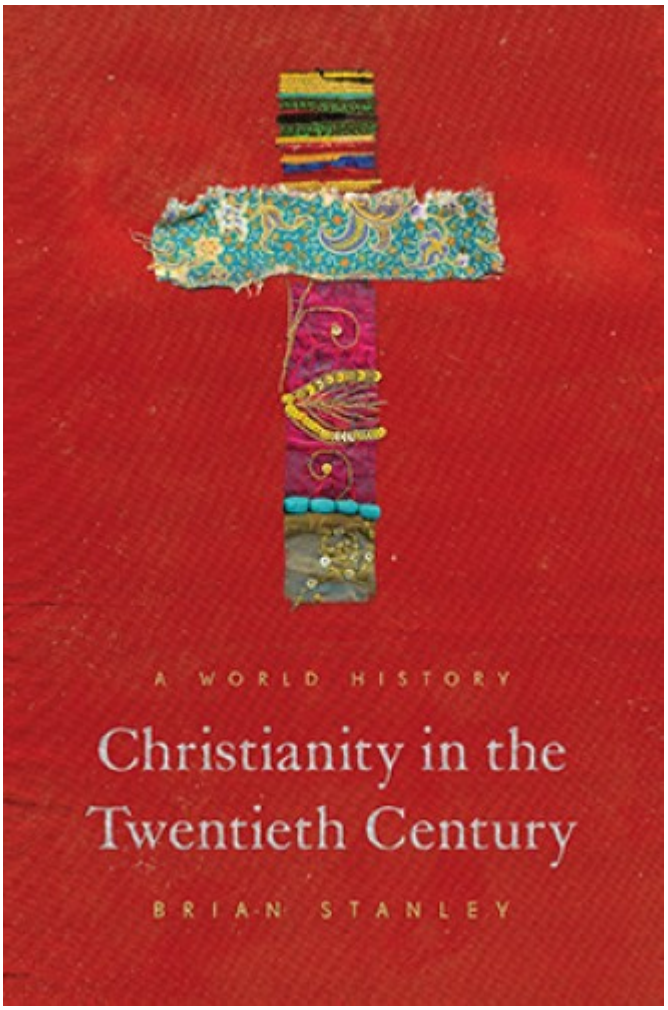
The “Christian century” and the people who lived it

Brian Stanley pulls off a readable, one-volume history of 20th-century Christianity.

by Mark Granquist in the June 5, 2019 issue

In Review



Christianity in the Twentieth Century

A World History

By Brian Stanley
Princeton University Press

Readers of this publication are aware that the 20th century was tagged at its beginning as “the Christian century.” Certainly it was a Christian century, but in ways that those original framers could hardly have dreamed.

In 1900, nearly half of the world’s Christians lived in Europe, and two-thirds of all Christians lived on either side of the North Atlantic. Except for a few scattered pockets, Christianity was rarely found in Africa and Asia. By the end of the century, two-thirds of all Christians lived in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—and Christianity in Europe had become a shell of its former self. Alongside these demographic shifts, the past century has produced Pentecostalism, fundamentalism, neoorthodoxy, the German Christians, Vatican II, liberation theology, feminist theology, evangelicalism, the “death of God,” ecumenism, and the prosperity gospel (just to name a few of the major developments).

What is the historian to say to all this, especially when the dust has barely settled on some of these developments and others are still ongoing? Brian Stanley has taken on this daunting task, producing a marvelous historical look at the sweep of 20th-century Christianity in less than 400 readable and insightful pages.

To pull off such a history in a single volume requires creativity. Stanley is strategic in choosing which stories to include, and he self-consciously avoids making the book a history of Christian thought. Although it addresses major intellectual and theological themes, these are not central to the narrative. Rather, it attempts to understand the growth and development of 20th-century Christianity in its social, cultural, and political contexts, embedded in local and national situations.

Stanley’s 15 chapters take readers on a roughly chronological journey from the First World War era to the late 20th-century crisis of migration and transnationalism. But this is not a strictly chronological work, nor is it structured by geography. Rather, it is organized thematically. In each chapter Stanley explores a different theme related to Christian history, usually by juxtaposing two case studies from different continents. For example, one chapter explores the theme of ethnic hatred and genocide within Christianity, using as case studies Nazi Germany and late 20th-century Rwanda. Another chapter illuminates Christian encounters with militant secularism by comparing and contrasting the Soviet Union and France.

Sometimes these paired case studies work brilliantly well. In a chapter on Christianity and nationalism, Stanley pairs Poland and the Koreas. In both places, Christianity became a partner with nascent nationalism to help the country emerge from oppression by larger countries. In such situations, Christianity became the focus of intense nationalistic sentiments, lifting the cause of Christianity in both Poland and the Koreas (although the long-term effects of this alliance are still to be determined). As Stanley rightly states, “twentieth-century experience, no less than that of earlier centuries, suggests that nationalism and Christianity will always be uneasy bedfellows.”

Another thoughtful chapter addresses the theme of Christians living in majority Muslim nations, pairing the Coptic Church in Egypt with the Christian churches in Indonesia. Obviously the Christian situations are not the same in these two countries: the long-standing Eastern Christian communities in Egypt have a different trajectory than the missionary-derived Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in Indonesia. Yet both communities had to find creative ways to cope with (and sometimes resist) a new national government that was deeply shaped by the resurgence of popular and sometimes aggressive forms of Islam. Stanley ruefully observes that instead of a growing relationship between Christianity and Islam in these two countries, the common trend involves “a regression from some measure of Christian-Muslim collaboration in the anticolonial cause in the first half of the century to intensifying religious rivalry and antagonism in the post-colonial era.”

Other chapters seem more strained. For example, in a chapter examining forms of liberation theology in Latin America and Palestine, Stanley writes about how 20th-century theologians in both areas developed new approaches to Christianity in light of the oppressive situations in which they found themselves. The trouble here is that the two situations are so dissimilar that the comparisons break down rather quickly. (The size difference between the two populations alone makes comparison of the two groups difficult.) Stanley admits that Palestinian theologians “owed more to the early twentieth-century tradition of Christian Arab nationalism and to much older traditions of Christian theology constructed within an Islamic environment than they did to influences from Latin America.”

To his credit, Stanley is methodologically flexible. His chapters on the First World War and the ecumenical movement both stray from the thematic approach—and both are, I suspect, more readable for that reason.

When it comes to assessing which century is characterized by the most dramatic shifts in Christian history, the 20th rivals both the turbulent fourth and the chaotic 16th. Stanley’s thoughtful wrestling provides a sense of some of the most important developments in Christianity during the last century and how they are interconnected. This important book will pay dividends for readers who engage with its narrative.