BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHRISTIANITY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Category: Observations

In case there should be any doubts regarding my feelings about this book, let me say at the outset that it is absolutely excellent. If it isn't the best book I read this year, I will be very surprised (and pleased, because that means I've got another really excellent book to read!).

Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World HistoryÂ is a medium format hardback (no doubt the paperback will come at some point) and has just over 360 pages of text with more than a hundred pages more of references, notes and indices. It will set you back just over Â£18 on Amazon and it is worth every penny.

The book is thematic in its approach, rather than chronological. So rather than having a chapter for each decade or something like that, it has fifteen chapters, each analysing a particular theme. The chapter titles don't always tell you what is in them, so here is a list of the themes:

- The response to the First World War
- Christianity and Nationalism
- Conversion
- The Church Under Seige
- Patterns of Belonging and Believing
- The Ecumenical Movement and its Converse
- Ethnic Hatred and Genocide
- Living in an Islamic Context
- Christian Mission to the Modern World
- Theologies of Liberation
- Human Rights, Race and Indigenous Peoples
- Human Rights, Gender and Sexuality
- Global Pentecostal Christianities
- The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Modern World
- Migrant Churches

As you can see, there are a lot of contentious issues covered, this book does not shy away from the big questions. However, this is a history book, not a work of theology. If you want to read about any of these issues in detail, you would do better to get a volume dedicated to the issue in question. The great value of this book is its breadth, not its depth (which is not to say that it isn't deep). By covering such a wide range of issues, the book helps you see how all of them are interconnected; each arising and being influenced by a global context. Some ideas spread around the globe, while others are restricted to a particular locality, but all of them are connected in some fashion or other.

Each chapter is helpfully divided into four parts. The first introduces the issue in a broad context, this is followed by two case studies (normally from two different continents). The chapter closes with a summary which draws the various threads together. So, for example, the chapter on Pentecostalism has case studies from Ghana and Brazil sandwiched between the more general introduction and

summary. This structure works well for a number of reasons; firstly the case studies are well chosen and give a good feel for the issues, without overwhelming the reader with a massive amount of information which is what would happen if the author gave a truly global overview of each issue. Secondly, the structure means that each section is relatively short; as a result, the book reads easily despite the academic depth which lies behind it.

A word of warning; this is a history of Christianity, it is not a history of Evangelicalism. Though he is an evangelical himself, Stanley writes as a historian and not an apologist for one form of Christianity over another. I suspect that some readers of Kouyanet might be uncomfortable with some of the discussions in the book. That being said, those are the people who would most profit from reading it - there is a big world out there and we need to understand it if we are to play a role in it.Â So, who should read this book? Anyone with a serious interest in church history should have it on their to-read list and anyone with international responsibility in a Christian organisation (agency or church) should have read it already!

I normally close these short reviews with quotes from the books that I am covering, but I've given a couple of quotes in earlier blog posts - so you can go and read those (here and here).

My series on the characteristics of the modern mission movement will resume tomorrow - just in case you were missing it.