BOOKS I HAVE READ: DOMINION

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Category: Observations

The bottom line is that I may read a better book this year, but with only three months left, it seems highly unlikely unless something really good crosses my desk. Dominion: The Making of the Western MindÂ is readable, interesting, highly informative and it is important; whoever you are, you should read it. You might want to wait till the paperback comes out if you are on a limited budget, but you should read it.

This is not a small book, it's a medium format hardback of over six hundred pages. It is a scholarly work, there are enough notes and references to keep the most assiduous researcher happy. However, you shouldn't let this put you off, there are also pictures (not a lot, but some) but the main thing is that Tom Holland's writing style is very accessible. You might not believe that a history of Western thought could be a gripping read, but in Holland's hands, it is. He is a historian of note and no mean philosopher or religion, but above everything, he is a gripping storyteller.

The sub-title of the book gives you an indication of what the book is about, but more specifically, it is about how Christianity shaped the Western mind. By taking us on a historical tour, Holland demonstrates that concepts such as universal human rights and even the notion of the division between sacred and secular developed out of Christian thinking and history (sprinkled with a fine seasoning of Greek philosophy).

> *Just as the Bishop of Oxford refused to consider that he might be descended from an ape, so now are many in the West reluctant to contemplate that their values, and even their very lack of belief, might be traceable back to Christian origins.*

It is beyond the scope of this blog (and my abilities) to give an overview of the arguments that run through Dominion, but they are persuasive. There are a few things to note; Tom Holland is not writing from the standpoint of a Christian believer, much less as an Evangelical. Some Kouyanet readers might find some of the things that he says difficult or challenging, but if that is the case, you need to get out more. Equally, this is a book about the history of Western thought, not a church history. You will look in vain for references to the Synod of Dort or Carey's Enquiry, but you will find a lot about Bartolomeo de Las Casas (and if you've not heard of him, you should have). It is also a book about the West, there are some references to the church in Asia, but if you are looking for a complete history of Christianity, this isn't the place to look. You will also find more about Aristotle, Spinoza and Darwin than you would in your average church history book.

The book ends on a personal note as Holland reflects on the life of his Godmother, a devout Christian lady who he clearly loved and admired. We are reminded that the great themes and movements which form the basis of this book find their origins in the lives of individuals who seek to follow an obscure craftsman from first century Palestine. This is, perhaps, the most surprising fact in all historical study.

A recurring theme of this blog is the way in which missionaries from the West encounter the growing global church. One of the important things in this encounter is for Westerners to disentangle the historical, political, philosophic and power structures which are bound up with the way that their faith is perceived by others. Dominion helpfully, but somewhat frustratingly demonstrates that Christianity and a Western worldview are far more entangled than we might otherwise have thought. Training for cross-cultural mission tends to focus on understanding the new cultures that missionaries encounter, but an essential (and difficult) pre-requisite to this is understanding our own culture and the things which shape our thinking. This book is an excellent resource to help Western Christians develop an understanding of their own background. It would also be remarkably useful to anyone seeking to defend and promote Christianity in the increasingly secular West.

So, who should read this book? That's easy; I think anyone involved in Christian leadership should read it (probably more than once) and I would argue that anyone (Christian or not) who wants to consider themselves well-read should read this. It's that good.

As always, a few quotes to give you a feel for the book:

> *To identify the laws that governed the universe was to honour the Lord God who had formulated them.*

> *That all men had been created equal, and endowed with an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, were not remotely self-evident truths. That most Americans believed they were owed less to philosophy than to the Bible:*

> *Even though Lennon had first met McCartney at a church fÃªte, all four had long since abandoned their childhood Christianity. It was, in the words of McCartney, a â€˜goody-goody thingâ€™ fine, perhaps, for a lonely woman wearing a face that she kept in a jar by the door, but not for a band that had conquered the world.*

> *The rate of growth, far from going into decline with the end of colonial rule, had exploded. Nothing quite like it had been seen since the expansion of Christendom in the early Middle Ages. As then, so now, the worship of Christ had spectacularly slipped the bonds of a vanished imperial order. Even in the early years of the twentieth century, when the European empires had seemed invincible, Africans had found in the Bible the promise of redemption from foreign rule. Just as Irish hermits and Anglo-Saxon missionaries had once claimed an authority that, deriving as it did from heaven, instilled in them the courage to upbraid kings,*

> *so in Africa, native preachers had repeatedly confronted colonial officials.*

> *Repeatedly, like a great earthquake, Christianity has sent reverberations across the world. First there was the primal revolution: the revolution preached by Saint Paul. Then there came the aftershocks: the revolution in the eleventh century that set Latin Christendom upon its momentous course; the revolution commemorated as the Reformation; the revolution that killed God. All bore an identical stamp: the aspiration to enfold within their embrace every other possible way of seeing the world; the claim to a universalism that was culturally highly specific.*

> *Communist dictators may have been no less murderous than fascist ones; but they â€“ because communism was the expression of a concern for the oppressed masses â€“ rarely seem as diabolical to people today. The measure of how Christian we as a society remain is that mass murder precipitated by racism tends to be seen as vastly more abhorrent than mass murder precipitated by an ambition to usher in a classless paradise.*