BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHRISTIANITY - THE BIOGRAPHY

Posted on November 7, 2016 by Eddie

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Category: Reviews

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This is a large format paperback of around 270 pages with a good index and a limited selection of suggested titles for further reading. It will set you back just under Â£9 at Amazon (other booksellers are available).

Trying to cram the 2,000 year history of the global church into a relatively short book is a huge undertaking. Ian Shaw has managed to pull this off, producing a book which is well written, interesting and clear. The major themes are all covered in enough detail to help the reader understand what is going on without getting too bogged down. The chapters are short and there is a sprinkling of maps and photographs, all of which help to make this an extremely accessible book. I would have no hesitation in passing this on to anyone who wanted to get an overview of the development of the Christian church.

However, the book has two particular selling points and here, I think it is on much less solid ground. The first thing to note is that the book is entitledÂ Christianity the BiographyÂ - note the word biography. The author likens the growth of the church to the life of a person; the first paragraph from chapter 2 shows how this works.

> *Newborns grow and develop at a remarkable speed, and the same is true of early Christianity. Young children thrive best, however, where they are welcomed and secure, but as has been seen, the environment into which Christianity was born was challenging in a number of social, political and religious ways.*

This extended metaphor is interesting and at times quite helpful. However, it is also more or less impossible to sustain and by the later chapters it appears to have been dropped altogether. It also poses the problem of how to describe the contemporary church. Is it in its old age as the book suggests? It may well be, but it may have another few thousand years in it, too - we aren't privileged to know that yet. Ultimately, the 'biography' angle comes across as a bit of a gimmick, it is helpful in places but doesn't really have a great impact on the book.

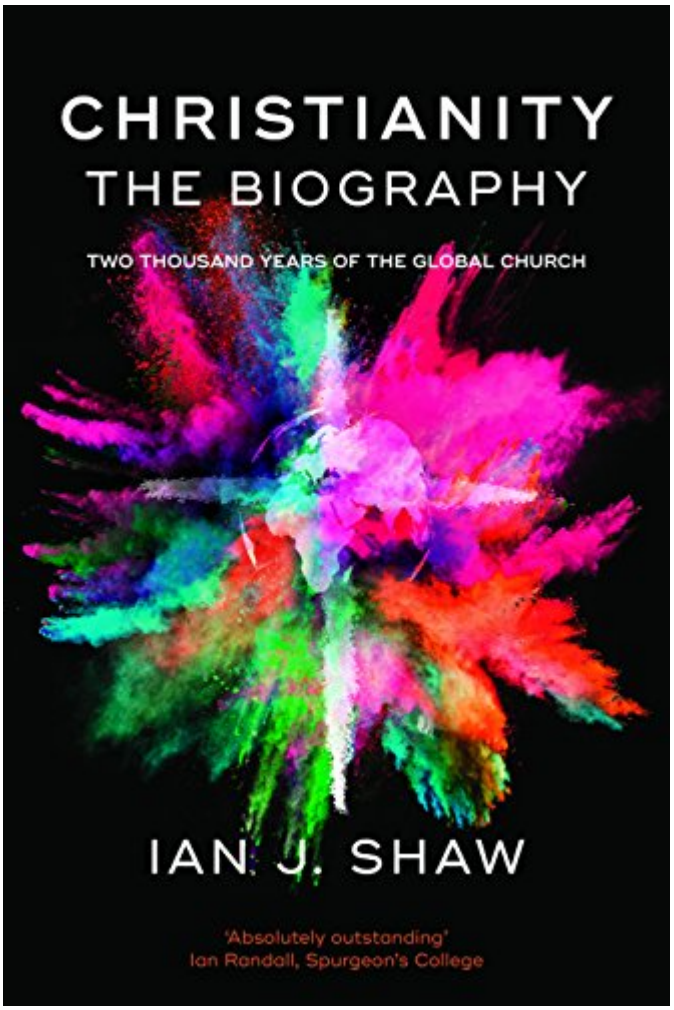
A more important issue is the way that the book looks at the church globally. Most short church history books written in the Protestant world more or less ignore the church in the East altogether, and once the Reformation is out of the way, they ignore the Catholic church too. This biography makes a great play of looking at the global church, which is what drew me to it in the first place. The blurb on the back of the book says:

> *As well as covering the history of Christianity in the West, this fascinating book has a special*

> *concern for the story from the non-Western world.*

In my view the author has only been partially successfulÂ in this aim.

Let me say at the outset thatÂ most of the themes and people that I would see as important in the history of the Global church are mentioned.



It is good to see the early missions to China getting a mention and to be reminded thatÂ the gospel had a long history in that country before the advent of modern Protestant missions. It may well come as a surprise to those nurtured on a Euro-centric version of church history to learn that in the C13 the East Syrian patriarch exercised ecclesiastical power of a greater geographical area than the pope.

As a an amateur student of mission history, I was pleased to see some space given over to early Roman Catholic missionaries such as Las Cassas and Ricci. These important figures are often ignored by popular Protestant historians.

I was particularly encouragedÂ to see that the Liberian missionary William Wade Harris got a mention.

However, while most of the important people and themes are mentioned, the book falls down in that it gives very little space to explore the issues raised by events outside of the West. Let me illustrate this by briefly referring to the two Catholic pioneers that I mentioned above. Bartolemeo de Las Cassas worked in Latin America in the early days of the Spanish empire. To his credit, he fought against the way in which the indigenous people were effectively enslaved by Spanish landowners. Shaw mentions this very briefly, but does not explore how this influence went on to shape some aspects of Latin American Christianity. The cuttingÂ edge of (broadly) Catholic Liberation Theology and the Radical Discipleship movement within Latin Protestantism pick up on some issues raised by Las Cassas.

Likewise, Matteo Ricci worked hard to develop a contextualised approach to mission in China, but, despite meeting with some success, his efforts were squashed by the papal authorities who were threatened by this new expression of Christianity. There are parallels today in the way that rich donors in the West are seeking to shape and restrict the way that indigenous Christians live out their faith in different contexts around the world.

I have a similar concern when it comes to the issue of vernacular languages (well, I would, wouldn't I?). Shaw mentions a number of times that the Bible or some passages were translated into various languages. But there is virtually no discussion about the importance of the vernacular for the spread and survival of Christian witness in a community.Â I'm not sure how you can write about the growth of the Global Church without referring to either Andrew Walls or Lamin Sanneh.

Shaw does a great job of demonstrating the way in which events in the West, such as the Reformation, have impacted the church down through history, but much less attention is given to the long term significance of events outside of Europe and North America.

I don't want to complain too much. This is an excellent book and the fact that it even mentions so many people from outside of the mainstream of Evangelical church histories is a huge step forward for a book of this type. However, the lack of discussion or reflection on events outside of the West means that ultimately it doesn't live up to its promise.

This is far and away the best book of its type that I have read, but it could have been so much more.

I should note that the publishers kindly provided me with a copy of this book in exchange for this review. I have not allowed this generosity to impact what I have written.Â