

A SHORT HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

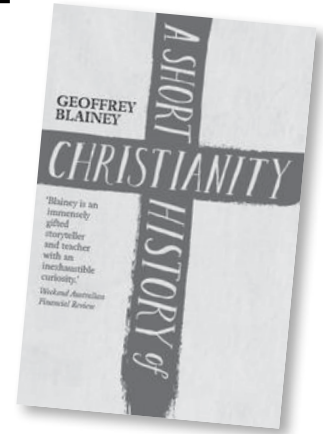
Although Christianity is in decline in the developed countries of the West, Geoffrey Blainey says it is too soon to call the decline permanent

By Geoffrey Blainey

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Former Beatle John Lennon announced in the London *Evening Standard* in March 1966 that ‘Christianity will go.’ Lennon went on, in praise of the Beatles, to claim: ‘We’re more popular than Jesus now.’ His remarks caused considerable offence at the time. Even so, towards the end of this new and substantial survey of the impact Christianity has had around the world since its emergence in first-century Palestine, Geoffrey Blainey wonders whether Lennon might have been on to something. ‘The Beatle was partly correct,’ Blainey says. ‘In Europe the church was in decline, and many intellectuals quietly agreed with [Lennon’s] prediction that Christianity would vanish’ (p. 547).

Yet opponents of Christianity will be disappointed if they think *A Short History of Christianity* is little more than a 553-page obituary for a religious movement. Although Christianity does appear to be in decline in the most prosperous, most literate, and most materialist nations, Blainey says it is too soon to judge the decline permanent. ‘In its heartland, in the course of twenty centuries, it has declined and revived again and again ... Christianity has repeatedly been reinvented. Every religious revival is a reflection of a previous state of decline; but no revival and perhaps no decline is permanent’ (p. 548).

Blainey sets out to investigate the ways Christianity—‘a difficult and tantalising creed’ (p. 552)—has influenced our world since the birth of Jesus in about 6BC until the early years of the twenty-first century. On the basis that Jesus’ life is ‘astonishingly documented’ for one who lived in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire (p. xix), Blainey begins by accepting the historical existence of Jesus. He does so as a historian, however, rather than as a theologian, sidestepping both theological and technical complexities to tell a clear and riveting story of Christian history. He does so with the calm and measured detachment of a scholar committed to what we might think of as the ‘long’ view of history.

Tony Judt, the late historian and social commentator, held that coherent narrative and factual accuracy are the bedrock of any historian’s job. ‘A scholar of the past who is not interested in the first instance in getting the story right,’ Judt said, ‘may be many virtuous things but a historian is not among them.’ One of

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Blainey's great strength is that he is a superb story-teller and goes to great lengths to get the story right so that lay readers, particularly those with little knowledge of Christianity, can follow the thread and judge for themselves the extent of Christian influence on the world.

Mind you, this is not to say that the book is light on facts or inferences. Blainey estimates there are some 27,000 of them in the text, and many more are likely to have been excluded in a rigorous editing process that saw more than 20 of every 100 pages written deleted at one stage of the writing. Some topics, such as the history of Christianity in Australia, are handled with great concision; others are omitted. These editorial decisions are quite understandable, but the addition of a select bibliography would have helped readers keen to pursue a deeper understanding of particular eras.

The story begins with the birth, life and death of Jesus, the carpenter's son who was raised in Nazareth. Much, if not all, of the material in this early part of the book is drawn from the documents of the New Testament. It's a sympathetic re-telling that distils the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and locates him in the social, cultural and political context of the time. However, these early chapters might have been yet more interesting had Blainey tested the historical validity of the texts and weighed, say, the evidence for the Resurrection. These texts are, after all, the bedrock on which the Christian faith stands, with each of the gospels giving a slightly different account of Jesus' life. While Blainey follows mainstream opinion, for example, by accepting the priority of Mark's gospel, he might have investigated the extent to which it is possible, or even desirable, to distinguish the historical Jesus from the later New Testament accounts of the emergence of the Christ of faith.

As Blainey follows the emergence of the new movement, spurred along by the belief that Jesus had come to life after his execution, he is quite right to emphasise Christianity's indebtedness to Judaism and 'the Jewish insight into human nature and its potential for creating disaster as well as triumph' (p. 503). Even though relations between Christians and Jews have, at times,

been tormented, that insight has remained a crucial part of Christianity and continues to be expressed, for example, in the liturgical and spiritual reading of the Psalms.

Contemporary critics of organised religion like to pick at the fabric of Christianity, insisting that the doubt, uncertainty and argument marking discussions and disputes, both within and between the churches, are symptoms of the religion's death throes. Yet these features were already characterising Christianity during its first three centuries when scholars did not debate so much the historical existence of Jesus as whether he was human or divine or both in origin.

Blainey is good at showing how the corpus of Christian doctrine and practice emerged over time, and he does so without ever sinking into a morass of theological or philosophical complexity. The death and resurrection of Jesus, always more important ideas in Christianity than his birth, meant that it was to be some 400 years before the idea of Christmas took hold. Over the next 200 years, the celebration of Christmas was accompanied by a rising tide of veneration of Mary, his mother, and of the Wise Men (Magi) who were believed to have visited the infant in Bethlehem. The doctrine of Purgatory was only defined at the Council of Lyons in 1274, thereby creating the idea of a vast Christian community united in life and death, after which the church was able to tap a rich source of revenue by selling Indulgences promising to shorten a soul's time spent in that murky realm.

Problems began for the first Christians when they began to shun the gods of the Roman Empire, and this unleashed successive waves of vicious persecution. It was not until 313AD, when the Edict of Milan was signed between Constantine, the emperor in the west, and Licinius, emperor in the east, that Christians were free to practise their faith without fear of persecution. When Constantine himself embraced Christianity, the religion went from being merely tolerated to being the preferred religion of the empire. Yet close ties to the state were, and remain, problematic for Christian leaders. 'In saving the church from persecution,

Constantine exposed it to a new form of interference—his own. He valued the right to intervene in any Roman institution if the tranquillity and security of the Empire was at stake' (p. 74). It was not to be the first time in the history of Christianity that fortunes varied according to the prevailing political mood of the prince.

Blainey is good at handling the big themes of Christian history, examining the issues with a sympathetic eye but always seeking to explain rather than to justify. The Crusades, originally intended to unite Christendom, merely accentuated the religious rift between Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christians. At the same time, bonds between Catholic Christians were, themselves, strained by commercial rivalries that helped stimulate the emergence of capitalism. The legacy of the Crusades is still with us. They are 'now seen as one of the most disastrous episodes in the history of Christianity, and a cause of the present rift between a small militant branch of Islam, on the one hand, and the western near-Christian world on the other' (p. 209).

Soon enough, western Christendom was to be convulsed by its own internal divisions and conflicts. When the reform movements of the sixteenth century got underway, the church's challengers, such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, all depended at one time or another on the protection offered by sympathetic princes and cities. This period of religious turbulence, marking the rise of Protestantism, was characterised by the translation and wide dissemination of vernacular versions of the Bible. Another feature of the period was the promulgation of new doctrines articulating the relationship between God and humankind (Luther's belief in 'justification by faith alone' is perhaps the most famous example).

However, the Reformation was also a revolution that saw the emergence of radically new forms of church organisation and governance allowing for religious observance to be organised at the lowest appropriate level, whether it was the emerging nation-state, the city, or the local congregation. 'Protestantism, once the Bible was freely available in a homeland language, tended

to foster that debate and discussion which are the core of democracy ... Protestantism tended quietly to promote democracy because it rested on the belief that 'unspecialised folk can grasp great thinking' (p. 336).

Yet for all the democratising tendencies, Protestant princes and church leaders vigorously pursued religious cohesion in their realms. When the Catholic Church responded to aspects of the Reformation in a series of significant developments over the latter half of the sixteenth century beginning with the Council of Trent, it was in an attempt to consolidate its own authority rather than to share it. The twenty-first century reader might be dismayed by the ferocity with which the churches pursued its enemies during this turbulent period. But Blainey warns wisely of the danger of reading history only from a twenty-first century point of view. Even though the Reformation did eventually help promote a new era of religious toleration, it was not something intended by its leaders at the time.

Blainey also shows that the history of Christianity is also the history of the ways in which the religion has shaped everyday life.

'A high level of religious tolerance is almost a modern invention ... Then it was important to hold the correct religious views rather than hold the freedom to reject them. The right to disobey the government and the Church, the right to be free in matters of conscience, was a precept that slowly emerged after the acute tensions aroused by the Reformation. Today the western trend is to devalue the merits of religion and to enthrone the virtues of tolerance. In western civilisation we view religious deviance or heresy as a minor matter because religion is no longer seen as important' (p. 341).

For as much as the story features significant names and events, Blainey also shows that the history of Christianity is also the history of the ways in which the religion has shaped everyday life over the last 2,000 years.

From the beginning, the Christian faith was rooted in a practical expression of love both for one's neighbour and for the sick, the poor and the destitute. These down-to-earth values were part of the appeal of the new religion. 'Many outsiders, knowing little about Christianity, were impressed by its results. At its best it produced what could be called civilised lives: a respect for those from other lands and for parents and the old; more respect for women than was common in the Roman Empire; and a helping hand for slaves who accepted the faith' (p. 69).

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Christianity's concern for social issues, and its capacity to respond to emerging or pressing needs in daily life, forms a thread that runs through its history. It has shaped social history significantly. Early hospitals, schools and universities were established by monastic orders. Christian missions brought education and health care to peoples who previously knew nothing of either. A homesick shop assistant, George Williams, formed what would quickly become the Young Men's Christian Association in nineteenth century London. Movements such as the Salvation Army did much to promote both the status of women within society (Catherine Booth, wife of the Army's founder, worked hard to win acceptance of women preachers) and to alleviate the hunger of the urban poor by means of the soup kitchen and cheap meals. The vegetarian diet adopted by nineteenth century Seventh-Day Adventists in the United States in a bid to purify themselves for the Second Coming led them to manufacture breakfast cereals. 'The modern western breakfast is their monument' (p. 413).

In each era, the Christian churches have faced and responded to emerging social issues and challenges not the least of which, in the course of the twentieth century, was the rise of rival secular creeds such as communism, materialism and atheism. The effectiveness of

such responses has been variable. In recent years, the entanglement between Christians and atheists has become stale with neither side able to demolish its rival intellectually and so capture the 'wide strip of vacant ground' lying midway between the two positions (p. 448).

In these first years of the twenty-first century, Christianity is in decline in Western countries and is enjoying a vigorous resurgence in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Blainey sketches the changes occurring in different parts of the world and suggests that in the West the desire for knowledge had displaced the pursuit of wisdom. 'Wisdom is primarily concerned with human beings and their predicaments. Indeed, wisdom should constitute the arena in which atheists and Christians both compete. It is legitimate to say that one does not believe in God. But to say no more, and to sideline that debate about human nature that surrounds the whole concept of a god, is to misunderstand why Christianity has absorbed so many minds for so long' (p. 550).

Throughout the book, Blainey shows his skills as a superb teacher. He is mindful of the lessons history can teach twenty-first century readers who may well harbour their own sensibilities and prejudices about Christianity. He reminds us that disputes and controversies have always been part of the Christian story rather than the exception. In particular, he warns us that diversity of belief is more often a long-term source of strength. It is usually safer and healthier to allow rival doctrines to co-exist than to impose unity by physical or legal force.

Blainey has produced a gripping, engaging and thoroughly readable survey of the history of Christianity. It is a tale told for the new century that assumes little if any prior knowledge of the faith or its founder. And while there are many who remain confident of Lennon's prediction nearly 50 years ago, it is a tale that has not yet ended. 'The debate about Christ's message and influence will continue,' Blainey declares at the end of the book. 'Long after we are all dead and the twenty-first century is lost behind passing clouds, the fascination with him will persist; and many will still see him as triumphant' (p. 553).