: Chapter 3: European conversion
Week 3: Chapter 5: Beyond Western Christendom
Week 4: Chapter 9: Globalizing Christianity

1

Christian beginnings: to *c.* 300

Introduction

Christian history begins with the history of Jesus' public ministry and the immediate aftermath of his death. Although there is considerable debate between Christians and non-Christians as to who exactly Jesus was, and what he did, there is no substantial argument as to the historical fact that someone called Jesus lived and taught in the area around Galilee and Jerusalem during the period of the Roman occupation of Palestine. There is considerable evidence from Christian, Jewish and Roman sources that Jesus existed, taught, and was executed by crucifixion, and that this execution was quickly followed by claims that he had risen from the dead.

Accounts vary as to the exact length of time that Jesus' public ministry lasted, but it seems to have been between one and three years. It ended with his execution just outside the city walls of Jerusalem some time between AD 29 and 32, on the day now commemorated as Good Friday. According to the Bible and Christian tradition, he was resurrected from the dead three days later, on the day now commemorated as Easter Sunday, and was seen and encountered by many different groups of people over the following 40 days. After that period, Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1.6–11). The bereft disciples were then given the gift of the Holy Spirit, an event commemorated in the Christian calendar as the feast of Pentecost, and the history of the Church is commonly dated from that point onwards.

At the beginning of this period, however, it is anachronistic to speak of 'Christianity'; the term was not in widespread use at this point. The first Christians thought of themselves as the fulfilment of classical Judaism, with Jesus being understood as the long-promised Jewish Messiah. Outsiders, such as the Romans, seem to have understood them as a variant sect within Judaism, and initially

it seems that Christianity was primarily preached and successful within the context of the synagogues (Jewish worshipping communities). Christianity rapidly spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, helped by the presence of a common language, good trading networks and transport routes, and the extensive presence of Romans who respected and were interested in Judaism.

Its early spread was patchy, with particular concentration in cities and with some regions more affected than others, and exact statistics for its spread are impossible to calculate. However, by the beginning of the fourth century (*c.* AD 300) around half the population in some areas were Christian, and there were few parts of the empire where Christianity was unknown. Throughout this period there were sporadic periods of persecution, particularly fierce in the period after AD 250 when the Roman Empire was beginning to find its borders threatened. However, these were never severe or consistent enough to wipe out Christianity, but instead gave it both publicity and a self-understanding of purity and separation which has proved remarkably persistent and influential in later centuries.

The beginning of Christianity

After the events of the first Easter, there was a small but highly committed core of people who believed both that Jesus was in some way God, and that he had risen from the dead. Since these were the earliest core beliefs, they have a plausible claim to be the heart of the Christian faith. Many of the doctrines and teachings that have subsequently been held to be essential – that Jesus died to save us from our sins, or the doctrine of the Trinity, for example – were not at this point precisely formulated, though it seems highly likely that they were held by at least some of the earliest Christians. Nor was the term 'Christian' in widespread use at this point. The earliest disciples were not yet clearly differentiated from mainstream Judaism. It was generally believed that Jesus had come to revive and restore Judaism, rather than found a new religion. It was only as conflicts with the traditional Jewish authorities increased that this changed. These conflicts escalated as Judaism was particularly concerned to define its boundaries after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans following successive Jewish revolts against Roman rule in AD 66–70 and 132–5. By the early to mid second century, therefore, the two had clearly diverged into two distinct religions.

The earliest known use of the word 'Christian' comes in the Acts of the Apostles, probably written around AD 60–70 (Acts 11.26). Both the fish (*icthys* in Greek, which also served as an acrostic for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour) and the cross were well-known Christian signs, certainly from the second century onwards, being used in inscriptions and referred to in Christian writings. The crucifix (a representation of Christ crucified, rather than simply a bare cross) only developed as a Christian symbol after it had stopped being used as a routine Roman punishment, and is only known from the fifth century onwards. Earlier than this, however, it was used as a slur. One of the best-known pieces of early graffiti is a crude cartoon of a man with a donkey's head being crucified, which we know dates from before AD 79, as it was found in the excavations at Pompeii. It shows a man kneeling before the cross with the slogan 'Alexamenos worshipping his God' (Green, 2004).

Over the last few decades a great deal of light has been shed on the religious context in which Christianity developed, above all with the discovery of the library of the Qumran community (popularly known as the 'Dead Sea Scrolls'). These documents reveal that the Judaism of the century or so before Jesus lived was full of renewal movements, hermits, quasi-monastic communities emphasizing bodily holiness and denial, apocalyptic predictions, and so on. In this context, John the Baptist (Luke 3.1–18) would have been seen as simply one of a long line of eccentric prophets calling for repentence; those who went out to be baptized by him would have been acting in a culturally accepted way. Similarly, the initial preaching and teaching ministry of Jesus would have been of a type that was widely familiar.

This explains two otherwise puzzling and contradictory things about the Gospel accounts. On the one hand, we are told that thousands of people followed Jesus (think of the feeding miracles, and his having to teach from a boat); on the other, that it was not clear to more than a handful of close followers that he was anything very different, and even they remained unconvinced until after the resurrection. Contemporary documents illuminate very clearly that this was a period in which charismatic teachers and miracle workers were a common and accepted part of life. There was what we might almost call a celebrity culture around them, in which a gathering of hundreds or even thousands was not an unexpected occurrence, but a

good day out. This explains the apparent paradox that few took Jesus particularly seriously at the time; he was one among many, and only after the resurrection did his uniqueness become clear.

The early spread of Christianity

Christianity began to spread remarkably quickly after the initial events of the first Easter and Pentecost, both within the local Jewish community in Jerusalem and much more widely. This was partly due to intentional missionary activity on the part of the earliest Christian leaders, but three structural factors were also critically important. These were the presence of a common language; the infrastructure of the Roman Empire; and the wide cultural and religious penetration of Judaism throughout the empire.

The earliest Church spoke Aramaic, the local language and Jesus' own mother tongue. But most early Christians would also have spoken and understood Greek, which was the lingua franca of the Roman world (not Latin, which was simply one local language among many). Indeed, Greek was widely understood even beyond the limits of the empire: the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC had spread Greek well into Asia, and there was a Greek kingdom for two centuries in and around India. Greek was very widely spoken as a second language, and this meant that there was little or no language barrier in communicating the gospel message. The earliest texts of the New Testament were written in simple, idiomatic Greek, and would have been easily understood across disparate societies and social groups.

From the beginning, it is clear that the Church was multinational, as the Pentecost story graphically illustrates (Acts 2.1–11). This is not surprising, as the Roman world was extremely multicultural because of widespread trading networks, the institution of slavery, and the fact that soldiers were always posted to other countries than their own. The famous *Pax Romana* (the Roman peace), though sometimes patchy and fragile, was a reality. Within the empire, travel was relatively safe, with piracy and banditry harshly punished. Good roads and sea routes linked all parts of the empire. It is quite remarkable how the early Christians managed to get about the world – much more easily, in some cases, than the believers who were to follow them a few hundred years later.

Many of the individuals who were the first believers would therefore have been very mobile, and as they travelled around the empire – as slaves, merchants, soldiers or government officials – they would have spread their faith widely. This is backed up by external evidence showing the rapid geographical spread of Christianity across the region and beyond, often following prominent trading routes. One of the most famous examples is a letter that Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking his advice, in around AD 112. Pliny was governor in the remote and mainly rural region of Bithynia, in north-west Asia Minor, and he was dismayed by the rapid spread of Christianity to 'many of all ages and every rank, and also of both sexes . . . [and not in] the cities only, but the villages and country' (Stevenson and Frend, 1987).

But an even more decisive factor may well have been the successful spread of Judaism itself in previous centuries. Jews were to be found everywhere throughout the empire, with synagogues in all the main cities. Graeco-Roman culture was fascinated by ancient wisdom, and monotheism was growing in attraction by this period. The old gods were increasingly understood, at least by the intellectual and cultural elite, to be mythological, and monotheism was viewed as a purer and more intellectually satisfying alternative. Some converts became Jews through circumcision, but circumcision was not generally a culturally acceptable practice in Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) society, so most Gentile adherents to Judaism remained 'God-fearers'. Through attendance at the synagogues they were well versed in the Old Testament and its moral and theological ideas, and they seem to have been the earliest respondents to the gospel. It has been suggested that 'It was the presence of this prepared elite that differentiated the missions of the apostolic age from those of every subsequent time, and makes comparison almost impossible' (Neill, 1986).

Though Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Roman empire, its progress was uneven in different areas. The empire itself was primarily city based; government and economy were centred on cities, and transport links were focused on providing routes for trade and information between cities. The growth of the early Church mirrored this organizational pattern. Initially, missionaries travelled to the major cities – Paul's journeys, described in Acts, being the best-known example. Paul was by no means the only full-time missionary in this early period, but he may well have been the most systematic,

and is the one of whom we have most evidence. His technique was very much based on the great cities of the empire, settling in a major city for a time, and using his assistants to radiate out to the smaller cities of the region.

Estimating numbers for the spread of Christianity in this period is very difficult, since historians have to extrapolate from small fragments of documents and archaeological evidence. In around 250, for example, a letter from Bishop Cornelius of Rome recorded that the Christian community there included '46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes, 52 exorcists, readers and door-keepers, over 1500 widows and persons in distress' (Stevenson and Frend, 1987). It has been calculated that this represents a total Christian population of around 30,000. While the total population of Rome at this time is uncertain, this clearly represented a significant fraction of the total.

Progress was perhaps most rapid in those parts of North Africa comprising present-day Tunisia and Algeria. Here, Christianity may well have arrived from two directions simultaneously, both across from Egypt and south from Rome. It is certainly the case that the first Latin-speaking churches of the world were to be found in North Africa, and this is probably also where the first Latin Scripture translations were made. There is evidence of very many bishops from this region, one for almost every town and village, implying the existence of many thriving Christian churches. The most famous and lastingly influential early Christian writer, Augustine of Hippo, was born to a Christian mother, Monica, and a pagan father, in Tastage in North Africa around 354.

At the northern extremes of the empire, there seem to have been at least some Christians in Britain by the early years of the third century. In 208 the Roman theologian Tertullian claimed in his treatise *Adversos Judaeos* that by about 200 Christianity was established in the remoter parts of the empire, including even 'places of the British not approached by the Romans' (Hylson-Smith, 1999). Christians may have fled to Britain from the persecutions in Gaul, in 177, and there were well-established trade routes to Britain which Christianity might have followed: from Gaul to eastern Britain, or along the Mediterranean Sea and around the Spanish coast to the far south-west of Britain. The first named British Christian is Alban, whose story of hiding a Christian priest, being converted, and giving himself

up in the priest's stead is related in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. The story is thought to be broadly true, and likely to have occurred in 304, during the Diocletian persecutions. But there would only have been a sprinkling of Christians in Britain at this period, perhaps a few traders and soldiers. There is no evidence of any organized church in Britain until after Constantine's 313 Edict of Milan (see Chapter 2).

So by the end of the third century almost no part of the empire was untouched by Christianity. On the eve of the dramatic change in fortunes that was about to occur for the Church with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312, it has been estimated that out of a total population of around 50 million, perhaps 10 per cent were Christian. These were unevenly distributed across the empire, however. In some places, such as parts of Asia Minor, as much as half of the population may have Christian, whereas other areas were relatively untouched, and Christians were disproportionately concentrated in the major towns and cities.

It is also notable that Christianity had spread beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire by this point. For example, there is known to have been a Syriac-language church in Edessa in northern Mesopotamia. Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, quoted a legend of King Abgar writing to Jesus; even assuming that to be apocryphal, it is clear that the Syrian church was ancient by Eusebius' time. It is also possible that there is some truth in the legend that the Apostle Thomas personally founded the church in India. The legend has it that when he refused to make the journey, God arranged for him to be sold as a slave to an Indian king whom he then converted. Certainly the journey described in the legend was a possible one, the king is a real one from the period, and the Indian church is one of the earliest known. A similar story in relation to the founding of the church in Ethiopia is almost certainly factual. Two young Christian men from Tyre, who were shipwrecked while travelling down the Red Sea, were taken as slaves to the King of Ethiopia. They were subsequently appointed to high office and became free to preach the gospel. Years later one of them, named Frumentius, travelled to Alexandria to ask the bishop, Athanasius, to send priests to Ethiopia, and was himself consecrated Bishop of Ethiopia, probably in 341.

The earliest converts seem to have been mainly relatively low-status members of society: slaves, women, petty traders and some soldiers. A Roman critic of Christianity, Celsus, wrote disparagingly (in

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