

While students and readers of medieval English literature would be familiar with most of the themes discussed in this work, there are numerous insights that open up new vistas through the thicket of *Piers Plowman* scholarship. Although the promise not to use images as mere 'illustrations' (p.26) remains just a promise, and the numerous examples of manuscript illumination and monumental painting are art-historically inert, the parallels are informative and convincing. Mary Davlin's reading of *Piers Plowman* in the light of 14th-century culture and spirituality is both highly contextualised and truly inspirational.

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**HISTORY OF THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT, vol.1
EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY TO 1453** by Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2001. Pp. xv + 512, £24.99 pbk.*

The publisher's ambitious claim, on the dustjacket, that the book is a 'landmark in its unique approach to the history of Christianity' appears justified. Most histories of Christianity, at least those written for the English-speaking market, reveal a Western perspective, especially in their treatment of developments after about 800. After this watershed, marked by the pope's crowning of Charlemagne as emperor of the West, Christianity in the wider world has been seen as an appendix to what happened in Europe; before it, as a preparation for these later Western developments. The present work, rather, sees Christianity as a world movement throughout its first millennium and a half — a theme that no doubt will be developed further in volume 2.

America and Australasia do not yet enter the story but North Africa and especially Asia are well treated. Sunquist's recent *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* has established him as a leading authority on Asia, so it is refreshing to see his scholarship brought to bear in reviewing christian history in an eastwards direction. We are reminded that the geographical spread of Christianity extended far further East than West of Rome, or even of Jerusalem, into Persia, Afghanistan, India and China; that for long the Syriac-speaking churches were as important as the Greek-speaking; that some knowledge of Buddhism was current in Egypt around 200, witness Clement of Alexandria (p.86). Today the lament is often heard that Christianity is too Western, yet for many centuries Europeans might well have complained that the Church was too Asian. The present work, therefore, should encourage the growing churches of Africa and Asia to recover their early roots and traditions rather than to seek only liberation from Western developments.

The book's title styles Christianity as a movement rather than a Church. This is a commonly accepted theme for the early centuries but the authors are remarkable for pursuing the notion after the conversion of Constantine and throughout the medieval period. The

approach is made possible by an ecumenical outlook. That is to say, diversity within the Christian people is seen within an overall framework of unity. What unites Christians is far greater and more important than what divides them. This is a healthy and relatively new approach, one that Roman Catholics can share especially in the light of Vatican II's decree on ecumenism. But the book does not gloss over the divisions. Theological, personal, cultural, geographical and other factors are properly explored. In such an all-encompassing work the reader will inevitably want some corrections. Nestorius was first condemned by the council of Ephesus rather than Chalcedon (p.158). A clearer distinction could be made between the creed issued by the council of Nicaea and the revised version of it promulgated by the council of Constantinople in 381 (pp.182–3, 192 and 300). Canon 6 of Nicaea did not give supremacy to the bishops of Rome and Alexandria (p.199). Pope Leo certainly played a significant role at Chalcedon (p.356). The decree of reunion between East and West at the council of Florence in 1439 was more of a compromise than the authors suggest, not based 'entirely on theological terms set by the West' (p.385).

The seven sacraments were first defined at the second council of Lyons in 1274, not at the fourth Lateran council of 1215 (p.435). Scholars are now less confident of Wycliffe's role in the English Bible and the early date of its completion than is suggested (p.488). The date of Oldcastle's rebellion is 1414 not 1417 (p.489). It may be questioned whether the East-West schism and the Reformation were as inevitable as the authors suggest, or the late-medieval Church so decadent (p.479).

As a study of Christianity as a movement, the book concentrates on people more than institutions: Christians in all their richness, diversity and frailty. The approach ties in with Vatican II's teaching that the primary sense of the Church is the people of God: an ecumenical convergence of thought inasmuch as the authors belong to traditions of the Reformation. Women receive particularly sensitive treatment. In a sense the approach is postmodern, inasmuch as the history of Christianity is viewed from many different angles. This must be due in part to the large number of 'consultant participants', 44 of them, the majority from the USA but representing many other countries, who, thanks to the Luce Foundation and other benefactors, were able to play a large, supportive role in the writing of the book. It also gives the sense that Christianity is postmodern in the best sense. Rather than a monolithic teaching and institution, it is a treasure from which people have been able to draw in a multitude of ways according to their characters and circumstances.

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