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Christianity: A Cultural Perspective

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Christianity: A Cultural Perspective

James B. Wiggins and Robert S. Elwood

Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988

vii + 182 pp.

This, the seventh and final volume of "The Prentice Hall Series in World Religions", is intended chiefly for university use as a religious studies textbook. To present a profile of Christianity which will challenge North American students to reassess often preconceived notions is a difficult task. But it is a monumental one to do so in a way which moves beyond the sterile recitation of creeds, councils, and controversies in order to treat Christianity as a multi-dimensional cultural phenomenon. The authors seek to focus not only on Christianity's history but also its worship practices, contemporary social challenges, and expression in the fine arts. It is in varying degrees that they are successful. Where the book succeeds is where the multi-dimensionality of Christianity is adequately presented. Its thinness, however, betrays its major weakness. In short, there is a good deal of information about many things in this book, but often not enough about anything.

Christianity is divided into two equal parts, entitled "The Kingdom of the Cross" and "The Structure of Christian Life". The division is curious, and nowhere explicated. Throughout its eight chapters the book reiterates its major thesis that the strength of Christianity is in its adaptable diversity. At certain points, however, one suspects that the diversity of the subject has overwhelmed these authors. The opening and weakest chapter is a good example. It is unfocussed, confusing, and disjointed (in the space of three pages—10 to 13—we move from early Christian worship to Protestantism and then back to Jesus). Chapter two presents an historical overview, with the astonishing omission of the entire Orthodox tradition. Chapter three, entitled "Countercultures", focuses on the notion of heresy. "Cameo appearances" by Simon Magus, Marcion, and Peter Waldo, introduced to illustrate the nature of Christian heresy, are marred by anachronism and over-generalization (e.g., on p. 45 Marcion is presented as a church reformer; on p. 50 the triumvirate of heretics is described as having in common opposition to papal authority). The most promising but ultimately disappointing chapter, entitled "Christianity and the Arts", discusses both literature and the visual arts with exemplary passages of the former, but alas no plates of the latter (a major problem given that most students will have no idea what a Giotto Madonna is, let alone its significance). And, amazingly, there is no discussion of the musical arts.

Part two, discusses material more traditionally associated with introductory texts to Christianity and is on the whole a stronger section. Chapter five, "Beliefs", presents an insightful way of understanding Christian doctrine as narrative or story. There are some errors, however. On p. 84, footnote 4, the Hebrew spelling of YHWH is nowhere near correct; on p. 90

the *homoiousion* position is attributed to Arius at Nicaea (it emerged as an explicit theological alternative two decades later). The latter error arises, again, because of a too general treatment. Chapter six provides a good discussion of Christian worship and at last a discussion of the Orthodox tradition. Here the cultural perspective helps to illuminate the importance of symbol and ritual in Christian worship. The final two chapters turn to issues of a more sociological nature. Troeltsch's sect and church types provide the structure for a description of contemporary Christianity's relationship to its culture. The book concludes with a brief glossary and a bibliography for further reading.

Because the same phenomena are often viewed from the particular vantage points of the various chapters, there is a tendency to be repetitious. Given the economy of space the authors have allowed themselves, this is unfortunate because in a book of this nature every word counts.

In the end one's assessment of the book will vary according to what one regards as the proper task of introductory university texts. If one thinks that they should provide a kind of intellectual "first date"—to titillate with a view to whetting the appetite for a more involved acquaintance—this book is successful. If, however, one desires of an introductory text both titillation and information, *Christianity* will leave one dissatisfied.

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On Earth as it is in Heaven: Jews, Christians, and Liberation Theology

Dan Cohn-Sherbok
Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987

As the title suggests, Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok's recent work is a brief survey in comparative religion and ethics. He begins by presenting the differences of Judaism and traditional Christianity in such doctrinal categories as: God, Jesus Christ, the Law, free will, sin and atonement. Then, there follows a comparative study of the similarities of contemporary Christian liberation theology and the Jewish tradition. In the closing chapter, the rabbi gives his readers a good summary of the common ground shared by Jewish theology and liberation theology.

Cohn-Sherbok points out that the doctrine of the Trinity remains a continuing "fly in the ointment" for contemporary Jewish theologians. But those readers seeking a thorough, concise overview of the problem will be rather disappointed. The rabbi's discussion is far too brief.

In addition to Jewish thinkers rejecting the Incarnation, the two natures of Jesus, and Jesus as Messiah, there are several other problems concerning