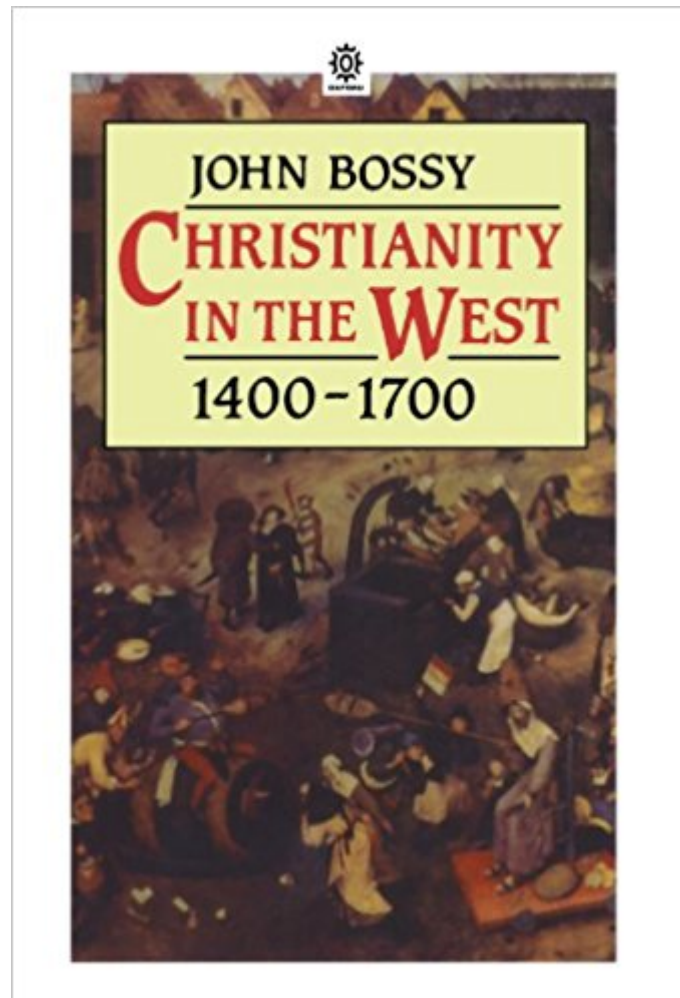




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Christianity In The West 1400-1700 (Opus S)



Synopsis

A study not of the institution of the Church but of Christianity itself, this book explores the Christian people, their beliefs, and their way of life, providing a new understanding of Western Christianity at the time of the Reformation. Bossy begins with a systematic exposition of traditional or pre-Reformation Christianity, exploring the forces that tended to undermine it, the characteristics of the Protestant and Catholic regimes that superseded it, and the fall-out that resulted from its disintegration.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Bossy's survey of late medieval religion is magisterial. He discusses theology and church law with consummate ease, has an acute appreciation of the liturgy, and convincingly depicts people freely practicing a faith they understood."--American Historical Review

"Vivid and memorable...will help correct previous portrayals that paid too much attention to ecclesiastical writings."--The Christian Century

"Sensitive, subtle, and erudite analysis...a major achievement in opening our eyes...to dimensions that conventional historiography has hidden from view."--Times Literary Supplement

"A fine work of synthetic analysis. It should stimulate the reflection of any reader concerned about the nature of the social and religious changes prompted by the Lutheran and Catholic reforms."--Pacific Theological Review

"Challenging, thought-provoking...there is much to inform and interest."--Wilson Library Bulletin

John Bossy is at University of York.

The authors approach is that of the Annales school. He is good at that, but a difficult read for Yanks. There are frequent unexplained references which may make sense to someone from the UK, but are lost on this American. Sometimes the references are simply intrinsically opaque in themselves. Explanatory footnotes are sometimes necessary, and this book has few if any of them. This is an area with which I am quite familiar although I am not a professional historian.

Split into two parts, *Christianity in the West* addresses two themes: the state of "traditional" Christianity, or Catholicism as practiced by the majority of Western European Christians prior to the sixteenth century, and the changes wrought upon this community by the Reformation. In a book of one hundred and seventy-one pages, Dr. John Bossy uses only seventeen endnotes. This is an important observation, because it emphasizes the familiarity and virtuosity that Bossy displays with his subject. Although the author provides a short preface, the book lacks chapters dedicated to either an introduction or a conclusion. Bossy tells us up front that his book addresses this question: "Supposing that your account of what you call traditional Christianity is roughly correct, what difference does it make to the conventional narrative of sixteenth-century reformations, Protestant or Catholic?" Roughly, Bossy is trying to provide a new perspective on what the medieval society of Christians had before the reforms of the sixteenth century, and what was lost afterwards. And there can be no mistake that Bossy definitely thinks more was lost than gained.

Part One: Traditional Christianity examines the beliefs and rites of the medieval Church. Bossy's main theme is that traditional Christianity was not a system of religion thrust from the top down, from theologians onto the peasantry, but rather a rich social construct, equally participated in and constructed by all members of society - peasant, burgher, friar, bishop. The author illustrates this by the use of many examples of traditional belief. Bossy discusses the importance of family to the medieval society, and how this was reflected in a fascination with the extended family of Christ - his mother's relations, his step-cousins, etc. Particular attention is paid to the hierarchy of the seven deadly sins, and the difference between sins of concupiscence (or desire) such as gluttony and lechery, and the sins of aversion, which were pride, anger, and envy. Bossy argues that society's winking tolerance of the sins of desire but the special punishments for the sins of aversion prove that those which would disrupt the community the most were defined as the worst sins. This thesis is strengthened even more when Bossy discusses the formation of the Christian fraternities that proliferated throughout Europe. More than a guild or simple municipal brotherhood, these fraternities banded together for

strictly Christian purpose, be it glorification of the Eucharist, transmission of catechism, or public charity in the form of delivering Christian burial to members of the community. In summation, the first eighty-seven pages of the book consist of Bossy describing the many ways in which the diverse body of Western European Christians were united by the collective social belief in the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, Part Two: Christianity Translated is an eighty page discussion of what changed in Christianity after the turbulent sixteenth century, whether due to the Protestant or Catholic reformations. Assuming his reader's familiarity with the basics, Bossy dispenses with the narrative of dates and names and instead studies changes in theology, belief, and practice. There is discussion of the elimination of representative religious art by the Protestants, the growing popularity of printed catechisms for all religions, and the difficult knot of beliefs around the Trinity and Christ's godhead versus his manhood. Bossy is keenly interested in the growing rift between public and private practices of faith, in what power was surrendered by the organized church to the individual faithful, and what structures replaced the Church in the minds of the society. Here Bossy sees perhaps not the disintegration of the tight social fabric he saw as the defining characteristic of traditional Christianity, but certainly the compartmentalization and enclosure of that society into smaller, more self-sufficient groups. His closest statement to a summation is that "[b]y 1700 the Christian world was full of religions, objective social and moral entities characterized by system, principles, and hard edges..." Clearly, where Bossy sees an organic body of the faithful in late medieval Christianity, he sees a splintered collection of competing orthodoxies by 1700, and the change was not a happy one. The book is certainly engaging, if a bit obtuse at times. Bossy is able to gather his audience and pull the reader along through his summaries and arguments, and the journey is enlightening. A writer with such a commanding knowledge of his subject is always a pleasure to read. However, genius may not always be entirely convincing. Bossy's treatment of the forms the new Christianity took is the strongest part of his book. His earlier characterization of medieval Christianity is a little too pat, unfortunately. Bossy himself admits that he is glossing over wide swaths of the Church, particularly its Irish fringe and national Orthodox churches. In striving to see the unity of the body of the faithful in 1400, Bossy turns a blind eye to the many sectarian influences that were already existent, and indeed had always been there. This flaw does not diminish the fine summation of the effects of the reformation in Part Two, but it does undermine his thesis of the unified whole of the medieval Church. And without that, the reader is left rather nonplussed by Bossy's conviction that so much was lost by 1700.

I had to read this for my course. The author assumes you know pretty much everything about the

Reformation and all its players. Full of lofty vernacular, I had to read the book with Google open so that I could look up what he was writing about... and I have some background knowledge of the Reformation. In addition to anything else, the print is woeful and detracts from any enjoyment to be derived from this turgid slog.

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