

Reviews

A HISTORY OF ENGLISH CHRISTIANITY 1920–1985 by Adrian Hastings. Collins, 1986, pp 720, £25.00

Once again Professor Adrian Hastings has accepted the challenge of writing contemporary history. His new book, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985* is a worthy successor to his *History of African Christianity 1950–1975*, and shares the same virtues of courage, insight and fairmindedness. The problem of writing contemporary history is that although some kind of conventional narrative line already exists, many of the sources needed to test and revise it are not easily, if at all, available. To some extent, the contemporary historian has to work by intuition, always going a little beyond what can be documented. And in the case of religious history there is the additional problem of fitting the narrative into the wider stream of secular events, so as to arrive at a correct perspective. Professor Hastings offers his own solution to this second problem. He has divided his book into seven parts, one of which is devoted to the Second World War. In each of the other six parts there is a preliminary chapter called 'Politics'. Through these chapters he asserts a view of English society over the whole period, that in 1920 English society was radically unequal, that by 1939 it was widely agreed that something must be done to produce a fairer system, and that when in 1945 the British electorate 'exchanged the splendours of oratory and the decades of experience of the greatest of war leaders for a very sincere but decidedly underestimated little man ... it never made a better choice'. The Welfare State that Attlee built up formed the basis of a social consensus which church leaders came to take for granted and which lasted into the 1970's, when a new uninhibited Toryism set the axe to the root of the tree. The book breaks off in the 1980s with the Churches in some disarray. Adrian Hastings, himself by this time perhaps too close to the present, is evidently distressed at the evidence that 'middle-of-the-road' Christians refused to support either Bruce Kent's CND or the Corrie Abortion Bill of 1980. Nevertheless, the Christian history of the country has been firmly related to the overall pattern of events, and this is salutary.

This is only one element in an elaborately crafted book. Professor Hastings handles his denominational history in a chronological series of chapters entitled 'Roman Catholicism' and 'Anglicanism and the Free Churches'. I suspect that the Free Churches have never been more fairly treated in a work of this kind. The underlying theme, however, which controls the narrative, is the advance of the ecumenical movement, above all when it is looked at in terms of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. It may, Hastings says, have been reasonable for William Temple in the 1930s to feel that the whole ethos of the two communions was 'radically different', but times have really changed. 'Protestantism' has sharply declined, so that even popular religion now has more in common with the medieval than with the Reformation world. A line stretching from Alfred the Great to Chesterton through More and Newman 'may well be regarded as constituting the truest centre of English Christianity, folk religion especially'. Here Hastings is perhaps reflecting a more general English Catholic inability to feel that 'Anglicanism' has any substance which is not 'catholic', and he also exaggerates (I suspect) the long-term impact of Anglo-Catholicism on the Church of England. After all, in a few years' time Anglican bishops will ordain Anglican women priests, whatever the ecumenical consequences, and they will do so because a majority of Anglicans accept an attitude to 'modernization' (the Bishop of Durham will not be silenced, as he well might have been in a 'Roman' context) which a majority of Catholics still reject. And enthusiasm can carry one just so far: Chesterton was surely too close to Belloc for comfort, and one could not want to see the centre of English Christianity running through Belloc.

This should not be misread as implying that Professor Hastings is pressing a 'Catholic' point of view. I would agree in any case that the vital fact in the recent history of English Christianity has been a shift in the balance of power in the religious subculture from Anglicanism to Catholicism. This comes out clearly in the separate chapters which he devotes to the up and down fortunes of academic theology (that most misunderstood of trades), as well as in the sections on theology and culture, including literature (where much will depend, however, on the reader's own view of writers like Evelyn Waugh and C.S. Lewis). Moreover, Hastings makes no effort to hide his distress at the largely negative effect of Vatican II in the time of Cardinal Heenan. In a moving paragraph he says: 'The tragedy in England of the post-conciliar Church was a tragedy of devout young people, desperate for the pill, but unable to reconcile it with the confidence in Roman authority they had learned at mother's knee. It was a tragedy of a whole generation of able priests—perhaps the ablest the Catholic Church in England has ever had—who went down leaderless between Rome and their people; but it was the personal tragedy too of John Carmel Heenan'. And he quotes the brave, noble words of Bishop Butler writing on *Humanae Vitae*, words which Newman would surely have endorsed: 'It is simply and solely to man's conscience that the Christian gospel, the Catholic faith, makes its appeal. And it seems to me that at the very point where authority fails to communicate its message to conscience, it fails to *be* effective authority ...'. Again and again Professor Hastings seems to me to underline the dilemma of the modern Christian, alternatively attracted and repelled by the spiritual courage and the intellectual crassness of so much institutional Christianity. Hence the wisdom of his conclusion, that only when the Churches adjust to their exclusion from the commanding heights of present-day society (an exclusion made obvious, I would say, in the British government's treatment of the Aids issue) can they effectively resume their missionary task.

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MARRIAGE IN CANON LAW: TEXTS AND COMMENTS, REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS, by Ladislav Orsy. *Michael Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1986.* pp.328. £25.00

Tucked away in one of his footnotes is a good clue to what Orsy's commentary is aiming at; the greatest precision obtainable, for the sake of those who eventually will have to carry in real life the burden of our theoretical conclusions. This is the spirit of Orsy, an internationally-known Jesuit canonist, born in Hungary and teaching mainly in the United States. He studied theology at Louvain, civil law at Oxford and canon law in Rome.

There is no mistaking his intellectual vigour, the sheer theological inquisitiveness of the man, or his marked sense of pastoral responsibility. The bulk of the book is a canon by canon commentary on the 1983 Code as it deals with marriage (canons 1055—1165). But the framework can scarcely contain the exuberant dialectic, which spills over into footnotes, extra notes and finally into thirteen fundamental questions concerning problem areas and disputed matters. Question 12, on whether the tribunal system is satisfactory, and question 11, on whether canonical form should be required for validity, are especially good. Even the bibliography is annotated.

Keeping pace with such a probing mind does make extra demands on the reader, who should expect not so much a placid and thorough exposition of the canons but rather the constant highlighting of the assorted elements that make up the canons, and the unresolved problems and tensions involved. This is not an introductory textbook. Here and there this method, or perhaps intellectual predilection, means that points needing to be covered are not treated as they deserve. The perfunctory explanation of canon 1101 is a glaring example, despite its prominence in societies in which divorce, infidelity or contraception are deeply rooted.