Put simply, and at only slight risk of hyperbole, MacCulloch’s *Christianity* is the history of the church incarnate. Covering the global church from its Jewish and Hellenistic pre-history to the most recent trends in the so-called “culture wars” and coming in at well over one thousand pages in total, it is a comprehensive guide to the complex and intertwined stories that are church history.

While holding firm to the narrative form, MacCulloch offers no single “metanarrative.” Rather, the complex history of Christian self-expression is held together in all its actual lived messiness by a heavily cross-referenced series of interwoven “micro-narratives” of limited geographic, cultural, and temporal scope. In this way MacCulloch overcomes the great obstacle to offering a representative history of global Christianity. Gone is the familiar straight line from Bethlehem to Boston.

At first glance a book on the first “three thousand years” of Christianity seems either prophetic or simply mistaken. Only upon taking up the text does the genius of its title become apparent. By presenting the deep roots of Christianity in both its Hebraic and Hellenic sources in his first major section, MacCulloch makes the early church intelligible as a complex social and theological phenomenon rather than as an institution revealed *ex nihilo*. The wisdom of this thousand year backstory is as clear as it is rare among histories of the church.

Without the history of the people of Israel (covenant, prophecy, and Torah) the life and message of Jesus are unintelligible. Likewise, without the traditions of Greek thought (religion, philosophy, and letters) the reception of the Rabbi from Nazareth by the larger world is equally mysterious. Since Jesus was a Jew and his gospel was written (and interpreted) in Greek, the necessary pre-history of the faith he inspired includes the prophets of Israel and the philosophers of Greece.
After a second section treating the early church until Chalcedon (461 CE), MacCulloch first follows developments in Asia and Africa for a full thousand years before turning to the “Unpredictable Rise of Rome (300-1300).” Likewise, the distinctive developments of the Orthodox churches (“The Imperial Faith [451-1800]”) is laid out for nearly one-and-a-half millennia before back-tracking in time and shifting in space to address “Western Christianity Dismembered (1300-1800).” The final section, “God in the Dock (1492-present),” presents the reunion of the churches as players on a world stage that made a truly global faith possible.

Each of these major sections stands alone as introductions to the politics, economics, culture, and theology of their respective regions and eras. What makes these parts a whole is the frequent use of cross-references; illustrating the persistent points of contact and mutual influence across the miles and centuries. What emerges is a network of interconnected themes, events, and personalities scattered over time, space, and ideology. All of this supplies a depth that is often lacking in histories of this ambitious scope. Where others give us a map, MacCulloch offers a globe.

MacCulloch’s sensitivity to the modes of thought contributing to Christian self-consciousness also opens up to a more subtle issue. Christianity includes a great deal of (sometimes arcane) theological detail. This is important because, for example, without understanding their theological views one cannot hope to begin to appreciate the forces that separated the Latin, Greek, Southern, and Eastern churches. MacCulloch is fully aware that conflicts really were fueled by matters as seemingly minor as a single letter (i.e., *homoiousios*, “similar essence,” vs. *homoousios*, “same essence”).

In an age when even the first-year seminarian cannot be expected to be familiar with the Christian theological tradition, no history of the church can afford to be without a good deal of theology. Ironically, however, the level of theological detail required to make MacCulloch’s historical narratives intelligible can interrupt the flow of that narrative and makes for some relatively difficult reading at times.
Still, *Christianity* is an excellent first read in church history and will make a convenient reference for scholars as well. The limitations of MacCulloch’s history – and there are gaps here and there – have more to do with the limits of book binding and the vigor of the reader than with any real fault in plan or execution. Despite the enormity of his task, MacCulloch largely succeeds in bringing politics and piety as well as economics and theology together to tell the stories of real people, for whom all were equally important and often inseparable.

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