

The Routledge Companion to Christian History

Chris Cook. *The Routledge Companion to Christian History*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 365 pp. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 041538362. \$120.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0415383625.

The idea of creating a timeline of the history of Christianity would be daunting and intimidating to many writers, but Chris Cook has set out to do just that in *The Routledge Companion to Christian History*. In this medium-sized volume, Cook presents timelines that provide historical and political insight into various aspects of Christian religions over the past 2000 years. In a work of this size with a topic so wide-reaching, not all continents and issues can be covered equally, but Cook presents what he considers to be essential to understanding the current issues of Christianity from a Western reader's perspective.

The book is designed to be a quick reference work to find key facts, dates, and statistics, and as such, presents information in a concise format with short entries under each key date in the chronologies section, clear definitions in the glossary, and easy-to-read tables and statistical data in the compendium. Part 1 of the book, which is about two-thirds of the book, features chronologies of relevant or noteworthy events for many specific topics within the broad category of Christian history. A small sample of the scope of topics covered includes: "The Early Church," "Christianity in North Africa (to 698)," "Christianity and the Rise of Islam," "The Northern Reformation," and "The Church in the Age of the Dictators, 1918-45." Part 2 is devoted to a glossary of terms and events, and part 3 is a compendium of lists, tables, and statistics.

Cook's stated audience is the individual interested in the historical contexts of Christianity, whether that is the theologian, the religion student, or the historian studying the role of Christianity throughout time. "The book is intended particularly to provide some of the background dates, data, and other key information concerning the role and place of Christianity in the world of the twenty-first century" (xiii). The book was specifically written for those interested in the historical aspect of Christianity in order to better understand the current state of religion throughout the world, including "the rise of militant Islam, the revival of Christianity in the former Soviet Union, the embracing influence of the 'religious right' in the USA" (xiii).

Although Cook states that the intended audience is the reader searching for historical facts about Christianity, this reviewer contends that the writer of this work underestimates its usefulness to theologians. Theology instructors at all levels would consider this a treasure for all those dates they feel they should know but can never remember, students could use this as a study guide tool for those classes that ask them to memorize key dates, clergy could make use of the book to reference in preparing sermons, and librarians in theological libraries could happily keep this at arms length for those ready-reference inquiries. There are many points of entry in this work, so readers at all levels can easily find needed information.

Despite, or perhaps because of the book's concise entries, browsing is a pleasure. Events overlap and are repeated in appropriate timelines with cross references in the index and glossary. The reader wanting to learn about one topic will only have to read through that timeline instead of flipping through the book to find related events. Students and instructors alike can easily find talking points or research subjects with a quick glance through the book. The

broad scope of the book does not allow for in-depth treatment of any topic, and no analysis is presented on any subject, so this book would best be used as a fact finder. Without commentary of any sort, the reader is left with the task of creating meaning and conclusions based on the hard facts that are presented.

The glossary does not reference page numbers, which makes browsing in this section less efficient than it could be. However, the index does include the glossary entries as well as entries for the chronologies and compendium of data. It would be helpful to have more sources cited throughout the work; the book features citations sparingly throughout the chronology section with more citations in the compendium section. A relatively brief bibliography, which is made up of a carefully selected hundred works, is provided in an effort to make further research in the topics easier, but the relationship between each work and the content of the *Companion to Christian History* is not provided.

The compendium in this work is extensive. It is broken down into broad fields such as “The Spread of Christianity,” “Persecution and Martyrdom,” “The Religious Orders,” “The Modern Missionary Age,” “The Development of Christian Doctrine,” “Pilgrimages and Cults,” “Church Membership in the Modern Era,” “Selected Offices and Office Holders” and “Rulers and Monarchs.” Within each field are sub-categories to help narrow down a search, and these are included in the table of contents. Finding needed information in this section is only possible if one uses the succinct table of contents or index since there is no real order to the subjects.

With such a large and broad topic that can take off in so many directions, Cook manages to keep the ambitious work on track by keeping his purpose in the forefront. Cook writes in the introduction that the study of the history of religion, Christianity in particular, seemed to become unfashionable in the twentieth century due to the rise of science, technology, communism, consumerism, and the Internet. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, religion has once again come forward as a key player in world affairs. Thus, the goal of the book is to provide context for the relationship of Christianity with Islam and Judaism, orthodoxy in non-Western countries, the power of Christianity moving from the U.S. and Europe to Africa and Asia. This work achieves this without pushing a political or religious agenda; it is a history book that provides factual context without conclusions. It is not for the lazy reader hoping to be told why militant Islamists attack or if the fundamental Christians in the American South have too much political sway in the country, rather one might get an understanding of the development of those issues and how the stage was set.

Cook writes this book with a background as the head of the Modern Archives Unit at the London School of Economics using primarily that library as well as the Institute of Historical Research. He presents an unbiased look at the context for various aspects of Christianity. For example, in the compendium Cook provides estimates of the number of early Christians at the time of Constantine’s conversion as about 5 percent of the population of the Roman Empire while also noting that some historians put that number at 10 percent (273). There are no additional contributors to this work but this is acceptable since there is only fact presented—it would be difficult to find a dissenting opinion on the data provided, although there are some in the field who would argue that many of the early dates are estimates or even just educated guesses.

The Routledge Companion to Christian History would make a nice addition to any library that serves a theological population. Historians with interest in religions could find this work useful as well.

Sophie Schottler
MLIS Student at the College of St. Catherine, MN

