WHOSE FAMILY HISTORY?

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We need to study Church history; but we need to study all of it, not just the bits that interest us.

Category: Church: World

In a recent, wonderfully written piece, Onesimus mourns the difficulty of finding decent church history text books for his theology students in Nairobi.

> *But no books on Christian history.Â None are being offered.Â None are being sold.Â None are being read.Â This explains a lot.Â In Kenya, there is a revival of just about every heresy that the Church of the Apostles and the Fathers battled against in the first five centuries of Chrsitianity.Â Read St. Irenaeusâ€™ Against the Heresies, and itâ€™s like reading contemporary newspaper accounts of Kenyan/African Christianity.Â Itâ€™s all here, in different forms and in different guises.Â But itâ€™s the same weirdness, the same bizarre teachings, the same gnosticisms, the same dualisms, the same paganisms, the same making use of religion to justify what I want to do, the same self-appointed prophets, apostles and bishops running around gathering flocks to fleece.Â The only difference seems to be that the heresies pestering and plaguing the early Church didnâ€™t have sound systems, while the ones today do.Â Lord have mercy.*

Onesimus' point is that it is hard to find books on church history in Nairobi, because people in Kenya are not really interested in the subject.Â Which of courseÂ raises the question as to how much British people are interested in church history.

I would make two observations; firstly, I don't think that there is enough interest in church history in the UK and as a result we are seeing some of the same problems that Onesimus raises in the passage quoted above. My second (and more controversial) thought is that many of those who do take an interest in church history are rather selective in the way they do so.

Permit me a little exaggeration here (it is only a little), but a typical evangelical work of church history tends to have the following outline:

- The early Church.
- The Roman persecutions, Constantine and the rise of the papacy.
- The medieval church, with a focus on the Celtic saints.
- The reformation - this will probably be the longest section.
- William Carey and the modern missionary movement.
- The church in the 20th (and 21st if it is a new book) century.

There are a number of problems with viewing church history in this way; let me mention a few of them.

Firstly, it gives a European centric view of the church which is not in accord with the facts. For most of the last 2,000 years, the majority of Christians have lived inÂ the East, not in the West. For most protestant-evangelicals the long history of the orthodox church in Asia is a complete mystery.

Secondly, it ignores some amazing and heroic movements in the church. We tend to see mission work in China as starting with Hudson-Taylor and the China Inland Mission, completely ignoringÂ Syrian and Jesuit mission work which predated the protestants by hundreds of years. We have a lot to learn today from these experiences and for the heroism of the early believers, catholic missionaries in Japan. The way in which Las Casas and others struggled against colonialism in the Americas carries important lessons for us in a world which is becoming increasingly unequal.

It is important to realise that 'our' history is not everyone's history. The Reformation was an extremely important event, theologically, politically and culturally, it helped shape modern Europe and had a huge impact on Western Christianity. It is important that we study it and understand it. But it is also important that we realise that for, say, Coptic Christians in Egypt it is something that happened in Europe and which had very little effect on them. It is our history, but not theirs.

Lastly,Â by focussing on certain key issues, we give the impression that modern evangelicalism is the default state for Christianity - the goal towards which it has been working towards. In doing so, we fail to appreciate the richness and variety of the church over time and across the world today. OK, we are not quite so bad as the cartoon suggests, but there is a kernel of truth in it.

So what should we do? We must read church history; but we need to read broad histories, not just those that emerge from our own constituency. For me, the best work of all is Kenneth Scott LaTourette's 'A History of Christianity'. It's a big book and out of print, but you might find it on a second hand book site. A more modern and similarly large book is Diarmaid MacCullooch;sÂ A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand YearsÂ and if you want to learn about the history of the church in the east, you could do worse than read Jenkins'Â The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In the post I referred to at the outset, Onesimus was looking to find copies of Needham's Two Thousand Year's of Christ's Power. This is, perhaps, the best church history series from an Evangelical perspective. Unfortunately, it is out of print and individual volumes are going for hundreds of pounds on Amazon. The good news, is that it is being reprinted and updated by Grace publications soon.