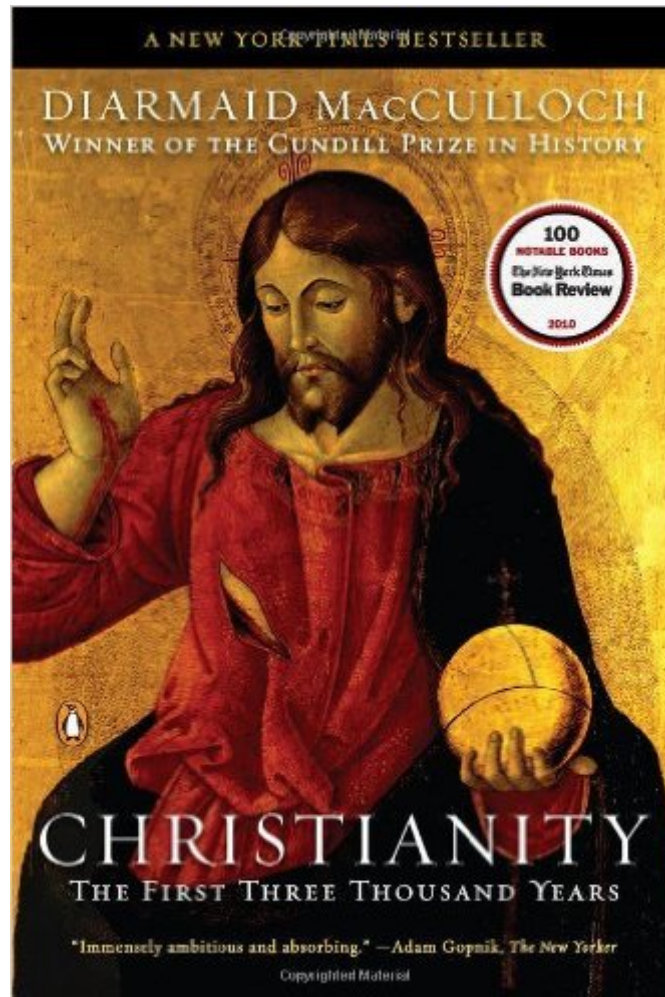


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Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years



Synopsis

The New York Times bestseller and a definitive history of Christianity for our time "from the award-winning author of *The Reformation and Silence* A product of electrifying scholarship conveyed with commanding skill, Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Christianity* goes back to the origins of the Hebrew Bible and encompasses the globe. It captures the major turning points in Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox history and fills in often neglected accounts of conversion and confrontation in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. MacCulloch introduces us to monks and crusaders, heretics and reformers, popes and abolitionists, and discover Christianity's essential role in shaping human history and the intimate lives of men and women. And he uncovers the roots of the faith that galvanized America, charting the surprising beliefs of the founding fathers, the rise of the Evangelical movement and of Pentecostalism, and the recent crises within the Catholic Church. Bursting with original insights and a great pleasure to read, this monumental religious history will not soon be surpassed.

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Customer Reviews

This is a long and scholarly history of the background, birth and growth of Christianity. The author is an Anglican and church historian. The narrative makes it clear that there has never been just one church, but many interpretations of who Jesus Christ was : from the early gnostic "heretics" (who lost the PR/political battles and were banned) to the Western Roman Church to the Eastern Greek Church to the Reformation and beyond (which spawned Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, et al). The love of Christ as shown by early Christian martyrs and by St. Francis of Assisi is contrasted with the

intolerance of differences as shown by the religious wars and the Crusades. It is very readable and assumes no prior knowledge by the reader. With the approach of Easter, Mr. MacCulloch has written a book for the lay reader.

If you are in the market for a comprehensive 1000 page overview of the history of Christianity this is the one. Diarmaid MacCulloch has written a masterful synthesis. He covers all that one might reasonably expect in such a volume -- moving from ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel up to the contemporary culture wars, including the Orthodox East as well as the Latin West. He transitions seamlessly from topic to topic and is almost never merely superficial. He successfully balances the need to relate relevant details with the virtue of concision. His interpretations are often stimulating and characteristically judicious. The book either can be read profitably straight-through (for those with strong attention spans) or used as a reference source as the occasion arises. It helpfully contains extensive source endnotes, suggestions for further reading, and an index, plus page references for inter-related topics are noted parenthetically throughout the text. That the development of Christianity might be treated historically at all may seem heretical to some. History seldom consistently comforts belief. MacCulloch points out, for example, that right off the bat "one of the greatest turning points in the Christian story" may have been that the last days, as apparently expected by many early followers of the movement, had not arrived by the end of the first century CE. He emphasizes that certain major historical outcomes were contingent, not inevitable. For example, the victories of Christian over Islamic forces in 678 at Constantinople and in 732-33 near Poitiers helped shield the West from Islam and "preserved a Europe in which Christianity remained dominant, and as a result the centre of energy and unfettered development shifted west from its old Eastern centres." Later, he believes, the Church's response to Luther was unnecessarily heavy-handed, further dramatically re-shaping the West (not surprisingly, he is especially strong on the Reformation, the subject of his earlier well-received major work). MacCulloch does not shy away from lofty theology, often a turn-off to some readers of religious histories. Indeed, he seeks to demonstrate how seemingly rarified theological controversies have sometimes stirred the masses. He provides ample discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Chalcedonian controversy, disputes regarding the Eucharist, and the like, but never to the point of tedium. He traces how theological emphases shifted over time, including the emergence of elements of Christian belief that had little or no Biblical foundation. For instance, he calls the concept of Purgatory, which had taken root by the 1170s, "one of the most successful and long-lasting theological ideas in the Western church. It bred an intricate industry of prayer: a whole range of institutions and endowments," financing priests to

devote their time to saving souls. MacCulloch attends to Christianity's engagements with worldly power and with political and societal issues. He provides plentiful material for readers to construct their own balance sheets of where Christians have stood through history regarding, for example, the roles of women, slavery and race, war and violence, concerns for the poor and the oppressed, religious tolerance, and (more recently) Fascism and Nazism. MacCulloch points out that "doubt is fundamental to religion. One human sees holiness in someone, something, somewhere: where is the proof to others?" He notes, for instance, that while the nineteenth century is typically seen as a period of skepticism, it was a period "crowded with visionaries both Catholic and Protestant" when Christianity ambitiously spread its global reach. Christianity has never been uniform. Its ability to mutate is one of its great strengths, particularly its ability to accommodate syncretist variations in non-European cultures. MacCulloch concludes with the observation that, "It would be very surprising if this religion, so youthful, yet so varied in its historical experience, had now revealed all its secrets."

Review of the book "Christianity" by Diarmaid MacCullough This was a daunting book with a scope beyond the less educated. It was scholarly but opinionated and much too Anglican centric in its overall presentation. If you are a lover of History and somewhat familiar with Western Civilization you might have the "stick-to-it-iveness" to read it to the end. The subject of Christianity is beyond huge and its impact on the civilization of man and on man's thinking is without comparison in its overall influence. I realized, probably for the first time in my experience, the number of schisms or differences in the interpretation of Christ's divinity and words and their reactions as heretical, intellectual or philosophical. As a Roman Catholic, reading this book, I anticipated being chagrined by an Anglican view of Christ, I was not. For the first time, I began to somewhat understand the reasons for the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism, but I still abhor the need to intellectualize the simple words of Christ into congruity with the philosophy or language du jour and the splitting away from the central body of that teaching. I guess my Catholic-ness is a burden to my overall objectivity when talking about matters of Christ's teachings. However, this being said the followers of Christ have been in a constant battle as to not only as to his divinity but the tenets of his teachings. The whole idea of Christ's teachings being hijacked by emperors and monarchs and being used for political advantages is an unfortunate by-product of man being man. But then without this, would Christianity have ever flourished to the degree it has today? I was impressed by the author's coverage of the whole Orthodoxy separation from the Roman Church and its equally troubling impact on the politics resulting from its teachings, some of which are or may be at odds with the

whole idea of Christ being both man and God. I discovered things which I was never aware of but then as a lover of History I kept reading, when my instincts were to abandon this tome. There were many things of great interest to me such as the role of Christianity in the American Civil War and how Church people were able to accept slavery in this country and the answer I walked away with was that it was somewhat economic but it was also a "white" supremacy thing too. I was also interested in the role of the Roman Catholic Church in both World Wars as well as the impact of infallibility of the Pope in matters of faith and doctrine on my Protestant brothers. In many respects because of the constant splitting off of numerous sects from many of the original Protestants, since the Reformation, I found it reinforcing to me that the Roman Catholic Church has evolved yet remained constant and together in its belief tenets. While, we as Catholics are not perfect, we have been a steady and influencing force in the development of Western Civilization (something that MacCulloch does not really acknowledge, directly, though he does, somewhat when he discussed the second Vatican Council.) I did not find this book to be a spiritual experience but rather a great academic struggle toward varying degrees of enlightenment. I do not recommend this book to the casual reader; it is more the kind of book that would take up at least four semesters at a university to fully appreciate all of its contents. At times I felt like I was drinking water out of a full turned on fire hydrant.

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