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.