

The Christian story and the world's story

I can't remember precisely when I fell in love with history, but it was surely in the first innings of my reading life.

Granted, this was easier in the days when history was written and taught as, well, history - meaning drama, heroes and villains, great arguments, wars and revolutions, and all that other dead white male stuff. I was fortunate in that my third-grade teacher, the estimable School Sister of Notre Dame Sister Miriam Jude (then a postulant known as Sister Florence) had sold World Book encyclopedias on the side during her days as a Philadelphia public school teacher and talked my parents into buying a set.

Thanks to the World Book, I was off to the historical races. Then there were Random House's "Landmark Books," wonderful history-for-young-readers, written by real historians, not overly dumbed-down, and costing something like \$.95 or \$1.25 for a hardback. I owned dozens, and read more than a few of them several times. Thus prepared, high school and college history were fun, not drudgery, and to this day, reading good narrative history is a never-failing pleasure.

History, that is, like Robert Bruce Mullin's "A Short World History of Christianity," recently published by Westminster John Knox Press. It is no easy business, getting two millennia of Christian history into 283 readable pages. But Professor Mullin has done the job, in a readable style that makes the fruits of his impressive ample scholarship available to a general audience.

Mullin is a master at sketching brief portraits of key figures in the Christian story. He neatly disentangles the great - and often daunting - trinitarian, christological, and mariological controversies of the first centuries in a thoroughly accessible way. Unlike many, perhaps most, historians of Christianity, he understands that the Christian contest with Islam has been a defining experience of Christian history, ever since the armies of Islam broke out of the Arabian peninsula and swept across what was, in the seventh century, one of the vital centers of the Christian world -

North Africa.

His description of the accomplishments of the often-deplored Middle Ages is both just and enlightening, as are his depictions of the Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the European wars of religion. His attention to the tremendous missionary expansion of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries is a useful reminder, in this Pauline year, that great Christian missions didn't stop with St. Paul – or St. Francis Xavier, for that matter.

What's the relationship between the story told so well by Robert Bruce Mullin and the history I inhaled with those World Books? When history was taught properly, the sequence was usually organized by chapter headings that read something like "Ancient Civilizations," "Greece and Rome," "the Dark Ages," the Middle Ages," "Renaissance and Reformation," "the Age of Reason," "the Age of Revolution," "the Age of Science," "the Space Age," or some such. From a Christian perspective, however, that is history read on its surface.

For there is another way to schematize the human story. Its chapter headings would run something like this: "Creation," "Fall," "Promise," "Prophecy," "Incarnation," "Redemption," "Sanctification," "Proclamation," "the Kingdom of God." That story – the biblical story, if you will – does not, however, run parallel to the "real" story as taught in the history textbooks. The story that begins with "Creation" and culminates in "the Kingdom of God" is the human story, read in its proper depth and against its most ample horizon. For the central truth of history is that history is History: the story of God's coming into time and our learning to take the same path that God takes toward the future.

In "A Short World History of Christianity," Robert Bruce Mullin offers us, not a theological interpretation of history but a concise narrative of the church's life in the world – the church's life between "Redemption" and "the Kingdom of God." To know that story is to see how, in specific personalities and communities, both the Spirit promised to the church and the ancient enemy have been at work, shaping what the world regards as "history." It's a story every literate Catholic should know.

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D. C.