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THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

JOURNAL OF

THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXIV

JULY 1991

No. 73

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THE CRITICAL TRADITION

Stephen Winward, in an essay inter-relating tradition and scripture, argued a Baptist Doctrine of Development (in A. Gilmore, ed., *Christian Baptism*, 1959, pp.25-53). Growth and development, essential to the life of the church, need constantly to be tested by constant reference to the word of God. Warning against simple invocation of the slogan, 'Back to the New Testament', as if the work of the Spirit in the intervening years was of no import, he also cautions against isolationism: all Christians must not only test received traditions but also listen to one another, for 'the Holy Spirit is given to the whole church and He is not the monopoly of any one part of it.' Even to Baptists tradition in all its wholeness is of critical importance.

Such thinking may properly set the scene for appreciating *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (1990, 724pp, £25), edited by John McManners. This handsome volume with its well-presented illustrations and slate of international authorities, is attractively priced in current publishing terms. After a sensitive introduction, admitting the ambiguity of the story - 'Was the Constantinian alliance a betrayal of the pure essence of Christianity, with religion contributing to society

and culture at the risk of its own soul, at the expense of its eternal mission?' - the book is divided into three sections. The first and longest, divided chronologically, takes the story to 1800. The second part is organized by continents, and the last has four essays: What Christians believe, New Images of Christian Community, The Christian Conscience, and The Future of Christianity.

Henry Chadwick has to construct history out of the apostolic and other contemporary writings, proceeding through the sub-apostolic period, in which the world-renouncing Christians succeeded in capturing the citadel of power, the story of how 'dissenters from and critics of the worldly values of power, pleasure and opulence' came to see that somehow God's purposes were mysteriously bound up with the destinies of empire. Its fortunes in turn became caught up with the fate of the church, now the vehicle of a state religion, through 'wholesale Romanization of Christianity and Christianization of Roman society', thus mediating Roman culture to the Germanic world. It is a complex story - of spiritual ideals and earthly institutions; of pious monks, courageous missionaries and martyrs alongside those only interested in manipulating power, petty compromisers who failed to understand the insidiousness of their own sin; 'the molten gold' of faith and truth and love carried in 'crucibles of iron and steel'. The vulnerability of incarnation, both in the life of Christ and of his Church is not so much a cause for regret - for how could the situation be other? - but rather a call to test and discern.

The story is of gains and losses: amongst the most significant must be far-reaching losses to the rising forces of Islam. Crusades not only failed to resecure the Holy Land but served to highlight differences between the western and eastern churches and left a legacy of military opportunism in the western church which could easily be turned on enemies within, as in the Albigensian Crusade. Ambiguity is also seen in movements of religious recovery: Patrick Collinson's account of reformation in the sixteenth century is fully apprised of the admixture of gold and base metal. Henry VIII is seen as a man with both a political problem and a conscience, and Luther was wrong in denying a religious element behind the Peasants' War, but his teaching on justification set the process of reformation on its way. A recovery of the gospel necessarily involved a recovery of the church, involving institutional 'routinization'. Menno Simons even converted 'the shattered remains of a disorganized chiliastic movement into a law-abiding denomination (Mennonites or Baptists)', anticipating most churches in the modern world by 'its disconnection with the things of Caesar'.

The book is rather meagre in its treatment of the dissenting tradition: Baptists hit the headlines in association with overseas missions and revivalism in North America but charismatic renewal and American sectarian protestantism fare rather better. Discussion of contemporary belief seems unearthed in writings of contemporary theologians. Teilhard de Chardin only secures an allusion in the Introduction. Barth as theologian hardly fares better. Bultmann, Tillich, Pannenberg and Moltmann are off the map. By contrast John Taylor, with the difficult task of a forward prophetic glance, is much more specific and strangely more historical. It is a tribute to his insight that the postscript required to his chapter by events while the book was at press fills in details but changes little.

The book has been well prepared for the press, though something has gone astray with Anglican statistics in the chart on p.637, and Dame Nita Barrow, formidable champion of the Caribbean, must regret being described as of the USA.

And the theology of it all? Winward once more: 'We cannot go back. We must move on with the Lord the Spirit, who makes explicit that which from the beginning was implicit in Christ, and evermore causes new light and truth to break forth from God's word'. John Taylor's essay will help all parts of the church to do just that.