

Review of

L. WOODHEAD, *AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, ISBN 0 521  
45445.

*An introduction to Christianity* is a social study on the history of the Church from a moderately feminist perspective. It asks questions or traces developments that should make theologians think, and provoke church leaders to think twice. The title fails to deliver. The style of writing and the knowledge of church history and theology required to read this book intelligently place it beyond the reach of common mortals. But if you are a theologian, rejoice, you did not spend all those years at university in vain, because now one is supposed to be able to digest books such as this one!

Mrs. Linda Woodhead, senior lecturer at Lancaster University, covers twenty centuries of Christianity. The Pardoner in *Canterbury Tales* repeatedly stated: "My theme is always one and ever was". Mrs. Woodhead's theme is one of power: how Christianity gained control of the Western world and lost it. She thus concentrates on organisational issues when dealing with the early church rather than on the apparent innate power of its message. Divine activity and work of the Spirit of God do not feature in the author's mindset. Readers should not expect theological explanation in this social study. However, the author makes up for this by assessing developments in our present age that concern the church and theologians in particular. If not always right, she certainly stimulates intelligent thought about relevant issues.

*Challenge*

The book deals with Christianity in a circular way, the old theme of rise and fall:

Christianity returns to a marginal position in relation to social power, but does so with a heavy weight of baggage in tow. Above all it brings with it a history of alliance with higher power that sits uncomfortable with an age that exalts power from below (p. 409).

This ignores the mathematical difference of a few billion people who consider themselves Christians now compared to some 120 faithful in the Book of Acts. Nonetheless it begs a response to the apparent fact that modern Christianity has largely become a private affair in a secular world, perhaps even producing a secularised Church. Woodhead's answer to the challenge is embracing a subjective and liberal spirituality in which women will play a major role. She basically invites the Church to use its organisation and do something else than what Christianity was supposed to be about for two thousand years.

But the author calls our attention to the shift from the old confessional approach to the subjective theology of our times (362,63). The former started out with faith. It trusted revealed dogma from "above", embodied in Scripture and authoritative confessional summaries, but explored with reason. Since the seventeenth century, reason and experience were no longer evaluated from the perspective of an authoritative mind of God. The old faith was replaced by subjectivism — personal preference and experience as new masters of faith and morality, reaching its (temporary?) climax in our times. Woodhead shows that the Protestant church in general and evangelicalism in particular have to a large extent been affected by this paradigm shift in culture and in many cases we might add: dislodged from their original foundations.

### *Partiality*

A broad theme such as 2000 years of Christianity requires a selective approach, but in this book the author's liberal American background or preference clouds the possibilities of fair assessment. The reader will meet with liberal Dutchmen like Jan Beukelsz (p. 196), Coornheert (p. 225), Erasmus (pp. 193-4, 200, 203, 220, 259), but will look in vain for Dathenus, Voetius, Witsius or Bogerman. The Roman Catholic agnostic Schillebeeckx (p. 381) is mentioned, while the great Jerome is only referred to in parentheses as the author of the Vulgate translation (p. 85). When in an introduction to the history of Christianity, the reader seeks in vain for Thomas of Kempen (*De Imitatione Christi*, one of the greatest bestsellers after the Bible throughout many centuries!), the bias becomes somewhat intolerable. Rather than living up to its claims, *An introduction to Christianity* serves as an intro-

duction to Mrs Woodhead's particular perception of Christianity. Relatively obscure names such as Peck and Chopra (p. 359) feature, but reformed giants such as Cranmer, Kuyper, Owen, Chalmers and Spurgeon are simply ignored. Edwards (p. 247) and Whitefield (pp. 221, 224, 246, 251) are introduced, but these men had the good fortune to minister in the United States of America. Neither South Africa nor its great missionary endeavours are on the author's map. Australia is not mentioned either, and William Carey, the father of modern missions, is an unknown entity.

Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of positive thinking* is classified among the "spiritualist versions of Christianity" (p. 358). Whether this is a matter of definition or a blunder of the second magnitude the careful reader may decide.

The author interprets Fundamentalism through American glasses, connecting the publication of the Fundamentals to an American sub-culture, introducing the Scopes trial without reference, stating that:

Central to the fundamentalist scheme of interpretation was a framework of "dispensational premillennialism" whose origins can be traced back to the work of the British writer and church leader John Nelson Darby (1800-82), leader of the proto-fundamentalist group commonly known as the Plymouth Brethren (p. 353).

This statement tends to grossly overrate the actual role of dispensational premillennialism in the hermeneutics of those who contributed to the Fundamentals and subsequent generations of likeminded scholars. Rather than being central to their interpretation of Scripture, it was a view which some of them held as a consequence of their literal approach to the Bible, not *vice versa*. Although a notable premillennialist such as Scofield contributed to the Fundamentals, so did bishop Ryle, James Orr and Benjamin Warfield.

The first volume deals exclusively with nineteen issues of Scripture authority and Bible criticism.

"Sex roles" and "gender relations" are recurrent themes. The reader simply has to read these, whether the issues were relevant to generations past or not. The index refers to women under "gender issues" that should have been "sex roles" or "grammar issues" when the Queen's English was still in vogue in England. Now even Cambridge Uni-

versity Press fails the language and Bill Clinton has been nominated as chancellor of Oxford. South Africans might as well give up on English altogether. At least 25 entries with numerous references tell us about Calvinism and women, Marcionism and women, etc. If one compares this with one lonesome reference to children and none to man or men, a remark that “women and blacks are still underrepresented in academic and theological circles” does not come as a surprise. That the same underrepresentation applies to theologically conservative married white men is no apparent concern of this author.

In dealing with Africa (pp. 397, 398) Woodhead highlights the surge of Pentecostalism. She connects this numeric success to doing the same thing as indigenous African religions and the lack of historical connection with colonialism. The essentially spiritual character of the African worldview (cf. Europe from 500 to 1500) seems to have escaped her attention.

#### *Conclusion*

*An introduction to Christianity* is a thought-provoking book. It helps the church to face questions, evaluate its current position, and relate to the world. The answers or suggestions provided by the author are less helpful for those who appreciate the Scriptures as God’s revelation and the apostolic teachings as authoritative.

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