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Shaw's "Christianity: The biography, 2000 years of global history" (Book Review)

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*Christianity: The Biography* uses the theme of a maturing human to tell the story of Christianity over the past 2000 years. Unlike many Christian history book authors, Ian Shaw does not show Christianity being carried by historical forces throughout the western world, but characterizes Christianity as an active force in its own right. Acknowledging the difficulty with pinpointing the actual beginnings of Christianity, Ian Shaw begins his biography with the mythical foundation of Rome in 753 BC. He then shows how the classical ancient world sets the stage for the eventual birth and development of Christianity in the Middle East.

Recognizing the significance of Christianity’s Middle Eastern beginnings Shaw develops a diffusion pattern to show radiating ripples carrying and being driven by the young religion in all directions, unlike many books which just focus on passive western expansion of Christianity. This expanding base allows Shaw to present Christianity in an active mode while still recognizing the significant influence the classical world’s preparation gave to Christianity’s westward expansion without ignoring expansion into other areas as well. This expanding base allows Shaw to show the integration of Christianity into many different cultures over the past two millennia and goes a long way toward allowing him to show both the integration of Christianity into developing sociopolitical situations and acknowledging the ways that Christianity influenced change in its own way.

Shaw further discusses most of the major issues which faced Christianity during this maturing process. Although each issue is only briefly mentioned the gist of most can be readily identified. Major personages effecting Christianity in its expansion, shaping the development of Christianity, or acting to oppose Christianity are introduced in their appropriate places. The brevity of this book does not allow for adequate treatment of some of the more important figures or events and unfortunately Shaw does not provide adequate footnoting or additional resources for readers to pursue further those individuals or issues which may interest them.
A strength of this book is the way that Shaw demonstrates Christianity as a potent force which shapes the world and highlights the significance of Christianity to the modern world, yet grounding that significance in Christianity’s historical development. Shaw clearly acknowledges the global reach of Christianity and demonstrates well that this worldwide reach results from a process of historical development that rippled from an epicenter in the ancient Middle East. The major limitation to this book is the brevity with which Shaw attempts to state his points. Although brevity succeeds in keeping the book a manageable size it leads to a jilted reading style which makes the book seem somewhat boring and unable to do much more than touch on most subjects it discusses.

Shaw injures the overall acceptability of the rest of his book by making several blanket statements regarding doctrinal issues that insinuate significant differences have been resolved when this is not the actual case. In one example, Shaw presents as settled that submission in marriage is a mutual submission between husband and wife when many evangelicals and most linguists would argue that neither Scripture nor Christian history does anything of that sort. Another example involves Shaw’s statement elevating Athanasius to one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church without giving any significant scholarly reasons for what many would consider an idiosyncratic distinction.

Despite the above shortcomings this book is a valuable introduction to Christianity which refreshingly shows Christianity as a potent force both affecting and being affected by human history. It would be a good introductory textbook for high school and college religion or history courses. Homeschoolers and individuals wanting an introductory level book on Christian history make up other audiences. A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years by Diarmaid MacCulloch is a competing book and one of the definitive works on the history of Christianity, but many will find the 1200 pages too daunting and they might opt for Shaw’s shorter introduction.

**Reviewer**
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