



A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada

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Broad in scope yet written from a well-defined perspective, this book provides a superb narrative survey of Christian churches, institutions, and interactions with culture in the United States and Canada from the colonial period to the present.

One of the foremost authorities on the history of Christianity in North America, Mark Noll has intentionally made this history a comprehensive, balanced one-volume work: the book covers the great variety of Christian experience throughout all of North American history, sensitively encompassing the story of many contrasting groups and regions--elite and common people, whites and blacks, Catholics and Protestants, men and women, North and South. Adding a personal dimension to the narrative, numerous biographical profiles further enrich Noll's multifaceted exploration of major movements and events.

A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada Details

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Daniel Alvers says

I found the book to be fantastic and well worth the money and the time it took to get through. It is about 50 bucks and has about 550 pages so beware.

Mikey B. says

The coverage in this book of North American Christianity in the U.S. and Canada is outstanding. One comes out with a much deeper awareness of it's expansion and diversity.

Religion in the United States, right from the onset of the first landing of the Puritans in the mid-1600's, began to spread. Remarkably religion kept changing by groups splintering, and the original root source was constantly in flux. One reason for this was the abundant geographical space available for expansion and the constant arrival of new-comers – often bringing their religious strains. Protestant groups were never static. They also established several religious institutions of learning which today we know as Harvard, Princeton...

With the American Revolution in 1776 no religion was directly associated with government – theoretically. Regionally this was not the case. Different off-shoots began to dominate in various areas. In new territory and adjoining areas there was competition. It was freedom of religion in that sense. What is also noteworthy is how frequently people changed their religious affiliation. The United States has always been a marketplace of religions.

Page 163 (my book) 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville

In America [the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom] were intimately united and they reigned in common over the country.

Also there were cycles of what the author terms “Great Awakenings” – of charismatic preachers and sermons. They embraced a revivalism – a messianic vision of conversion. What some might call being “born again”, was always in vogue. Many preachers would travel the length and breathe of what then constituted the U.S., speaking to large audiences – and captivating many.

The author also discusses the differences and similarities between Canada and the U.S. Religion was important in Canada but was not as unifying as in the U.S. where Protestantism and the Bible was the key. At the time of confederation in 1867 Roman Catholicism was basically a state sponsored religion in the province of Quebec. Protestantism was in the rest of Canada – the Atlantic Provinces and Ontario. But Roman Catholicism was also “protected” throughout Canada. In Ontario to this day there are Roman Catholic schools that are government funded (by the provincial government).

Page 248

Canadian self-government resulted from pragmatic calculations, it did not engender fierce antagonisms, and it did not provide the stuff of legends. “Peace, order, and good government” was the slogan used to sell

confederation. This phrase, as many Canadian historians have pointed out, is almost entirely lacking in the appeal to idealism implied by the “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” clause in the American Declaration of Independence.

Page 250

The persistent fact of French-English multiculturalism, the embrace of Loyalism, the desire for evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary change, the respect for traditions, the knowledge that theirs was a small population in a vast land, a persistent awareness (and wariness) of the United States – these were all aspects of nineteenth-century Canadian history that influenced religion as much as it influenced politics.

American politics is imbued with a religious messianism. Speeches from Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama have a revivalist tone. There are constant Biblical references to their nation and people as being “chosen”. All want to save their country and since the end of World War I – the entire globe. American politicians often invoke Biblical passages, whereas in Canada this is very rare.

Page 261

Because of the divided Christian allegiances of Canadians, they were much less tempted than Protestant Americans to conceive of their nation as standing uniquely in covenant with God. Such notions can stimulate good, but they also lead to a great deal of moral posturing and simple hypocrisy that Canadians have mostly been able to avoid.

But there are other reasons as well. Canada is a bigger country than the U.S. but with a much smaller population, making it less prone to grandiosity. Also Canadians have forever been struggling with internal issues – use to be Protestant- Catholic, perennially French-English language disputes, provincial versus federal jurisdictions, and for the last 50 years the meaning and challenge of multiculturalism.

As the U.S. developed and matured, serious fissures became apparent with its’ Protestant-Biblical view. One was centred on slavery. The Bible was used to justify slavery – and then the racism of the Jim Crow era. The same Bible was used in the North by anti-slavery abolition groups. The same Bible was used by African American slaves and “free” African Americans in their quest for full equality.

Page 322 Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address of March 1865

Both [North and South] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither have been answered fully.

This led to a permanent schism in U.S. religion. It was further accentuated by the rise of secularism - of urbanism and of science (Darwinism). Schools and universities (like the above mentioned Harvard and Princeton) became more secular. Religion started to divide into two disparate groupings (and they themselves had sub-genres or styles). There were the evangelical conservatives that emphasized an individualistic and personal redemption interpreting the Bible literally. And somewhat in contradiction to this are liberal theologians and denominations that emphasize a less rigorous interpretation of the Bible.

The more conservative groups have many local brands scattered throughout both the U.S. and Canada. They have become much more popular and powerful since the publication of this book in 1992. There is one striking statistic (and in my opinion very concerning) in this book which is that 50% of Americans believe the Bible is God’s literal word. Probably that is still the same today.

Canada, by contrast, has become more secular. The province of Quebec now has the lowest church attendance of any province. This statistic of attendance was, I felt, not emphasized enough by the author. There is a distinct difference between statistics for church affiliation and actual church attendance (i.e. one may say that he is of such-and-such a denomination, but I find it carries little significance if this person is not an active church participant).

Another factor that has affected the Protestant-Biblical view in the U.S. is immigration. Catholics are now the largest group in the U.S. – due to Irish, Italian, and Hispanic immigration. Protestants are still the majority in total – but none of their denominations (as in Baptists, Methodists, Mormons...) outnumber Catholics.

The author does not discuss fringe or isolationist groups (like Jim Jones). He also avoids, for the most part, the entire sexual liberation (whether it be birth control, sexual openness and expressiveness, gay marriage...) that took place in the 20th Century. I do feel that this has contributed to much religious fallout – Christianity equates sex with sin.

But overall this book gives us an encompassing history of Christianity in the U.S. and Canada. It is dynamic and constantly mutating. I came out with a deeper understanding of who we are. Sorry for this very extended review!

James King says

If you have an interest in the history of Christianity in the United States and Canada then this book is an excellent overview. It covers predominantly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the various Christian movements and controversies. One criticism is the book tends to repeat things without adding much to the narrative.

Josh says

This was very good. Not a light read, but well researched and with good insights on the significance of the events narrated.

James Ruley says

In this work, Noll provides an overview of Christianity in America and Canada, beginning with the settlement of the continent and ending in the late 1980s. While forced to paint with sweeping strokes, this book introduces the key movements and players in the development of the church in America. Noll also deals, at some length, with the social and political events that influenced the development of religious doctrine and practice. Noll helpfully contrasts the church in America with the church in Canada, pointing to areas where the church's development was both similar and dissimilar. Overall, this book was informative

and helpful, and provides a solid, detailed glimpse into the development of Christianity in the United States and Canada.

Rick says

thorough, a bit tedious at times. He is careful to cover more than white American men: much text is given to women, people of color, as well as Canadian and Mexican events and people. More of a text book than a casual read.

Dean Moore says

I was first surprised at how large a volume it was, but after a few pages, it was hard to put down. Very well written, and it appears to be very thorough. as a interested party to both American history, and Christianity, it has proven to be satisfying on both fronts. It is a big book, and although a textbook, it reads more like a good story. each chapter has a tone to itself, and begins with a hymn or song, of the period to set the tone. The feeling after reading a while is much like the satisfying-but-wanting more feeling after visiting a good museum.

You will find facts about our history that you likely have never seen before unless you have focused on that particular event or person. I would that every church would have a copy in their library, and it could be especially useful to high school seniors heading off to college. it is readable by that age group (assuming decent education), and contains valuable information that will be necessary to combat revisionist history that occurs in many schools.

Taylor Bear says

Knoll's task is a difficult one, by any measure--a sweeping overview of Christianity in North America from the time of earliest European settlements. I thought the first three-quarters of the book superior, particularly the sections on the Great Awakenings. As he himself admits towards the end of the book, his treatment of Christianity after the first quarter of the twentieth century is brief (and does, indeed, appear somewhat more rushed than previous sections of the book). All in all, this is an approachable scholarly work which belongs in the library of anyone who wishes to more fully understand the trajectory of Christianity in America, and Canada and its shaping of our society.

Robert D. Cornwall says

I used this book to teach American Church History in the 1990s. It's well written, fair, and covers all the bases!!

Matt Root says

This is a good and comprehensive exploration of the themes and personalities that have driven Christianity in North America. It is however overly detailed in some sections, giving it a sprawling length (which I understand has been corrected in the author's more recent book on the same topic). At over twenty years old, it is now also best for its understanding of the history until the 1960s, as (as Noll points out on more than one occasion) not enough time had passed to fully understand the implications of the more recent events.

Melissa says

This book took me years to read but was well worth it in the end. Christianity is deeply woven into American history. The only detractor with this book is it hasn't been updated to add the past two decades since it was published.

Hank Pharis says

This is our best evangelical survey of church history. We use it as our text at CCU. The only frustrating part is that it has to fly over so many things that you wished were more fully developed. But it is supposed to be an introductory survey so it's probably wrong to wish for more.

Mark Lickliter says

Mark Noll is always great for church history. I enjoyed Turning Points, and I thoroughly enjoyed this longer work! Can't wait for class to start with Dr. Van Dixhoorn!

Barron says

This was a good book but not quite a five star book. Noll covers the history of religion in the United States. And Canada beginning with Sixteenth century and moving rather rapidly across the centuries to arrive in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries cover major events like the Great Awakening, the American Revolution and how it affected religion in the colonies, the American Civil War and Slavery in the South. The rise of the black African American churches and their affect on American Christianity is covered in quite some detail. There are many comparisons throughout the book between American and Canadian Christianity.

The only thing that I really didn't enjoy about this book at all was a short treatise toward the end of chapter 19 where Noll is enumerating some of the personalities of American Christianity in the Twentieth century and he goes into some of the leaders in Theology and what they focused on, especially the Reinhold and H. Robert Niebuhr. I found this section of the book to be so completely yawn-worthy that I had to take a whole star off of the book. Even though the section on Theology was only about 20-25% of the chapter, it took me as long or longer to get through that section as it did the rest of the chapter.

Still, even with this one drawback, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the subject of religious history. If I come across any of Mark Noll's other books I will most likely read them.

Richard says

Overall takeaway:

The Puritan idea, that conversion comes from within and that all of society can be converted too, is at the core of what makes America unique, and remains a defining characteristic of Americans, even for those who consider themselves opposed to Christianity.

The Civil War, which both sides fought earnestly in what they considered defense of their religious principles, proves that American religion brings a passion to change society, even when people disagree vehemently on what the Christian idea is.
