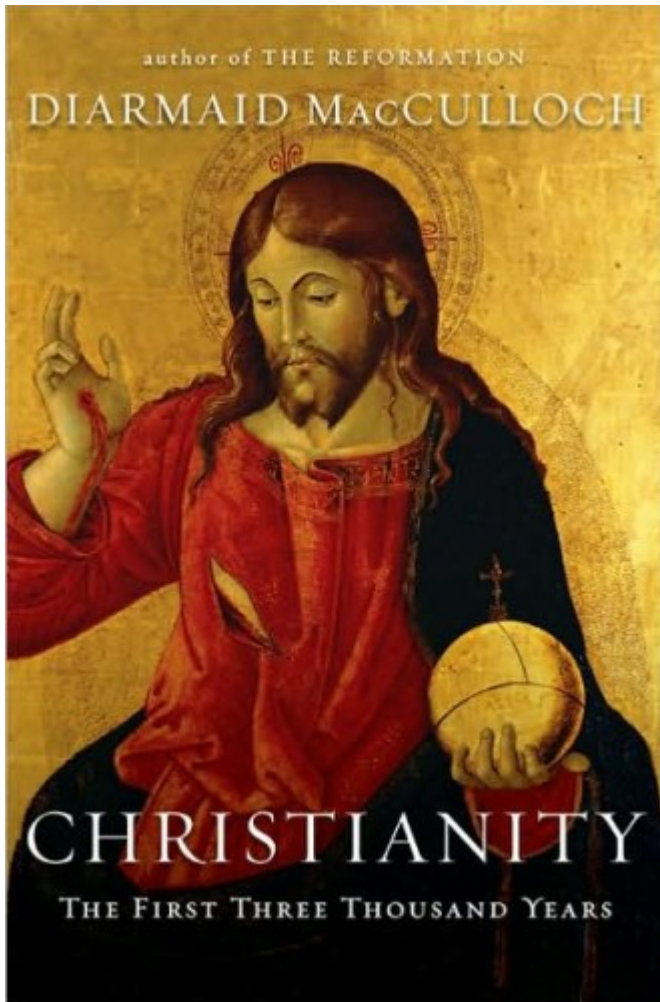


# Far-flung faith

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## Christianity

By Diarmaid MacCulloch  
Viking

In the 19th century, Christianity began to spread across West Africa less as the result of formal missionary endeavors directed from Europe than because of the

enthusiasm of ordinary indigenous believers fascinated by the new religion. As Diarmaid MacCulloch notes, "In Sierra Leone, many Krio women highly gifted in commerce were seized by enthusiasm for the Christian faith. On their far travels out of the colony, they marketed Christianity as successfully as all their other wares, like the Syrian merchants of Central Asia long before them." In itself, this story of the determined Krio women is of no unique significance, but with its glancing analogy to events long ago on a continent far away, the passage gives an excellent idea of the virtues (and quirks) of MacCulloch's awe-inspiring history of Christianity.

For one thing, this passage—and countless others like it throughout the weighty, almost 1,200-page volume—focuses on the activities not of churches, but of ordinary believers who practice and preach the faith in ways that they understand, but that might not correspond to the sense of any formal institutional body. I enjoyed the remark of the frustrated 20th-century Mexican priest who told his bishop that all his parishioners did indeed practice Catholicism, but "in a manner of their own." This is emphatically a history of Christianity, and of Christians, rather than of the church.

The book's historical vision also commands respect. How many other historians would let their minds wander so freely between West Africa in 1850 and the Silk Road a thousand years earlier? When approaching large subjects, historians tend to focus on periods and themes that appeal especially to them and skate briefly over eras they find less interesting. MacCulloch does not succumb to the temptation to focus on modern debates at the expense of earlier times; nor does he pass over the Middle Ages as a homogeneous lump. He discusses all ages with equal erudition and enthusiasm. My unscientific attempt to locate the midpoint of the book landed me at the subheading "Tatars, Lithuania and Muscovy (1240–1448)" in a section dealing chiefly with the Orthodox churches.

This example, like that of the Krio women, suggests the book's startling chronological range, and I could easily cite many other illuminating parallels that MacCulloch draws. Describing the extremist Catholic Cristero movement in 1920s Mexico, for instance, he compares the phenomenon to lay Korean Catholicism a century earlier, then suggests that the Cristeros set a precedent for the realignment of lay and clerical roles during Vatican II in the 1960s.

MacCulloch's history is worldwide in scope at every stage. In earlier eras, telling the Christian story meant beginning in Palestine and very soon turning to Europe; thereafter much of the action would be a European affair. Other regions of the world

mainly appeared as they were viewed from that central core: the Crusades, the legend of Prester John and eventually the missionary movement, through which Europeans took their faith to the darker corners of the globe. That spatial vision has denominational implications, as any reader would deduce that authentic Christianity must be synonymous with the Catholic and Protestant churches, while every other grouping plays a walk-on role. Peripheral regions spawned peripheral faiths.

Far from concentrating wholly on Europe, MacCulloch knows that early Christian expansion was in some ways far more successful in Asia, and he suggests that as late as the eighth century the obvious world capital for the faith would have been Baghdad rather than Rome or even Constantinople. At times, certainly, the strength of Christianity outside Europe has been severely weakened, even threatened with extinction, but the modern experience of globalization is anything but new. Christianity is a religion born and nurtured in Asia and Africa, and arguably in our days it is going home.

The author's breadth of vision has enormous implications for how we understand the nature of Christian truth and the relationship between indispensable core doctrines and later theological interpretations. Not only were Asian and African churches non-European, but they paid little regard to the cultural and theological norms that emerged in Europe. For these largely forgotten believers, the Miaphysite/Monophysite positions were as legitimate expressions of Christian truth as was the orthodoxy of the West. So was Nestorianism: the Christianity that Syrian merchants were carrying across Asia was almost certainly Nestorian rather than Chalcedonian. MacCulloch writes lyrically of the great Syriac churches of the East and duly mourns their later catastrophes in a lengthy and poignant section titled "Vanishing Futures."

The last book I can recall with anything like such geographical breadth was MacCulloch's earlier study, *The Reformation*—another instance in which his shifting of the geographical focus of the narrative profoundly reshaped our stereotyped vision of the theological debates and their outcome.

To be clear, this book is in no sense an anthology of historical quirks and byways, a collection of believe-it-or-nots concerning obscure heresies that flourished in out-of-the-way corners of the planet. MacCulloch provides superb coverage of European affairs and amply describes the mainstream churches, Catholic and Protestant. You would have to look far to find a better account of the controversies and divisions of

the Reformation. But MacCulloch always places these familiar stories in a worldwide context and situates them in the long span of historical development.

I do not seek to lessen MacCulloch's achievement by suggesting that the extraordinary scope of the book, its free ranging through time and space, reflects his personal agendas. He makes no apology for declaring his book "emphatically a personal view of the sweep of Christian history," and he freely cites his own upbringing to justify a book that "pontificates" (his word) on that story. His background in the Church of England gave him a lifelong fascination with the faith, but the relationship was never without its ambiguities. In the 1980s he was set for ordination in that church but abandoned that path because of scruples about the Anglican position on homosexuality. In some alternate universe, Diarmaid MacCulloch would be an esteemed bishop of the Church of England, a worthy intellectual companion to Rowan Williams and N. T. Wright and a persistent bane to British governments.

As a faithful gay Christian, MacCulloch has an understandable interest in probing the nature and emergence of orthodoxy, in comprehending the relationship between the substance and the accidents of faith. How do we distinguish between the eternal truth of Christ and the culturally shaped forms of Christianity? Do churches really speak with single unequivocal voices through the ages?

Such questions underlie MacCulloch's emphasis on the countless manifestations of Christian spirituality over the centuries, the many and various ways God appears to have spoken (and still speaks) to his followers. "So often what in one age seems bizarre—the property of a derided or persecuted sect—becomes the respected norm or variant in other, later circumstances—the abolition of slavery, the ordination of women, the avoidance of meat-eating or tobacco." The accidents change and pass; the One remains. But how to find that One? His section on the early centuries of the new religion is titled "One Church, One Faith, One Lord?"—and we note the query.

MacCulloch returns often to the dualities within the faith, particularly the struggle between its Greek and Jewish origins with what he calls their "two irreconcilable visions of God." This theme of contradiction explains the substantial attention that he pays to the cultural and spiritual predecessors of Christianity—attention that might otherwise look excessive. In this history of Christianity, Jesus is not even born until page 77. Without a thorough grounding in Greek and Hebrew traditions, MacCulloch believes, we can make no sense of Christian doctrine; his "Three

"Thousand Years" subtitle is meant to be neither perverse nor paradoxical.

For MacCulloch, much of the church's subsequent story has to be understood as a fundamental attempt to make those two visions into a coherent whole, and, as he says, "the results have never been and never can be a stable answer to an unending question." That conflict long predated all the subsequent struggles that shaped orthodoxy, as a belief rooted in the Mediterranean and Near East began its gradual migration to all parts of the globe. Although MacCulloch titles his final chapter "Culture Wars," we suspect that he would have liked to apply this term to the whole story of Christianity.

MacCulloch's *Christianity* is the work of a brilliant scholar seeking not so much to find meaning in this vast story as to sort out and evaluate the many different meanings that naturally emerge. It is a book of questions and alternatives rather than absolutes and certainties. Not surprisingly, many of his most provocative insights are framed as questions to which perhaps he has only begun to think through answers. Of course, he knows the story of the institutional churches and respects their debates and their quests for absolute truth, but he can never forget the alternatives that have presented themselves.

For all the agonies and disasters MacCulloch describes—all those vanishing futures and forsaken visions—he ends on a note of optimism. In the final pages he writes, "This history can draw attention to what has gone before: an extraordinary diversity called Christianity." And he does not believe that the earlier seeking has exhausted the treasury of faith: "It would be very surprising if this religion, so youthful, yet so varied in its historical experience, has now revealed all its secrets."