



# A Short History of Christianity

*Geoffrey Blainey*

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For 2000 years, Christianity has had a varying but immense influence on world history. Who better, then, than Geoffrey Blainey, author of the bestselling *A Short History of the World* and one of Australia's most accomplished historians, to bring us a comprehensive look at this world-changing religion.

*A Short History of Christianity* vividly describes many of the significant players in the religion's rise and fall through the ages, from Jesus himself to Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Francis Xavier, John Wesley and even the Beatles, who claimed to be 'more popular than Jesus'. Blainey takes us into the world of the mainstream worshippers - the housewives, the stonemasons - and traces the rise of the critics of Christ and his followers.

With his charismatic curiosity and storytelling skill, Blainey considers Christianity's central place in world history. Will it remain in the centre? As Blainey observes in his eminently readable account, the story of Christianity is one of many ups and downs.

## A Short History of Christianity Details

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# **From Reader Review A Short History of Christianity for online ebook**

## **Liz says**

Not quite as hard-hitting as I'd have liked. Yes, I learned a few new things, but it all seemed a bit bland and safe. The good and bad sides of what people have done in Jesus's name are mentioned, but the "bad" seems to be quite glossed over at times, which disappointed me. For example, the killing of "witches" took up about the space of 2-3 paragraphs out of a 550-page book.

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## **Chen Chen says**

The author is very talented to organize two thousand year of Christianity history into a series of stories. For those of you who want to better understand Christianity and the western civilization that the Christianity helps shape, this book is definitely a must-read.

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## **Rachel says**

I didn't finish this book; I read chapters here and there and used it as a resource for a class on church history I was teaching. I liked the fact that he incorporated information about the Eastern Orthodox Church and not just western European churches. Sometimes I found him hard to follow, but that may have been because I was skipping around so much.

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## **Roberta Roth says**

This was my first Blainey's, though not the first book on religious matter. I strongly recommend it to those who want a fairly thorough vision of Christianity throughout the centuries, although I may disagree with the author on some points.

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## **Cass Pawlowski says**

### **Short?**

Short, not really. There are some sections one would prefer to pass over. Good writing, but too lengthy for me.

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## **Peter Griffin says**

Not a religious text. Rather, an armchair guide to the spread of Christianity across Europe and the rest of the world. In typical Blainey style, the text is easy to digest and he avoids an endless list of statistics and deep analysis. A very engaging and fascinating read.

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### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

The author says at the outset that writing a history of Christianity is a perilous endeavor. Opinions on the subject is varied largely because of the variety of Christians and the variety of non-Christians who all have views on the subject. The author is bound to get in hot water with some people. I for one disagree with his assessment of early Christianity and the life of Jesus. However when he writes a book on a subject that is so important to so many people he is going to ruffle some feathers no matter how diplomatic a tact he takes. I found the chapters on the middle ages particularly helpful as the middle ages is a weak spot for me in regards to the church. One will find some interesting revelations such as the fact that the Crucifix did not become a popular symbol for Christians until the tenth century.

When the author comes to the Reformation and counter reformation and the modern period I am on more familiar ground and I find almost nothing in the analysis to quarrel with in that part. I enjoyed the book even while disagreeing with parts of it because it was informative. A daring venture on a subject that a large part of humanity at least contemplates from time to time.

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### **Lucas says**

Infelizmente o autor do livro teve que tirar mais de 1.200 paginas para que pudesse ser publicado. mas mesmo assim, a obra faz ser possível entender um pouco sobre os principais acontecimentos do mundo relacionados ao cristianismo.

Realmente recomendo.

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### **Julie Raymond says**

Readable

If you have never had the chance to study church history, I thoroughly recommend Blainey's book. Though the book is about 550 pages, the print is a reasonable size, there is adequate space between the lines, the chapters have sub-headings and most importantly you will want to turn the pages. I found dipping into the breadth of Christianity through the ages in all its major forms such as Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy as well as many of the more minor forms to be refreshing and informative. From the early church through the 20th century, including the negative periods such as the crusades, Blainey is mostly even-handed and realistic in his attitudes and opinions. In his conclusion, Blainey wonders at the influence of Christ and despite the rise of atheism and Islam, predicts Christianity will continue and that, as in the past, will come out much more on the positive side than the negative.

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## Angus Mcfarlane says

This was good but it didn't live up to my expectations either! Whereas Blainey's *The Tyranny Of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* had the pathos of a good science fiction, this book did not retain the same anticipation as the story unfolded. However, Blainey's clear and vivid prose, along with the balanced mix of quirky facts (including Australian ones), biographical anecdotes and big picture facts allows this to be very readable.

As a secular historian Blainey does not delve into the theological details, focussing instead on the activity of Jesus and the church which followed. I'm not sure what to think of this. Biographies of Galileo, Darwin and Einstein would probably feel shallow if the thinking behind their theories was not part and parcel of the story. Likewise, the reasons why various directions were taken by Christians over the ages are at least as important as the actions undertaken. On the other hand, remaining removed from these details allows the stories to unfold without inadvertently misrepresenting what can be complex and polarising issues. Christianity is presented without the justification of faith, but by its physical impact on the world.

There were certainly parts of the story that moved slower than others (e.g. 500-1000 in this book) whilst I was surprised by my interest in the schools of catholicism that emerged in the Medieval period through the monastic orders. The first and second century church was portrayed more vaguely than I am used to whilst the writing on the reformation captured the tension and anticipation of change taking place at that time.

For those with a Christian faith who have not read a comprehensive history I would probably recommend other books as a first stop (e.g. *Church History in Plain Language*) which are accessible but give more depth to the theological issues. For those who are more sceptical or have already read other histories, Blainey's book will provide interesting food for thought.

On a final note, I enjoyed the book's final note regarding wisdom. Although not explicitly discussed within the book, I felt the paragraph captures an essence which Blainey was writing about the whole way through (and can only be appreciated by reading what is in so many ways a long introduction to his final point!)

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## Louis Modra says

Blainey says *"of all known people, Jesus was the most influential"*. While it's a good read, I would have loved Blainey, like Jesus did at the temple, to punch through the flat veneer (Blainey's word) of religiosity that has for 17 centuries so often stood in front of the radical but consistently good speaking and teaching about God that Jesus continued. As a 'good aussie', Geoffrey's talking football; we're focused on the externals, and it's about WHO won, or whose winning. Unfortunately, for an age that really needs to know WHY passionate religious people are not all dangerous, Blainey fails to digest the game plan and show how this safe and predictable boring old clear dialogue works; how and why love and truth triumphs over all sorts of careless justifications for what people feel like doing at the time; How that book controls the final look. The prospect of a really good read about hard fought play, pushed through to game plan law and culture concepts is lost in a fast, ball by ball trip through 20 centuries of incredible upset wins for those small numbers who dared to believe and make those concepts law. Blainey, like most, wants to believe that faith is a fiction; that there is nothing deeper happening below what you can see on the surface. "If God is there, it's not obvious" perhaps? - except maybe? ..That Jesus bloke??

I enjoyed hearing the story from an studious outsider, because it's how much of the West now sees most of

our stories; " irrelevant". The preoccupation with "trying to prove things " in our generation makes history appear irrelevant because history proves nothing- on the surface anyway. While not widely recognised this position makes our culture at odds with the best science. Many of us know history's substance to be highly relevant and punchy, but there seems to be no easy way to get many moderns involved in the detail to do that. On the surface, the church is just the same as any old institution, if not more stuck in dusty old doctrine than any. As he points out well too, when its not the state church telling us how to live, its a church group insisting we should do this or that.

Even though our age seems to want solid values more than ever ,in a complete blinder, most seem "happy" to change them to suit the market. Our train is a fast moving and veneer rich one, but are we not overloaded and bloated by the volume of stuff we carry around with us? drugged on a drip feed with " what's new" . It seems impossible for an age that's now convinced itself that it has to keep buying ,that all the best things in life are indeed free; Christ's claims seem just too incredible and just too simple.

Our point, as history lovers, is this: a comfortable Prime Minister Chamberlain,or a woosy West,and their belief in progress, and automatic glass half full ( when things appear to be going well?) is no match for Christianity's more realistic tension of optimism and pessimism when disaster by another passionate group is clearly about to strike; a point Blainey makes. Christ's followers can see disaster coming because they understand that the greatest evil is done in the name of the best intention. The first Christians claim against the Greeks still stands - "They are too busy playing games with words to get on with life and.... commitment".

How do you capture the substance " of countless armed and unarmed disputes" he says succinctly about his task. The book is worth reading because the author has studied enough theology to see its significance and speculate on it ; Like the reformation leaders role in asserting democracy and resisting anarchy at the same time .

These quick views from outside the house, though, are never going to capture the sense of why the man who divides history , culture and families over the impossible idea that God is with us, should work. The task is too big for any one book. The logic so extra ordinary; the swearing so rude and contrary to conventional religion. The potential confusion lasts for 17 centuries when it was easy to get confused about what Christianity really stood for- convention or radical culture.

What this book does do, though, is give reason to the above claims of being something special . Its unemotional conclusions provide a good reason for all this cultures children to rethink their claim that "its all old , irrelevant and negative". Blainey doesn't do this with argument, as the church might, but by providing a convincing and concise view of a great variety of interesting individuals; what they said ; much of what they meant and some of how it changed history. Blainey's own speculations are often original, making it an interesting read for people who think they know the people better.His ability to place arguments in the context too is interesting if not always convincing. His welcome focus is individuals fighting institutions, ensuring he doesn't get lost, or confuse the reader, with the pedantry and the politics.

Clearly there is not enough room to do justice to some key battles. The failure of popular politics to resist the ongoing impact of Jesus teaching throughout the centuries; the failure of positivism in our own; the impact of Christian teaching on society and the size and role of government; the effect of Christian teaching in undermining "big government" ambitions and support for freedom of speech and action.

I would have really liked to see him apply his curiosity to tackle the great paradox of why these people who put faith before reason were often so effective in the long term; How religion and politics can mix and harness passions without them harming people. He prefers, for example,to discuss "swearing" when the whole impact of the golden age revival in arts and literature was springing from the reformation: why particular incidents turned out so unexpectedly; why believers bits of radical anti-establishment thinking and speaking made Jesus and his followers so influential ...and for good; This is, after all, the authors claim and ours. It seems that when people admit they are religious ,they own their own passion, fear it less ,and can use and understand it better. The history too goes back much further .

Would have liked less action and more quotes to remind the reader that powerful words made history and the

history of Christianity, including its literature, art and political democracy ideas in particular. How much this violent prone world needs its reassurance that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword and reconciliation is really possible.

Pursuing truth beyond prejudice and political correctness, the no go territory of our age, was the radical Christians cutting edge and is still critically important our ages need for the final comfort( cf "moving on") of the full story - getting it right ; It is too easy for our sub scientific age to put its own first /last secondary causes and mere reactions first ; "the end of story" or "the primary causes"; Thus the complex becomes too simple, the meaning and motive forces completely lost.

The book shows how a modern mindset sees history ( as mainly action ) , but that means its very light on for keys to the key questions about why Christianity, or any idealism, or faith, actually motivates people.

With long centuries of institutional churchiness, its not hard to imagine the radical element disappearing from view: One only has to think of all the throng of hangers on after Jesus became conventional; The subject, like its founder ,deserves a more radical focus.

The book is easy to read and enables the reader to quickly explore the vast territory, but only as one would on some sort of 5 day Orient express holiday through Europe. If this is how Australia's best get to tell history, its no wonder no one is studying or taking history seriously in Australia.

I don't know who would really enjoy this book because the real history of Christianity is about fighting and fearless men; a ripe old yarn that is still being written - not the passe porridge with cynical sugar that Blainey has, in too large a measure, dished up here.

There is however enough good Blainey portraits and speculation in the bits that got left in to make the thinking reader wonder what was left out; Like whats going to replace "positivism" and faith in progress in our own century? What can we do when the words that drive change are no longer Christ's clear words ?

"Short" gives no sense too, to the idea that the frame and history of this faith is big, really big" Love, hope and glory . The pastures green -a green and pleasant land". A worldview that has some cred ; some history ; some runs on the board.

I don't know who decided on the pictures, but they should have got the sack; Its incumbent on any historian of a popular culture ( especially over 17 centuries )to get beyond the veneer ; the dumb " motherhood and political statements' by so many hide the substance of the radical powerful family building tradition that has clearly been writing itself in there all that time. The few old frames in the middle of the book are enough to make anyone put the book down again. There are no pictures of great debates or headlines, no Chamberlain ,no heretics, no King or Bonhoeffer. I put it down half way through to find something that didn't send me to sleep.

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## **Hemhek Song says**

A very broad history. Light on the analysis, especially when dealing with the differences between the myriad movements. The Christian jewish relationship is barely touched on as well.

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## **Colleen Semanek says**

This was actually way more than I expected, and definitely more than I could absorb. I kept reading because you have to start somewhere.

I thought the author jumped around - time wise - a lot, which made things confusing. I had to flip back pages or paragraphs several times to see if I missed a transition - I didn't.

I'm glad I read this; it does give perspective, but it took a very long time to get through it and I'm even glad

its behind me.

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## **Roger says**

Geoffrey Blainey needs no introduction to any half-serious student of Australian History. From his first book about mining in Tasmania (*The peaks of Lyell*) through to the classic *The tyranny of distance*, and to his more recent worldwide bestseller *A short history of the World*, Blainey has over the last 50 years produced a body of work that is as imposing as it is diverse.

Following his success with *A short history of the World*, it seems the mavens at Penguin have decided to milk a success for all it's worth, for since then Blainey has produced the work under review and *A short history of the Twentieth Century*.....when you're onto a good thing.....

Blainey was born in 1930, the son of a Methodist Minister, and this fact reveals something about the structure of *A short history of Christianity*. In some ways, Blainey has set himself an impossible task; to compress a 2,000 year old world-wide phenomenon into 550 pages.

Written in a gentle but probing style, the first part of the book covers the life of Jesus. Blainey points out that, by the standards of the day, there is much documentary evidence to show that Jesus did in fact exist and have a following. He moves quickly on to talk of St. Paul and his work in beginning the process of creating a Church, while noting that doctrinal problems coursed through early Christianity, with Arius and Pelagius getting some space in the text. Then the rise of the Benedictines and other monks leads into part two, which covers the Crusaders, the Cathars, the further development of liturgy, and Pope vs. Anti-Pope. Part three takes us through the Reformation and Renaissance, and the last part of the book looks at religion in the new and modern world.

So, fairly comprehensive, and yet, there are sizable gaps in coverage. The Orthodox Church, in its many and varied shapes, hardly gets a look-in; this book is very much centred on a Western European view of Christianity. The split between Rome and the East is covered, but from then on in the book the Eastern Rites are mentioned only briefly, and more to emphasize their role in nationalism than perhaps in religion.

The other surprising lack is much discussion of the Roman Catholic Church, once Blainey comes to the Reformation era. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and (briefly) Hus enter the story, and the Roman Catholics tend to disappear. Much space is set aside for many of the Protestant groups and sects that flourished during the Reformation, but, it seemed to this reader, not enough space is given to describe how the Roman Church reacted to this incursion into their "space" - if we took this book on face value, it would seem that nothing much happened in the Roman Catholic world between about 1520 and World War I.

The other thing to state about this book is that is more a history of the activities of those who called themselves Christian, and the political implications of changes and rifts than any deep insight into the spirituality of any of the doctrine discussed. While the son of a Minister, Blainey has described himself as partly religious, more culturally than with any great belief, and this shows in the book - he certainly doesn't deny the validity of any Christian beliefs, but neither does he support them.

One of the strengths of this work, as in much of Blainey's writings, is that he is always at pains to avoid projecting the views of today into the past - very useful in a book such as this, to try to help the reader understand why something that seems crazy in this day-and-age was seen as perfectly sensible 400 years ago.



Overall Blainey's view of Christianity is positive; on balance he thinks more good than harm has come from the activities of people who feel Christ's calling. This book is easy to read, and while I can't recommend it as the only book you need to read to understand the history of Christianity, it's perhaps not a bad place to start.

Check out my other reviews at <http://aviewoverthebell.blogspot.com.au/>

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## **Larissa Fauber says**

Who's Harry Potter's precursor?

Where did John Lennon and Paul McCartney meet?

Who invented basketball and volleyball?

What did Rembrandt express in his paintings?

What do these questions have to do with Christianity? Well, keep on reading me to find it out.

As I always have a different way to write my reviews, I decided to outline the most important points in this book. You won't see much of my bla bla bla! Let's go straight to the point... Or 2 points:

- "Hebrew" means "the people who traverse or pass over".
- Most of the hymns they sang was written during the exile in Babylon and their return to Jerusalem.
- At that time, if a very shining star appeared it meant that something extremely important would happen.
- Jesus learnt how to write and read, which was not common in the city He lived.
- Jesus considered everyone as our "neighbour".
- Most of the people who followed Jesus belonged to low classes.
- Antioch was the first place to use the term "Christian".
- The Vulgate (The Bible with the Old and New Testament) was only put together in the 6th century.
- Jesus didn't give emphasis to the practice of fasting, despite the fact that He fasted while prayed and meditated in the desert.
- Other religions rarely offered any type of help during the times with epidemic! Yet, Christians would take care of sick people and attract lots of friends when they performed miracles and healed the ones with diseases.
- Constantine, in the year 321, decreed that Sunday should be a special day and everyone had to rest.
- Constantine abolished in 324 the death on a cross and all Roman soldiers should have the cross on their

shields.

- Constantinople (Istanbul nowadays) was the first city to have temple in mountains.
- Around the year 305, Christian leaders (Spanish in its majority), got together in Elvira, South of Spain, and decided that priests shouldn't get married. Others believed that they shouldn't get married because their children could inherit the wealth of Church.
- In the year 595, Augustine crossed the English Channel, arrived in Canterbury and founded a Benedictine abbey, which became the most famous Church in England.
- In Constantinople, around the year 730, the emperor Leo III condemned the worship of images. This movement was known as "iconoclasm".
- The term "purgatory" only appeared in Europe in 1170 and 1180 (remember that the Bible doesn't mention it).
- Universities were the result, in its majority, of the work of Church. They were formed by bishops, teachers and scholars.
- Muhammad was born in 570 and grew up among Jewish and Christian people. So, he absorbed their precepts and decided to found his own Islamic theory.
- The most important cities in the East were: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople. They are all under Islamic control.
- John Calvin believed that there were many angels and each person has one to protect himself.
- In 1513, Spanish baptised Florida in honour of the Easter Sunday.
- Francisco Xavier was the Jesuit sent to Japan. Many people became Christian through his teaching. However, Japan banned Christianity because of the Japanese traditionalism and the fear of losing people's loyalty to the emperor (a kind of god to them).
- The painter Rembrandt was a Mennonite (Christians who live simply and wear plain clothes). He expressed his beliefs in many of his paintings.
- The leader found in the book "The Pilgrim's Progress (by Christian author John Bunyan) was a precursor of Harry Potter.
- The Young Men's Christian Association was founded in 1844. They had youngsters full of energy and in 1891, in Springfield, Massachusetts, the basketball was created. 4 years later, the volleyball was invented in a near association.
- William Booth founded the Salvation Army in Whitechapel, London.
- The Beatles were formed by 4 guys who had a Christian family history. John Lennon and Paul McCartney met each other in a Christian Festival promoted by a Church in 1957.

- Many of the things that are admirable today were totally or partially resulted from Christianity.

So, those are the main (many) points of this book. The latest was taken from the last chapter, but do you know what? I agree with it although I'm suspicious to say.

Yet, if you're not Christian, I'd like you to take a look at your calendar and tell me how it is divided! The band AC/DC can help you with the answer.

Larissa Fauber

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