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# Introduction to the history of Christianity: First Century to the Present Day -- a Worldwide Story

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## **Introduction to the History of Christianity**

Tim Dowley, Editor

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002

688 pages, \$28.32 Softcover

For at least two decades I have been searching for a one-volume history of Christianity that I can use in my year-long course in Church History at the seminary. What I look for are the following characteristics: (1) a history that moves beyond a simply hagiographic replay toward a more critical in-depth analysis; (2) a history that takes modern critical, interdisciplinary work into account; (3) a history that moves beyond biographical vignettes to study and evolution of Christianity as a social movement; (4) a history that puts Christianity into its political, social and economic framework; (5) a history that demonstrates awareness to the varied and global character of the faith; and (6) a history that displays its recognition of the prominent role played by women in the development and growth of Christianity. Even beyond these most important content concerns I look for a text that is well-written, well-illustrated, well-designed and offers itself at a price with student income in mind.

Dowley's *Introduction to the History of Christianity* fits these latter categories almost to perfection. It is literate, easy to read and understand. In spite of its multi-authorship the entire text comes across as a united work that integrates into an effective whole. Given today's prices its cost is reasonable, its illustrations appealing and appropriate and its graphs and maps most helpful. Structurally it is attractive, and its numerous vignettes on leading church figures, like Perpetua, Augustine, Luther and Teresa of Avila, allow biographical pieces to be inserted while sustaining the interface of the social and "movement" character of the faith. Given the varied authors chosen to do the writing and above all, given the fundamental approach of the text, what emerges is a basically "conservative" Protestant church history.

Although I would take a significantly different approach, this work's conservatism is honest and has solid academic integrity. This integrity is enhanced both by the presence of some Catholic authors as well as a fairly balanced appraisal of the Catholic Church and its history. As well, an over-all ecumenical spirit breathes through the pages.

The book handles social and political relationships reasonably

well, using these factors as more than a backdrop to the history of ideas. In short, the text incarnates ideas into the soil of actual history. In the area of Christian history beyond its western locus this introduction makes a noteworthy effort to display the global and pluralistic character of Christianity.

However, in its awareness of gender issues and the role of women in Christian history it is woefully inadequate. In all the introductory textbooks I have used this one includes women more than any other, but this hardly distinguishes it in a genuinely positive manner. Certainly the text is merely a revision of its earliest 1977 edition. Yet surely we have learned in the last twenty-five years that a history without due place to women's critical role remains tokenism at best. Indeed, the inclusion of this or that vignette about this or that woman remains an offence to both the dream of Galatians 3:28 and the historical reality of Christianity. Serious critical analysis of historical Christianity's patriarchal struggle cannot be found nor a serious effort to tease out just how essential women were as leaders and missionaries in the early Jesus Movement. Why do we read nothing of the genius of Hildegard of Bingen, of the revolutionary urban ministry of the Beguines, of the violent misogyny of the "Witch Craze?" Why do we find no word of reformers like Argula von Grumbach or Catherine Zell? Yes, we are told of Elizabeth I but what about other great Reformation queens like Bona Sforza of Poland or Marguerite de Navarre and Jeanne d'Albert of France. In addition, of course, the Wesleyan movement thrived under its women missionaries, such as Sarah Crosby. Finally we read about the U.S. Social Gospel and its noted theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, yet without discounting his genius, we notice nothing of either Frances Willard of the W.C.T.U. or Jane Addams of Hull House, two figures whose "social gospel" influence far surpassed that of Rauschenbusch. This lack of women's vital input stands as no minor glitch but rather makes an otherwise admirable work seriously distorted and depleted.

Yes, until I find a better introduction I will use it with radical supplements of women's history, but I make a loud plea to church houses to refuse publication of any more church introductions that do not address and rectify this gender injustice.

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