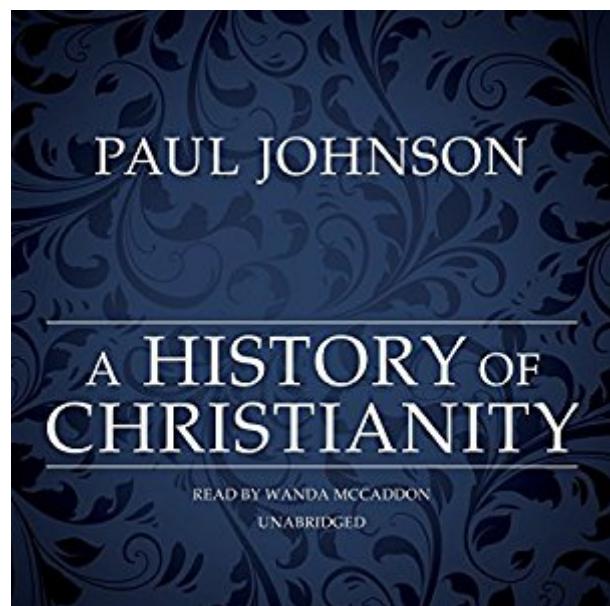


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A History Of Christianity



Synopsis

First published in 1976, Paul Johnson's exceptional study of Christianity has been loved and widely hailed for its intensive research, writing, and magnitude. Weaving a great range of material, the scholar and author Johnson creates an ambitious panoramic overview of the evolution of the Western world since the founding of a little-known "Jesus sect". With an unbiased and overall optimistic tone, Johnson traces the fantastic scope of the consequent sects of Christianity and the people who followed them, from the time of the apostle Paul through the Second Vatican Council. Information drawn from extensive and varied sources around the world makes this history as credible as it is reliable. Invaluable understanding of the framework of modern Christianity and its trials and tribulations throughout history has never before been contained in such a captivating work.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 28 hours and 30 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: May 24, 2016

Language: English

ASIN: B01G2MRD5Y

Best Sellers Rank: #36 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient #491 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Education #503 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations

Customer Reviews

Given the two millennia which the history of Christianity fills, Johnson's work is necessarily limited in what it covers and in the detail it devotes to certain topics. In a book of this nature (one designed for a general readership), much is left out. But the "spine" is there, and Johnson traces the development of the Church from the time of Christ (with some brief background information on Jewish sects before Christ) through, approximately, Vatican II and *Humanae Vitae*. The Catholic Church is more the topic of the book than is Christianity in general. Perhaps this results from the age of Catholicism versus the age Protestant denominations. After all, for three quarters of the period covered, the Catholic Church was virtually alone on the scene, at least as far as Western Europe (Johnson's focus) was concerned. But even in the post-Reformation era, Protestantism

receives attention that pales in comparison to that given Catholicism. And the Eastern Orthodox churches are mentioned virtually not at all after the 1054 split, except to compare the Church's adherence to Latin while the Orthodox churches accepted the native tongues of its members. All of this is fine, of course, but the title is somewhat misleading in this regard. A better title might have been "A History of Catholicism" or "A History of Christianity in the West." That said, this is still an excellent book, and the material it includes is examined excellently. Theological doctrine and debates necessarily enter the story (such as the Trinity and the Pope's infallibility), but this is not a history of doctrine and its development. Rather, Johnson focuses on the evolution of Christianity (or, if you like, the Church) as a political, social, legal, and economic institution, one centered in Western Europe but also attempting to radiate outward--through the Crusades, missionary work, and, later, attempting to establish a foothold in North America. A key element of the story is the church-versus-state relationship, which changed over time. At times, the Church was the dominant player, and at other times, it yielded much authority to European monarchs. Much of the history witnesses series of give-and-take between church and state and, of course, concludes with the triumph of the state and also with the virtual separation of the world into two (sometimes competing) spheres. This is an excellent treatment of Christian history, summarizing in 500 pages what could legitimately fill (and has filled) many thousands of pages. It is more than mere narrative as well, for Johnson includes many insightful analyses and draws thought-provoking conclusions. The book does not assume too much pre-existing knowledge of the subject (although having read the Bible, or at least Acts, would probably be helpful for the first part of the book), and it serves as a very fine starting point for studying the history of Christianity.

Johnson's history of Christianity is simply a masterpiece. The book will not let down the reader that not only want to learn about the rise and evolution of Christianity but also wants to take some lessons out of it. Written with sincerity, though Johnson is an English Catholic, the book describes the most important periods of Christianity depicting the major trends and changes in the history of the religion that shaped the spirit of the Western culture. Johnson's chronicle starts with the birth of a Jew in an obscure corner of the Roman empire and ends when Paul VI becomes pope, and so it leaves the reader without almost the last 30 years of history. However, this book is a must read: the way Johnson gathers the facts of history together in order to describe the main trends and seizures is magnificent. Therefore, through a pleasant reading, one learns, for instance, the evangelization of Europe, the struggle for power between the pope and the European rulers in the Middle Ages, the causes and consequences of the Reformation and the wars of religion, how the secularization process

started in the western world during the XVIII century, and many other things. The book shows also the evolution of the philosophical and social perspectives on christianity, from Agustin to John XXIII, and through the work of personalities like Thomas, Inocentius III, Beckett, Erasmus, Luther, Pascal, Locke, Leon III, Pius X, among others. Finally, two strengths must be emphasized. First, the book shows how the history of the last 500 years of christianity has been shaped by two antagonical forces: on one side, humanist and liberal forces (developed by people like Erasmus and John XXIII), and on the other side, ultra-conservative and retrograde forces (represented by Pius X for example). The book's second strength is the analysis of the XX century period (up to 1970's). There Johnson condemns brilliantly Pius XII's understandable but unforgivable cowardness during Nazi rule in Europe and shows the dramatic changes that led to the second Vatican council and the unresolved problems left after the council finished. In the end, Johnson says, the way the catholic church will lead with these unresolved problems (for example about the government and decision-making within the church) will be one of the most important factors shaping the history of christianity for the next decades.

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