

Book Review of Hill's Christianity
J. Harold Ellens, PhD

Christianity: How a Despised Sect from a Minority Religion Came to Dominate the Roman Empire, Jonathan Hill, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011, Pp. 256, Cloth, \$29.95.
Reviewed by J. Harold Ellens, PhD.

Between the lives of Christ and Constantine, Christianity moved from an minor apocalyptic Jewish sect to a Gentile world religion; from an unknown company of fishermen in a remote and irrelevant province of the Roman Empire to the dominant force shaping and controlling the empire; from a new faith movement of humble and oppressed believers to the primary oppressor in its world. All this in four centuries! Jonathan Hill has traced the history of this turbulent turn of churning events in his attractive new book, *Christianity*.

Hills graduated in philosophy and theology from Oxford, took his PhD at the University of Singapore, and is now a famous author. He wrote such highly acclaimed fast-sellers as *The History of Christian Thought* (2003), *Faith in the Age of Reason* (2004), *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?* (2005), and *The New Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity* (2007). There are a number of things, however, that make this new book distinctive. It is laid out like a volume that is part art book for your coffee table and part textbook. It is richly illustrated on nearly every page with full color plates of scenes, artifacts, and personages of the centuries of Christian history. The pristinely white dust jacket is embossed with an unidentified numismatic medallion that looks like the image of Alexander the Great but is probably supposed to be Constantine. It is definitely not Jesus of Nazareth.

The book is laid out with a rather elaborate table of contents like a text book, a very brief introduction, 11 chapters, a few cryptic end notes, a nicely rounded

bibliography, and an adequate index. This book is for beginners in the quest for Christian understanding and for specialists who are looking for a neat summary of the latest research. The latter will find the chapter headings revealing indicators of the contents and the unfolding story of the rise of Christianity. They are as follows: Jesus and the First Christians, From One Generation to the Next, Opposition and Persecution, The Church in the Empire, Christians in a Hostile World, Christian Philosophy, Heresy and Orthodoxy, The Christian Empire, A Divided Church, The First Monks, The Official Church. The story is closed with a brief Epilogue on the final triumph in 394 of the Imperial Christendom of the East over the Barbarian Paganism of the Western Empire. It happened in the victory of the Eastern Emperor Theodosius over the Western Emperor Eugenius at the River Frigidus. This gave rise to the imperial policy of extermination of all ancient Roman religions.

A virtue in Hills presentation of this phase of the historical narrative is that he tells the story forthrightly, he does not prettify it or avoid the rather chronic monstrous character and behavior of the variety of Christian movements that populate the first four centuries of the faith. Starting already in the second century a great variety of "denominations" of Christians arose, each with its remarkably distinctive and markedly different interpretations of the faith. These varied all the way from Bishop Theophilus of Antioch who in the third century was still claiming that Jesus was a human teacher and saves us by teaching and obeying the law perfectly, to the Gnosticism of Valentinius, a Bishop in Rome, and on to the mystical bishops in Alexandria. It did not take these factions long to begin to kill each other, setting the pattern of each "denomination's" perpetual effort to exterminate the others. When the dominant Alexandrians finally won

the church shifted its bloodletting toward the repression of Jews and the removal of pagans and paganism (old Roman religion and values).

Hill observes that historians tend to look for turning points and boundary lines in history to make more sense out of it with such compartmentalization; but history usually does not oblige. History is a growth process like plants in a greenhouse or natural field, progressing in slow stages and fits and starts, but unlike succulent plants history usually bears unexpected fruit in inadvertent moments. Nonetheless, says Hill, the battle at the River Frigidus was as genuinely a pivotal moment as Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge. With this observation he wisely closes his book.

Hill's lovely volume is engagingly written and thus immensely readable. His narrative style flows like a pleasant stream and the aesthetics of its combination of rhetorical style with the colorful plates makes this a book to be sought after. Kristin M. Swenson of Virginia Commonwealth University declares, "Hill offers a delightfully fresh telling for religious and non-religious readers alike. Balanced and engaging, Hill's clean and easy style makes the messy business of emerging Christianity a riveting read for experts and novices alike." Robin M. Jensen of Vanderbilt thinks this is a "solid, well-written, and beautifully illustrated introduction to the early history of Christianity." She recommends it for readers who would like to know about the early generations of Christians, how they survived the persecutions, thrived as the sometimes repressed and always minority force, and sorted out their internal differences while courageously taking on the empire, thus ending up as imperial oppressors. Hill is to be commended for his judicious use of the latest research in formulating this comprehensive and detailed story that has so severely shaped us all, ever since Christ and Constantine.

Buy it. It's cheap and it;s lovely. You won't even need to sell your bed to afford it!