
The author of this latest one-volume history of the Church is a theologian, teaching at St. Mary’s College, Moraga, California. It is apparently intended primarily as a textbook for undergraduate students in theology, and the author states in the foreword that he has, “more than is usually the case, emphasized the role of theology in the life of the Church.” He clearly distinguishes his work from purely secular history, since church history must accept as normative “the original revelation in Jesus and the reception of that revelation by his first followers.” Hence the “picture of the church in its historical reality and ambiguity” is intended in this book to be measured against that norm.

This avowed purpose of the author accounts for some of the strengths and weaknesses of the book. In comparison to any other brief history of the church, Dwyer gives a large portion of his book — 65 pages — to the period before 100 A.D. Necessarily, of course, this section is based on the New Testament, and Dwyer shows a keen awareness of contemporary historico-critical New Testament scholarship, something often not found in general church historians. Though there is in places a tendency to exaggerate his differences from older, more conventional views of early church structure and life, the recognition that the New Testament writings cannot be used in the same way as other historical documents is welcome.

However, it seems to this reviewer that the result of this extensive treatment of the first-century church is both too much and too little, at least from the point of view of a textbook. It is too little because in the absence of any previous courses in fundamental theology or introduction to the New Testament, sixty-five pages does not suffice to make clear the nature of the sources, nor to present the “original revelation of Jesus and the reception of that revelation by his first followers” with enough fullness and accuracy to be able to measure the later historical reality against this norm, as Dwyer’s foreword proposes to do. On the other hand, sixty-five pages on the period before 100 is too much in proportion to the brief treatment of some other major developments in the history of the Church. Moreover, though the treatment is a welcome contrast to other dogma-inspired efforts to read back into the first century the monopiscopate or even the papacy, the absoluteness with which all structures in the early church are minimized gives the reader little idea of the complexities of the evidence and the nuances that ought to be made. A comparison of some of Dwyer’s assertions with the more modest conclusions, e.g. of Raymond E. Brown in his books on the first-century church types makes this clear.

Attempts to write a one-volume history of the church inevitably demand de-emphasizing or omitting some topics and giving more space to others, and
no one’s choice will satisfy everyone. For one who, like this reviewer, sees church history as a theological discipline using historical method, Dwyer succeeds well in presenting in their main lines the major doctrinal controversies, particularly of the first five centuries, in a manner both succinct and clear. What I find missing, however, to a great extent, is any emphasis on development, as for example in the Trinitarian doctrinal evolution. Though the Arian controversies just before and after Nicaea are well presented in their main lines, there is almost no indication of the earlier, stumbling efforts to formulate the relation of Jesus to the Father, and the impression is given that only Origen had raised the question previously. The lack of concern for continuity and development of doctrine is perhaps consequent on the author’s stated purpose of measuring all subsequent history of the church against the first century.

In general the informed historian will note that Dwyer has read most of the important historical literature on key topics throughout the book, though he does not provide any footnotes. Most positions taken represent the consensus of contemporary scholarship. On the other hand, however, he usually presents only one position, and the reader is not informed that other plausible interpretations are proposed by respectable historians. Thus one is left with a certain impression of dogmatism at times, which seems incongruent for a book which is so sharply critical of the authoritarianism and dogmatism—which in fact did exist—of the twentieth-century papacy from Pius X to Pius XII.

There are, moreover, in the modern section of the history a number of factual errors, most, it is true, but not all, of relatively minor consequence. Thus Calvin’s major work is wrongly called Institutiones instead of Institutio (p. 245); Charles IX should be Henry III (p. 250); the date of the Ratio studiorum is 1599, not 1585 (p. 269); the Methodists are wrongly said to be the modern descendants of the Anabaptists (p. 249); and the Baroque philosophers and theologians, principally Jesuits, are said to have justified the divine right of kings (p. 270). Presumably these would include Bellarmine and Suarez, whose books were burned by royal governments both in Catholic France and in Protestant England precisely for denying that supposed divine right. Such errors as these, and a number of unnuanced or even simplistic judgments, e.g. that “most [Spanish] missionaries felt that the destruction of the native culture was a condition for the natives’ acceptance of the Good News” (p. 292), give the impression that much of this section was written hurriedly and without much care.

A review of this one-volume church history invites comparison with the other such histories of the Catholic Church currently in print in English—August Franzen’s A History of the Church, as revised and translated by John P. Dolan (1965, 1968); and Thomas Bokenkotter’s A Concise History of the Catholic Church (rev. ed. 1979). Dwyer’s treatment of the first five centuries
is certainly more up-to-date than Franzen, and even Bokenkotter. Bokenkotter and Dwyer naturally take account of the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI in a way which Franzen could not, but Bokenkotter, though published earlier, is much more informative and thoughtful than Dwyer. Franzen’s English edition is marred by all too frequent mistranslations of German terms, some of them seriously misleading, and for a non-European audience, the detail on early medieval Europe, especially Germany, is quite excessive. This is corrected in Bokenkotter and Dwyer, writing as they are for Americans, and neither gives excessive space to the American church, evidently presuming a special course or book on that topic for American students. None of the three works give much more than a chapter to the church in the third world; only Bokenkotter gives any treatment to 19th and 20th century non-western churches and the meaning of this development for the church universal. Only Bokenkotter gives any treatment to Social Catholicism. Of professed purpose, basing himself on a dubious ecclesiological premise, Dwyer gives little attention to the lives of ordinary Christians, or to spirituality and liturgy, unlike Bokenkotter. To sum up, Dwyer will be useful for the clear treatment of many theological topics, and could be a useful reference if it were not for the lack of any index. But the assertion of the publisher’s blurb that “this volume represents the best and most up-to-date single volume history of the Catholic Church available to readers today” is certainly not proven in the mind of this reviewer. For overall balance and sufficient proportionate treatment of the whole history of the church, Bokenkotter’s book is at present the most suitable textbook for colleges and seminaries in the Philippines or other English-speaking countries of the third world.

John N. Schumacher, S.J.

THE HOLY FAMILY OF FATHER MOON. By Joseph Fichter, S.J.

In this slim volume the author, an American Jesuit priest sociologist, examines one of the strangest religious groups on the contemporary world scene, including the Philippines. Originating in Korea where the Reverend Sun Myung Moon was born in 1918 it is officially known as “The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.” Universally the members are known as “Moonies” professing a syncretism of Christianity and Confucianism.

Young Catholics of the upper or middle class are often found to be vulnerable to the appeal of the Moonies even though they have to reject many of the most basic teachings and devotions of their Catholic faith. The Moonies deny the divinity of Christ, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and, logically, the existence of the Trinity. For them there are no sacraments, no Mass, no