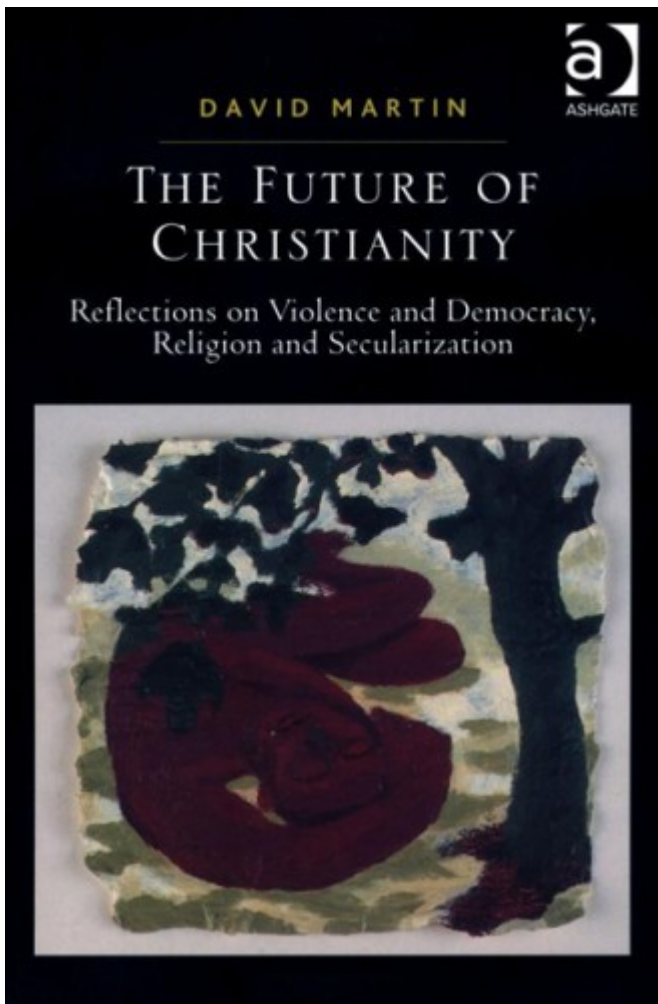


The Future of Christianity, by David Martin

reviewed by [John G. Stackhouse Jr.](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue

In Review



The Future of Christianity

By David Martin

Ashgate

David Martin concludes his introduction to this book—perhaps the best introductory mapping I have ever read of a collection of complex essays—with a description of his book as “a modest exercise.” But don’t be fooled. It is anything but. It is also not a

book about the future of Christianity. Martin himself demurs from the title when he writes, “Even the best observers failed to anticipate the crucial events of the past half century.”

So what is it? It is the richest, most controversial book of essays I have read in a long time. Martin disagrees with more *bien-pensant* thinking in fewer pages than any writer I’ve ever encountered as the juggernaut of his learning rolls across the landscape of contemporary scholarship and punditry, crushing all who get in its way while laying down a helpful road for all who follow.

Professor emeritus of sociology at the London School of Economics (from which he earned his Ph.D.) and fellow of the British Academy, Martin is the greatest living British sociologist of religion and, for my money, the best anywhere at what he does. He immerses himself in historical, ethnographic, sociological and political studies of multiple countries in order to build a mental storehouse of comparative information about religion, politics and society on three continents (Europe, North America and South America)—and he makes astute references to Africa, Asia and Australasia as well. From this storehouse Martin brings forth, in this book, treasures both new and old.

Among the new dimensions of analysis is Martin’s discussion of how Orthodox Christianity differs from Catholicism and Protestantism in its typical relationships to power, the state, pluralism and violence. Martin peers more closely at Protestantism and shows how its various forms differ from each other. He also indicates how Orthodoxy and Catholicism themselves contain a variety of themes and resources.

Martin has been articulating this theme of responding variously in various situations since at least as far back as his 1969 classic *A General Theory of Secularization*. The careers of religions are “path-dependent,” Martin has long contended, and are intrinsically related to their surrounding social landscapes. They are definitely in the world, if not entirely of it. Sociological realities, Martin argues, will grind up the unrealistic dreams of missionaries and denominational executives as inexorably as an avalanche will destroy one’s brave little campsite. As a theologian trying to read between Martin’s lines, I guess that he believes strongly in Providence in the sense that prayer for the extension of the kingdom of God really means praying that God so superintends the Big Things of the world that the Holy Spirit in due time can flow in helpful, influential channels. But a book as disciplinarily chaste as this one offers few hints on that level.

Martin's account of the various forms that secularization has taken in Europe, the United States and Latin America—with remarkable specificity regarding a wide range of countries and even regions within them—ends with a number of controversial conclusions. What follows is a sampling.

There are various paths to modernity, and modernity itself has different forms, none of which is necessarily inimical to religion or to Christianity in particular. There were also various Enlightenments, some congenial to Christianity, some distorting Christianity, and only some that were antagonistic to religion in any form—which helps to explain the vastly different trajectories of religion in the context of two Enlightenment revolutions, the American and the French, as well as the very different polities of enlightened absolutism in Austria, Prussia and Russia.

Also, there is no inherent connection between Christianity and democracy, even though certain forms of Protestantism are particularly congenial to democracy and have in some cases provided terms and legitimations useful to the rise of democratic politics.

Furthermore, there is no a priori religiousness in human beings, not even a functional equivalent in every situation, as the ideology-shorn East Germany now demonstrates. Christianity and science are not antagonists. Atheism does not correlate with intelligence, higher education, social class, modernness, nonviolence or any other mark of its putative superiority over religion. And so on.

Some of Martin's theses will startle almost anyone who is used to what we might call the *New York Times* or American Academy of Religion views of the world. Some examples include the following.

Universalizing movements ironically and inevitably fail as they provoke alternative movements in reaction.

Islam is inherently different from Christianity in that the former is rooted in territory and this-worldly politics, while the latter is rooted in a kingdom not of this world. Yet as Christianity moved from being the faith of an embattled and powerless minority to becoming the official religion of one empire after another, it drew upon its broad repertoire of religious elements (especially in the Old Testament and Revelation) to answer the demands of *realpolitik*—sometimes ruthlessly. To paraphrase Martin, Islam nowadays has to work hard to show that it is not inherently coercive, whereas Christianity previously has had to work hard to show that it can be.

Finally, violence is about survival and greed, not about religion, and there is no sociological basis for causally linking violence, and especially war, to religion. The history of warfare shows groups happily ignoring religious and ideological affinities to form alliances with those who will further other kinds of interests.

What is the value of such a wide-ranging book for readers who are employed in the church or academy?

First, Martin's work sensitizes us to the value of sociological awareness. Pastors worth their salt know that they had better be aware of the differences for ministry between New England and Texas—or, for that matter, between Austin and Abilene. Martin presses us to work harder than we might to bring into focus national, regional and local differences as they influence our values, lifeways and rhetoric and those of the people we serve in church, at school and elsewhere. Without such awareness we will knock our heads against cliff faces or unwittingly break taboos when a safer and more productive route is available just outside our current field of vision.

Second, here as in other works (most notably *Does Christianity Cause War?*), Martin puts the lie to a great many charges of the New Atheists. He shows that many of their arguments are not true because the generalizations that are supposed to support them are not true.

Third, Martin prompts us to consider how we and our respective communities pick the particulars that we prefer out of the constitutive elements of the Bible and Christian tradition, then arrange them in a way we like. To be sure, Martin recognizes what makes Christianity a definable religion and knows that not just any selection and deployment of elements will do; heresy is still a viable category. Nonetheless, his way of putting the matter prompts readers to become more self-conscious, to dig back into the resources of scripture and tradition for richer and less self-interested versions of Christianity, and to appreciate more respectfully the legitimacy of quite different forms of Christian faith because their adherents also read the Bible and worship Christ.

Finally, Martin's linkage of politics, nationalism, religion and secularization and his analysis of the wide varieties of each of those and the possible connections among them can put us on guard as we consider our relationship as Christians to the nation, politics more generally and society at large. To explain why I do what I do, feel what I feel and believe what I believe in terms of my communities and commitments does

not automatically make everything right. But to ignore the question of social location, or to answer it badly, is likely to perpetuate whatever is wrong.

I recommend Martin's book as a resource for people who would like to take a long, rigorous, bracing hike beyond well-worn paths. Most of us won't be reading a book like this very often. But I promise that even one such book will change the way you think about a great many things.