A Brief History of

Christianity

Blackwell Brief Histories of

Religion

This series offers brief, accessible, and lively accounts of key topics within theology and religion. Each volume presents both academic and general readers with a selected history of topics which have had a profound effect on religious and cultural life. The word "history" is, therefore, understood in its broadest cultural and social sense. The volumes are based on serious scholarship but they are written engagingly and in terms readily understood by general readers.

Published

Alister E. McGrath – A Brief History of Heaven
G. R. Evans – A Brief History of Heresy
Tamara Sonn – A Brief History of Islam
Douglas J. Davies – A Brief History of Death
Lawrence S. Cunningham – A Brief History of Saints
Carter Lindberg – A Brief History of Christianity

A Brief History of Christianity

CARTER LINDBERG

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lindberg, Carter, 1937–
A brief history of Christianity / Carter Lindberg.
p. cm. — (Blackwell brief histories of religion)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1078-5 (hardcover: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-4051-1078-3 (hardcover: alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1047-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-4051-1047-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Church history. I. Title. II. Series.

BR145.3.L56 2005
270—dc22

2005006598

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12.5pt Meridien
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed by Replika Press, India

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
www.blackwellpublishing.com

To Teddy and Coco

Contents

Preface

A "brief" history of Christianity falls into the genre of the proverbial final exam question: provide a history of the universe with a couple of examples. While I hope the following effort will provide a bit more perspective on the history of Western Christianity than a variation on the theme of curious George goes to church, I am all too aware of what is missing in the following narrative. The task has proven to be more daunting than I had at first thought – though probably not as daunting as the proposed "brief history of eternity" we bandied about in discussing this proposal. After having taught a survey course on the history of Christianity for more years than I care to remember, I naively assumed I could just paste together all my old yellowed notes and that would be it. But even as cryptic as they were, far more cutting was required – even with the gracious allowance by the editors of more space. A very partial remedy for the topics suffering neglect is the list of suggested reading. The list is not a bibliography of works consulted, though some of course were, but resources for addressing the many omissions in the text. I have also attempted to avoid footnotes. Partially this decision was to save space, but it also reflects that fact that over the years

I have appropriated the insights of so many scholars that I no longer am aware of specific attributions. Peter of Blois (d. 1212) is justly renowned for his comment: "We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts." I haven't seen nearly as far as the giant scholars of the history of Christianity, but I am grateful for their broad shoulders for whatever panorama the following text provides, and I beg their forgiveness for not crediting them for their "choice thoughts."

I am also grateful to the editors of Blackwell Publishing, especially Rebecca Harkin, who has supported, but should not be blamed, for this effort; and Andrew Humphries, who not only saw this project into print but also chose excellent reviewers of the manuscript whose insightful criticisms and suggestions have vastly improved the text. In retrospect, I am also grateful now (I wasn't at the time!) to those colleagues of the School of Theology at Boston University who many years ago forced me to accept teaching the survey course. It turned out to be really great fun – mainly because of the generations of lively students who wouldn't allow it to be just a litany of dates. Finally, I am delighted to dedicate this volume to our most recent grandchildren – Theodore (Teddy) and Claudia (aka Coco) – who, like their cousins, provide great reasons to get out of the study and play.

Chapter 1

The Responsibility to Remember: An Introduction to the Historiography of Christianity

In a memorable epigram, the historian Richard Hofstadter stated: "Memory is the thread of personal identity, history of public identity." Memory and historical identity are inseparable. Most of us have experienced the embarrassment of momentarily forgetting a name in the midst of an introduction. Think what life would be like without any memory at all. Life is terribly difficult for an amnesiac, and it is tragic for the person – and his or her family and friends – with Alzheimer's disease. The loss of memory is not just the absence of "facts"; it is the loss of personal identity, family, friends, indeed the whole complex of life's meaning. It is very difficult if not impossible to function in society if we do not know who we are. Our memory is the thread of our personal identity.

What about our religious identities? Are we amnesiacs when someone asks how the Methodist or the Roman Catholic Church came to be? Beyond referring to our parents or a move to a new neighborhood, could we explain why we belong to St. Mary's by the gas station or the Lutheran church by the grocery store?

A French friend once began to explain contemporary French–German relations to me by referring to the significance of the

ninth-century division of Charlemagne's empire! Most of us do not go back that far to understand the present, but his perspective illustrates the tenacity of historical memory, all too painfully evident in the eruption of historical ethnic conflicts. On the other hand, if we do not know our personal and communal histories, we are like children easily manipulated by those who would revise the past for their own purposes. Historical perspective is important for counteracting the tyranny of current opinions.

The biblical community has always known that its identity is rooted in history. Isaiah calls Israel to "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which your were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isaiah 51:1–2). The genealogies scattered through the Bible remind the people of God of their roots in creation and their destiny in God's plan (Matthew 1:1–25). Christian identity is clearly stated in the historical shorthand of the Christian creeds that confess faith in the historical person of Jesus who was born, suffered, and died. Christians put a unique spin on this history when they confess that this historical Jesus is also the historic Christ who was raised from the dead and who will return to complete history. Thus, from an insider's perspective, the identity of the Christian community is formed by both the historical past and the historical future. In brief, then, Christian identity is rooted in history, not in nature, philosophy, or ethics.

Sociologists suggest that our family identity is passed on to us through our conversations with the mothers and fathers who have gone on before us. We know, of course, from even limited family experience that when we no longer talk to our parents and children we begin to forget who we are. This is not to say that conversations between generations are always pleasant, but to say that they are important for learning "how we got this way." To paraphrase the old saw about watching the making of sausage and political decisions, the study of our personal and communal histories, including the history of Christianity, may

be disturbing. But without such conversations we are condemned to presentism, which is a more elegant way of describing a continuous "me generation."

Historical memory provides perspective, a horizon, for judging what is or is not important. Without a horizon it is too easy to overvalue what is before your nose. A horizon enables the valuation of the relative significance of everything within this horizon, as near or far, great or small. The idea of horizon or historical distance bears further reflection.

Historical distance can be a surprising element for understanding the present. Fernand Braudel, the renowned French historian, spoke of this by analogy to living in a foreign city. If you live in a foreign city for a year you may not learn a great deal about that city, but when you return home you will be surprised by your increasing comprehension as well as questions of your homeland. You did not previously understand or perhaps even perceive these characteristics because you were too close to them. Likewise, a visit to the past provides distance and a vantage point for comprehending and questioning the present. In other words, distance – in history as in navigation – is necessary for finding true bearings. Sailors, at least those with some longevity, do not navigate by watching the prow of the boat. Hence the old adage about people who can't see beyond their own noses applies equally to historical myopia.

I have belabored the importance of memory and history for our personal and communal identities because we live in a culture that regards as wisdom Henry Ford's dictum that "history is bunk." I hope the image of the amnesiac will jar loose easy acquiescence to forgetfulness of the past and warn us of the dangers posed by lack of identity. Without a sense of our communal and personal history we are prey for whatever fads and fancies appeal to us. If we do not recognize the role of history in shaping our identities then we unreflectively allow the past to control us. This may not have bad results but it puts us in the position of being misled by those who wish to manipulate us.

Lack of historical consciousness promotes a conversational deficit in the communion of saints, the church. The irony is that this is occurring even as we are acquiring more and more information. We now have a wealth of archeological and textual materials, including texts from the early Christian community not included in the Bible, far beyond the wildest imagination of medieval scribes, but without an interpretive tradition it is difficult to know what to do with this wealth of material.

"Tradition" is not merely a mass of information, but in its root sense means the action of handing on an understanding of that information, not just its rote repetition. The prolific historian of doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan sharpens this point with his clever distinction between tradition and traditionalism: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." In the Bible and the church fathers, "tradition" means primarily God's self-revelation; God's handing himself over in Jesus. Thus the fundamental structure of the Christian faith and community depends upon tradition, upon passing on significant conversations with prior generations concerning God's activity in history.

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of handing on what he has received. The first place he speaks this way is in connection with the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:23–26); the second place is where he cites the confession of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3–11). The concept of the tradition as the passing on of the news that God has handed over his Son at a particular moment in world history for the salvation of humankind is bound up in the New Testament with the concept of remembering (Greek: *anamnesis*, i.e., the exact opposite of forgetting, amnesia). It is no accident that these terms are both present in connection with the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. The tradition that Paul cites presents an exhortation to *anamnesis*. The meal that Jesus held with his disciples the night before his

death will continue to be held "in remembrance of me." This is not just a conceptual remembrance, an idea; rather, it is a carrying out of the remembrance that offers, passes on, his presence itself. This "doing in remembrance" has its model in the Hebrew Bible, namely in the Passover as the remembrance of the flight from Egypt. Here too the past event is made present as every co-celebrant becomes a contemporary of the event through remembrance of what is passed on. The essential yet paradoxical point in the biblical understanding of tradition is that it is not fixed upon the past, but that in presenting the past (i.e., making the past present) it has significance for a new future.

Chapter 2

The Law of Praying is the Law of Believing

The title of this chapter is from Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 390–ca. 463): "The rule of prayer should lay down the rule of faith." By his time, the Christian community had developed from the small group of Jewish followers of Jesus worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46), to the established religion of the Roman Empire with scriptures, creeds, and a hierarchical authority all claiming to be "apostolic." This astounding development was marked by tumult and controversy within and without as the various Christian communities with all the pluralism of their theologies and writings created a self-identity that would in turn inform and identify Western culture up to our own time. In the process, the "rule of faith" was not determined by "prayer alone" but with the help of tough, hard-nosed, and bright leaders who vigorously opposed alternative Christian writings, theologies, and ways of life as well as challenges from rival religious perspectives. The Christian protagonists and antagonists in these developments believed salvation depended on to whom one prayed, that is, what one believed and confessed about God and salvation. Normative authorities were needed to answer Jesus' question: "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

In retrospect, the Christian community believed that its survival was the fulfillment of God's plan. "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14–15).

"The time is fulfilled." The author of Mark wrote in Greek, and as the saying goes, the Greeks have a word for it. The Greek word used in the above sentence is "kairos," that is, the time for a decision, the time when events are so juxtaposed that a crucial decision or event may occur. Another Greek word for time is "chronos," that is, "chronological" time measured by units of years, days, hours, minutes, etc. "Kairos" has the potential to qualitatively change "chronos." The early Christian community had this sense that the appearance of Jesus in the midst of chronological time marked a crucial (crux, "cross") moment, a time of decision. A "kairotic" event divides time in terms of what precedes and succeeds it. This is what early Christian historians were getting at when they proclaimed Jesus the Christ is the center of history between the creation and the Last Judgment; a conviction eventually enshrined in the dating by years before and after Christ (BC and AD) or in more recent terms before and during the common era of Judaism and Christianity (BCE and CE). The "kairos" occurred at the "chronos" of a number of developments: the dispersion of Judaism, the dominance of the Roman Empire, and the universality of Hellenistic culture.

The early Christian community was convinced the "time is fulfilled" because they believed Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. Persuaded by their experience of Easter that Jesus is the Messiah, the early Christians – themselves Jews – therefore saw the promises in the Hebrew Bible to be transferable to Jesus. Convinced that God gave "all authority in heaven and earth" to Jesus, his followers believed they had the mission to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18–19).

The early community's liturgical confessions and hymns testify to its conviction that Jesus fulfilled the promise God made through his prophets (Romans 1:1–4). In this perspective, history is viewed within the context of God's plan of salvation "that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known" (Romans 16:25–26). Rooted in the life, preaching, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the early Christian community initially saw itself as a renewal movement within Palestinian Judaism; Easter confirmed God's promises to Israel.

The historical context for Christianity thus first of all is the whole history of Israel and its sacred scriptures, the Bible of early Christianity (there is not an "Old" Testament until the church developed the "New" Testament some 200 years later). As initially a Jewish movement, Christianity was heir to the plurality of influences from the Hebrew Bible, diaspora Judaism, and Hellenistic Judaism. Furthermore, in its formative stages, Christianity benefited from the protective shield Judaism provided as a "licit" religion in the Roman Empire.

At the time of the early Christian community, Jews had long been widely dispersed in Asia Minor and the Roman Empire with sizeable populations in urban centers such as Rome and Alexandria. The Jewish Dispersion (Diaspora), with its origins in the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations beginning in the eighth century BCE, provided a point of contact for Christian missionaries who "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (Acts 13:5), addressing both Jews and their Gentile converts (Acts 13:42–43; 14:1; 17:1–4; 17:10–17). The Book of Acts repeatedly states that in his missionary travels Paul would go to the local synagogue "every Sabbath" where he would argue and "try to convince Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4).

The ethical monotheism of Judaism appealed to those "Greeks," that is Gentiles, of the Greco-Roman Empire who found philosophical ethics too cerebral and Dionysian religions too emotional and amoral. The drawback however was that Gentile conversion

to Judaism included male circumcision and obedience to ritual and dietary laws. The appeal of Christianity was an ethical monotheism without such restrictive and counter-cultural rules. In Christ "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). Furthermore, Christianity appealed to the marginalized, women and the poor, in the proclamation of social equality. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

In a society that blamed the victim, the biblical motif of the great reversal – that the last shall be first and the first last – pointedly expressed in the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–55) must have appealed to those on the receiving end of the Roman view that the gods rewarded the good with wealth and punished the evil and lazy with poverty. That God would side with the poor and oppressed was a discordant note to those whose worldview was shaped by the Roman poet Ovid's (43 BCE–CE 17) dictum, "property confers rank," but it was a message of hope to the disenfranchised.

It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. "Martyr" derives from the Greek word for witness, and in that sense the witness of the early Christians that won Gentiles to the church was not only the witness in the face of persecution, but also the witness of serving the neighbor (cf. Matthew 25:35–40). There are numerous references from the early church fathers concerning the collection of funds during worship that are dedicated to helping the needy. One of the more famous stories is that of Laurence (d. 258), a deacon of Rome who was told by the civil authorities to deliver up the treasure of the church. In response he assembled the poor to whom he had distributed the church's possessions and presented them to the Roman prefect with the words, "These are the treasure of the church." The prefect was not amused, and – the story goes – had Laurence slowly roasted to death on a gridiron. Tertullian

(ca. 160–ca. 225) summarized the point when he stated to Roman culture, "our compassion spends more in the street than yours does in the temples."

The Roman Empire and its Political Achievements

The early Christian conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, whom God sent in the fullness of time, meant to them that universal history was prepared for this event. The Roman Empire was thus part of God's providential plan. The *pax romana* had pacified the Mediterranean world and suppressed robbery and piracy along the Roman roads and seaways. The network of roads enabled shipping, commerce and communications – from the British Isles to North Africa, from the Iberian Peninsula to the Near East – and thus facilitated the spread of Christian missions. Roman law also enabled missionary mobility. Paul could travel with relative safety and could appeal to his Roman citizenship when in difficulty (Acts 25:1–12).

Hellenization and its Cultural Achievements

The Greek language of the time, "Koine," was the common language of diplomacy and commerce in the Mediterranean world. Practically everyone understood Koine. Indeed, the culture, especially in the cities and commercial centers, was multilingual. Linguistic universality enabled Christians to spread their message rapidly. Thus early Christian missionaries not only did not have to spend years in language school before setting out to spread their faith, but with their facility with the "lingua franca" of their day they did not appear as an ethnic minority. Furthermore, their scripture (i.e., the Hebrew Bible) was already in a Greek translation known as the "Septuagint" or "LXX" (after the supposed number of translators in the legendary account of its

origin). By around 100 BCE the bulk of the Old Testament was circulating in Greek.

Hellenism also created a universal cultural orientation that was not only esteemed and perpetuated by the Romans but was also present in Palestine and influential upon Judaism. Spread by the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), Hellenistic culture provided a common philosophical terminology. Christians borrowed freely from both the terminology of Greek philosophy and its claim to be ancient wisdom. With regard to the latter claim, as we note in the appendix, the early Christians agreed that older is better. Thus, to counter the charge of innovation, defenders of the Christian faith claimed that Christianity goes back to Moses who is even before the ancient philosophers so highly esteemed in the Hellenistic culture of the day. A classic example of the use of philosophical terminology is the Christian use of the term and concept "logos." The term was rich with philosophical meanings as the universal "reason" or "word" that governs and permeates the world. The prologue to the Fourth Gospel gives this a new twist when it proclaims that the logos is not merely an idea but God incarnate: "In the beginning was the Word ["logos"] . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1–14). The claim that Christianity is really *the* true philosophy served as a catchy entrée to missionary dialogue, but would in turn be attacked by other Christians as warping the gospel message.

In fact control of the gospel message became an increasing priority as Christian communities developed throughout the empire, often with their own local take on Jesus supported by their own teachers and writings claiming to go back to particular apostles or their disciples. Without an authoritative scripture, how could one know the right teaching (literally, "orthodoxy"), but without the right teaching, how could one know which of the many scriptures extant among the various Christian communities were authoritative? These symbiotic problems stimulated the creation of an authoritative list of New Testament

writings even while the early church was dealing with a number of other interrelated concerns at the same time.

Development of the Biblical Canon

Christianity, like Judaism and later Islam, is a religion of the book. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the determination of normative biblical writings for the history of the church and its faith. Indeed, the development of the canon of scriptures was the first dogmatic development in the history of Christianity; it has remained fundamental for most Christian communities down to today as *the* source for the Christian faith.

The word "canon" (Greek: *kanon*, "measuring rod") means "rule" or "standard." The Greek and Latin fathers applied the term canon beyond the list of scriptures, for example to lists of church rules, thus canon law; lists of saints or heroes of the faith, thus persons who are canonized. The death of the first Christian generation and the efforts by various Christian communities or individuals to introduce their alternative understandings of Jesus and salvation led to the development of the canon. Since salvation related to confessing Christ, it was crucial to have the right confession and thus the right scripture by which to "measure" that confession. A famous (or infamous as the case may be) example, often cited as a major impetus to the formation of the New Testament, is the canon of Marcion (ca. 100–ca.160). Reputedly the excommunicated son of the bishop of Sinope, a city on the southern shore of the Black Sea, Marcion became very wealthy in the shipping industry. Around 140, he moved to Rome, joined the church there, and made a huge benevolence gift for the mission of the church.

Marcion's theology presented a dualistic opposition between the world of the spirit (deemed good) and the world of matter (deemed evil). In brief, what concerned Marcion was his perceived opposition between the righteousness of the law as he