

Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches' Past*. Blackwell, Oxford and Melbourne, 2005, pp. xii + 292, ISBN I3 978-0-631-21522-6. Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v22i3.377.

The author is a Church historian. He holds and has held some prestigious teaching positions in religious history and is the author of reputable early modern European histories. This book is a reflection on 'Christian history' resulting from Cameron's broad-based contact with historians and histories of Christianity. Basically his thesis runs thus:

So, who represents the different historic forms that Christianity has assumed? For me, it was increasingly clear that the professional rationalists, the intellectual elites, important as they were, did not constitute the whole story of what Christianity 'was'. Christian history, as lived and as experienced by the majority, was an enormously diverse thing. The cultural conditions—the ever-changing assumptions about life, the universe, the function of worship, the role of ritual, or the role of learning—played a huge part in defining what 'the Christian life' constituted at any given moment (p. ix).

The book accordingly divides into four parts. The first is a basic narrative sketch of general Christian history to ensure that the reader is aware of the main facets. The second part covers the vicissitudes of the collective behaviour of church people down the centuries. Significant changes in religious behaviour are charted. The author claims that there has been a constant tendency within Christianity to stress one or other feature of the Christian message, even to veer to extremes. There never has been such thing as a timeless faith.

The third section then examines to what extent Church historians have been aware of these changes at the time of their writing. For example, the author takes the *Commentaries* of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, an autobiographical memoir of the author's pontificate as Pius II in the fifteenth century.

[...] the Church, seen from the perspective of a fifteenth-century pope, was a quite different institution from that familiar to Bede or to Jocelin. Enea Silvio took the doctrine, beliefs, and practices of late medieval Catholicism entirely for granted. He neither subjected them to scrutiny nor supposed them to be changeable or open to doubt, save by heretics. The chief question for a Church historian, in those circumstances, was how well or badly individual human beings performed while living their lives within the Church (p. 119).

Finally, the author turns from Christian historians to Christian theologians, to see how theological scholarship over the past century and a half has responded to the challenge of historical perspective taken up by the Christian historians.

What conclusions are drawn by the author from this analysis of the historical experience of the churches? The first is that Christianity has never manifested itself within historical time as a pure, unmediated, eternally valid form. The tradition and its particular context always have ongoing interaction. In the second place, Christian history 'reflects a very human tendency to pile development on development, to evolve florid and ultimately extreme versions of particular trends'.

I find all of this quite reasonable and a clear approach to the understanding of history and theology. I could see where the thesis could be fruitfully applied to a number of different controversies at the present moment. However, the author has continually, in the course of writing the book, been aware of his mainly committed readership. He almost

instinctively prepares himself for an onslaught of abuse. In the end he takes on a very pastoral role and concludes:

The wandering teacher from Nazareth steps out again and again from the clouds of dust raised by the crowds in his wake, constantly arresting, surprising, and challenging. As in his lifetime, each individual must decide how to respond to his challenge (p. 240).

This is an interesting book. I wish Cameron had not felt so compelled to compromise at the end.

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