

Book Reviews

FROM DOGMA TO HISTORY. HOW OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE EARLY CHURCH DEVELOPED by William H. C. Frend, *SCM Press, London, 2003, Pp. vii + 212, £12.99 pbk.*

Until comparatively recent times the history of the Church has been a study conducted in the main as an adjunct to theology and with strong theological interests prominent in its pursuit. Except for medievalists, in universities its practitioners have for the most part been members of theology faculties. Frend's book sets out to sketch its liberation from the theological ghetto. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by the unrestricted claims embodied in its subtitle. Just think of the enormous contributions made to the development of ecclesiastical history by Gottfried Arnold, by Cardinal Baronius, or Jean Mabillon, the Maurists or the Bollandists and countless others. Frend, however, does not set out to trace the emergence of our understanding of early Christianity. He deals with the transformation of Church history from what he describes as "the history of the development of doctrinal orthodoxy to the history of Christianity in all its many forms and ideals during the first six centuries AD". This he claims to have been achieved in large part through the work of six scholars in the hundred years from about 1860. Frend's book is in fact a study of these six scholars – Adolf von Harnack, Hans Lietzmann, Stéphane Gsell, Sir William Ramsey, Mgr Louis Duchesne and Norman Baynes – who played a major part in turning early Church history from a theological into a historical discipline, reversing Cardinal Manning's frivolous remark, "One must overcome history with dogma".

All six have a good claim, even if some of Frend's choices are a little arbitrary, being determined by lines of apostolic succession terminating in the author himself. Two of the six (Gsell and Ramsey) are primarily distinguished by using their archaeological work – Gsell in North Africa, Ramsey in Asia Minor – to illuminate areas of early Christianity. Frend has built his own, highly fruitful, approach to North African Christianity on the work of French archaeologists in North Africa, the intellectual descendants of Gsell. Tribute to the work of pioneers in the archaeological study of early Christianity – an honourable company stretching back to Bosio and De Rossi – is still warranted: they are among those who made sure that archaeology is nowadays less likely to be ignored in this area of study.

Frend gives a notably sympathetic account of Mgr Louis Duchesne's struggles against the suspicions of his Catholic loyalty entertained in Roman, Italian and French ecclesiastical circles. The almost pathological fear of 'modernism' which was apt to spill over into regarding all independent-minded scholarship as tainted, will be of special interest to Catholic readers. Along with Duchesne, Harnack and Lietzmann have a strong claim to be among the founders of modern ecclesiastical historiography. There are, of course, others among the giants, such as Edouard Schwartz, the great editor of the early Church councils, or Pierre Courcelle, both of whom receive a passing mention – the latter, significantly, only as the author of a report on an excavation in North Africa. Norman Baynes is something of an outsider in this picture. He always thought of himself as a historian of what he insisted on calling not the 'Byzantine', but the 'East Roman' world; and assuredly he was among the great pioneers in this field. But it is as one of the supervisors of Frend's doctoral work (on the Donatists of North Africa) that he earns his presence in the book.

The case of Baynes illustrates the problems of presenting the development of modern historiography of early Christianity in a sequence of biographies. It exemplifies the inevitable overlaps with secular historical work and the element of arbitrary choice. There is no need to dispute the claims of any one of Frend's choices, in order to note that others could have equal claims, and, perhaps, also illuminate from other perspectives the way that the study of early Christianity has developed in the twentieth century. The most notable of these would be Henri-Irénée Marrou. Marrou, to be sure, published his work – as did Baynes – for the most part after the end of World War II. Like Duchesne, Marrou united textual and archaeological studies in his study of early Christianity. Above all, however, it is to him we owe the integration of early Christianity into the study of Late Antiquity in general. Indeed it is surely Marrou who is in great measure responsible for the emergence of Late Antiquity as a major and thriving field of interest. Having published his great work on St Augustine and the end of ancient culture in 1938, he returned ten years later to denounce it as 'the work of a young barbarian': he had, as he now realised, failed to recognise that the age of Augustine and the other great Fathers was not a time of 'decline', but the emergence of a new culture, with its own identity and its own creative impulses.

Marrou was one of the bridging figures between pre- and post-Vatican II Catholicism. That transformation, too, is of huge importance in our approach to early Christianity, with implications far beyond Roman Catholicism. The development of ecclesiastical history as a non-confessional discipline, its closer relation to secular historical scholarship, its ecumenical dimension are now, happily,

crucial to its pursuit. But Frennd's book does not set out to be a comprehensive account of its emergence and we must be grateful for the gallery of portraits he has given us that would be part of a more comprehensive story of our modern understanding of early Christianity.

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IS THE CHURCH TOO ASIAN? Reflections on the Ecumenical Councils by Norman Tanner. *Chavara Institute of Indian and Inter-religious Studies, Rome, and Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2002, Pp. 91, \$7 hbk; \$5 pbk.*

Who or what counts as Asian? The arresting title of Norman Tanner's captivating book, *Is the Church too Asian?*, invites such a question. His book is the published version of three lectures (the Placid lectures) given at the Chavara Institute of Indian and Inter-religious Studies in Rome during December, 2001. The lectures are held in memory of Father Placid Podipara CMI, who was a *peritus* representing India at the Second Vatican Council, a professor at the Oriental Institute in Rome, as well as a consultor to the Roman Curia's Congregation for the Eastern Churches.

Is the Church too Asian? considers a long tradition of the twenty-one ecumenical and general councils of the Church from Nicaea I (325) to Vatican II (1962–5). It calls into question the oft-heard charge in contemporary theology that western, or European, culture has been overly dominant in Christianity's history. Tanner skilfully builds a case to illustrate that far from being excessively influenced by western ideas and values, the Church has been continuously and richly influenced by Asia throughout its history.

To further his aim of examining Asia's contribution to Christianity it is obviously necessary for Tanner to clarify what he means by 'Asian'. He informs his readers that 'Christ and his disciples were Asians, the early Church was predominantly Asian' (p. 11). We are also told that the apostles and the prophets of the Old Testament were all Asians (p. 52). Such a use of the word 'Asian' rests on a very ancient understanding of the word's meaning. In contemporary settings, Asia is normally understood to include countries like India, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. However, in the ancient Hellenistic era, Asia referred primarily to the Seleucid Empire. At the height of the Roman Empire, Asia simply designated a province of the Empire in what is now regarded as the western region of Turkey. As this book explains, 'The province of Asia in the Roman Empire stretched, at its greatest extent, from the Aegean coast in the West to a point beyond Philomelium (modern Aksehir) in the east. It was only much