

Softcover: UK

The guises of Christianity through the ages

Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial book is a sympathetic but even-handed portrayal of the broad sweep of the religion's history

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

A few weeks ago I was handed a leaflet by a US missionary. It contained a sequence of statements — Man was created; Man sinned; Man died; Man repented; Man entered Eternal Life. Each statement was accompanied by two or three sentences from the Bible as would-be affirmation of their truth, each with chapter and verse duly appended.

This kind of fundamentalist mindlessness was as far removed as it's possible to be in the Christian context from the sublime sanity, historical breadth and intellectual integrity of Diarmaid MacCulloch in his magnificent *History of Christianity*, newly out in a massive paperback from Penguin this month. He's Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford, and his authoritative but eminently readable book stands in the best traditions of that university — non-doctrinal, yet replete with sympathy for its subject while maintaining an objective distance from it.

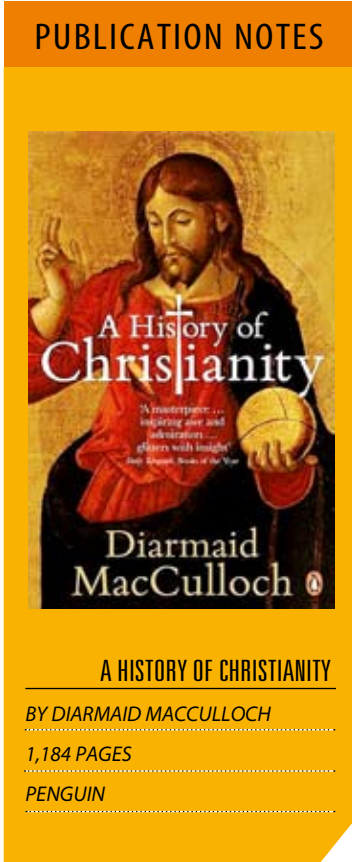
MacCulloch explains his position in an Introduction, saying it's something the reader has every right to know. His job as a historian, he says, doesn't give him any special capacity as an arbiter of the truth or otherwise of a religion, but its history is something that is undoubtedly real. His stance, he says, is that of a candid friend of Christianity. That he was once ordained as a deacon in the Church of England, but then progressed no further, should be added to this piece of self-description.

As for his aims, he states that modern historians have a duty to promote sanity and to curb the rhetoric that breeds fanaticism, because there is no surer basis for fanaticism than bad history, "which is invariably history oversimplified."

Many of MacCulloch's statements in this book support this even-handed approach. He speaks, for example, of "one of Christianity's most noble and dangerous visions, the Roman papacy." His entire account is full of skepticism and an awareness of ambiguity or difficulties, pointing out for instance how little of the familiar Christmas story is really authenticated, and how the various books of the Bible exist in variant texts, and were included or excluded from the final collection as the result of discussions (and probably votes) by a sequence of what we would nowadays call committees. This has been understood in enlightened circles for 300 years, and to take such a collection of old texts, however venerable, and then use them as a basis for telling people how to live their lives, and even enshrining their supposed teachings into punitive laws, is indeed a species of fanaticism. "Maybe the Bible can be taken seriously rather than literally," the author wisely writes.

I consequently wondered what MacCulloch's attitude would be to Edward Gibbon, the 18th century anti-Christian historian of the Roman Empire. He only refers to him a couple of times, once to quote one of his most celebrated jokes — that during the pontificate of the lecherous John XII his "rapes of virgins and widows had deterred the female pilgrims from visiting the tomb of St Peter, lest, in the devout act, they should be violated by his successor." But Gibbon, who he elsewhere describes as "feline," is clearly too much of a skeptic for MacCulloch's altogether more pro-Christian sensibilities.

The scope of this book is immense, as is its subject, though even 1,200 pages can't encompass every detail of the story. Asia, especially China, gets good coverage, though some territories understandably



have had to be left unexamined. But a vast range of Christian experience is represented, from Copts to Pentecostalists, Origen to Francis of Assisi.

At one point he remarks that now, all over the world, "the most easily heard tone in religion (not just Christianity) is of a generally angry conservatism." The reason for this, he suggests, is that the previously powerful heterosexual male today feels under threat. "It has been observed by sociologists of religion that the most extreme forms of conservatism ... are especially attractive to 'literate but jobless, unmarried male youths marginalized and disenfranchised by the juggernaut of modernity' — in other words, those whom modernity has created, only to fail to offer them any worthwhile purpose."

MacCulloch's overview is that Christianity's history has been extraordinary and that it is far from over. (The book's subtitle "The First Three Thousand Years" refers to the author's belief that for a thousand years before the life of Christ both Greco-Roman and Judaic traditions were spawning ideas that were to find an eventual place in the new religion). It is possible to take another view, however.

This is that what the world is now ready for is a new faith altogether. This will be one that is not based on a world-view rooted in the Eastern Mediterranean of 2,000 years ago, but encompasses the universe as it is now understood, stretching billions of light-years in all directions. Whatever might have been responsible for that is unlikely to have been involved in the sacrifice of a god-man to appease the anger of a jealous celestial father.

It will be something that teaches that what is holy is life itself, in all its forms, and so can appeal to all men everywhere irrespective of their cultural inheritance. It will probably be pacifist and vegetarian, and if it owes anything to presently existing religions will derive more from Buddhism than from Christianity. Miracles and holy books will play no part in it, except in so far as all life will be perceived as miraculous, and deserving of veneration. Most importantly, it will accord with everything that has been discovered by science, because these things are undoubtedly all "true," so must sit without friction in any overarching description of what is the ultimate truth of the universe. And describing what is the ultimate truth of our world, and of all other worlds is, after all, what all religions are essentially about.

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

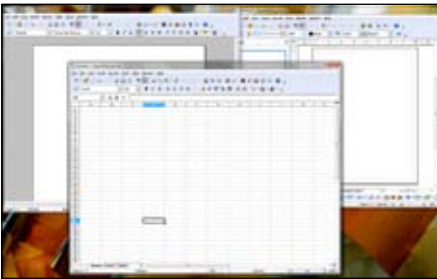
Everyone loves free, as in free beer, free lunch — you fill in the blank — and this is certainly true for computer software. If you feel like you've already spent too much on that new laptop or desktop PC, have a look at this short list of some of the better free softwares available.

OFFICE AND WORD PROCESSING

You don't need to splurge on Microsoft Office, the ubiquitous suite of programs that includes Word, Excel and Powerpoint. A free alternative, **OpenOffice** (www.openoffice.org), works just as well. This open source software supports all of the standard Microsoft file formats. And the interface of OpenOffice programs pretty much mimics that of Word, Excel and Powerpoint, so the learning curve for new users is small. It's available for both Mac and PC.

If document formatting isn't important to you — for example if all you really want to do is write notes or keep a journal — try a simple text editor instead. Most text editors cater to computer programmers writing code, but there a few designed for especially for wordsmiths. *TextRoom* (code.google.com/p/textroom/) aims to rid writers of all distractions on the screen — it takes away the menus at the top so the only things you see are the text and the time of day. There are other nifty options, too, such as a live word count display, an alarm timer for those on deadline and typewriter sounds for the nostalgic.

This program is only available for Linux and PC, but Mac users looking for something similar should try Bean OSX (www.bean-osx.com), which has a few more word processing features and is another nice and simple alternative to Microsoft Word.



Before you buy Microsoft Office, try the free alternative, OpenOffice.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

WEB BROWSERS

Mozilla Firefox (www.mozilla.com/firefox) is still the top alternative to Microsoft's Internet Explorer for surfing the Internet, but Google Chrome (www.google.com/chrome) is catching up. Google's browser, like Firefox, generally runs faster and is less susceptible to viruses than Internet Explorer. Both Chrome and Firefox are also more customizable, with a huge library of extensions that do everything from block pop-up advertisements to display the current weather. *Opera* (www.opera.com) offers yet another alternative and has a novel file sharing feature called Opera Unite.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

If you use both Facebook and Twitter, **Seesmic** (seesmic.com) might save you some time flipping back and forth between pages in your Web browser. The stylish fonts and layout make everything look good and easy to access: the desktop program organizes your Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn feeds into neat columns and also has a small pop-up screen that shows real time updates from your friends and contacts. **Tweetdeck** (www.tweetdeck.com) is a similar program, but doesn't work at all if you want to type in Chinese. Both programs are available for Mac and PC. For users of Plurk, the microblogging service particularly popular in Taiwan, there's **Bitter** (bitterware.com).

With Microsoft's **Fishbowl** (www.fishbowlclient.com), Facebook gets a facelift. This free program, for Windows only, has a similar appearance to the top social network's Web site, but looks cleaner as there are no ads. The modern-looking font gives the Facebook experience a somewhat more refined feel, but the most noticeable difference from the Web is the photo viewer, which neatly displays your contacts' photos into a collage of Polaroid shots. I found this to be much nicer when viewing my friends' photos. The software is in still beta, both worth a try if you use Facebook but find its Web site to be an eyesore.

MULTIMEDIA

iTunes rules the roost as a music and video organizer, but it's not very accommodating for those who use an Android mobile device instead of an iPhone or iPod. That's where **doubleTwist** (www.doubletwist.com) comes in. Built with Android users especially in mind, this program is designed to sync music, video and photos with little fuss. The interface is very similar to iTunes — it keeps a database library of all your music and videos, and lets you create playlists. doubleTwist provides an answer to Apple's online App and music stores with a built-in search engine for Android apps as well as Amazon's Mp3 store, which is sadly not available in Taiwan.

The program also works well as a complement to Apple's flagship software, as it can import your iTunes library and playlists. Also, there's a nice feature for avid YouTubeers: Just type in the link of a video and doubleTwist saves it in a playable format for your mobile device. If you have an HTC or Samsung Android phone and use it for music and video, doubleTwist is a must-try.

Most computers have Windows Media Player and Quicktime for videos, but



doubleTwist offers iTunes-like functionality to users of Android smartphones.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

occasionally you run into a file or DVD that just won't play. Enter **VLC** (www.videolan.org/vlc), an open-source media player that boasts "it plays everything," which is pretty close to the truth.

For organizing photos and basic editing, Google's **Picasa** (picasa.google.com) is tough to beat for its combination of simplicity and ease of use. It arranges your photos like a traditional contact sheet, so you can view them in large batches; simply click on a thumbnail to enlarge a photo. Picasa's editing features offer more than enough for average users, and will definitely do the job if you're maintaining family photos and mementos. Other user-friendly touches include a collage maker and the ability to make mini-movies out of your photos. Picasa is available for Mac, PC and Linux.

Irfanview (www.irfanview.com), for Windows only, doesn't have as much eye-candy as Picasa, but is another simple and powerful photo editing software available at no cost.



Picasa, Google's free software for editing and organizing photos.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

UTILITIES

When it comes to anti-virus programs, spare yourself the nagging messages from the trial software that came with your newly purchased computer. Instead, download and try the free versions of Antivir (www.free-av.com/) and AVG (free.avg.com), both of which do the job very well. AVG is particularly good for just setting it and forgetting it; Antivir gives you more annoying pop-up screens.

There are a several useful free back-up programs for those who want a little more control than Windows Backup offers. **Paragon Backup and Recovery** (www.paragon-software.com/home/db-express/) is good for creating a copy of your system drive just in case your hard drive dies or if you need to reinstall Windows. **Karen's Replicator** (www.karenware.com/powertools/ptreplicator.asp) is highly customizable when it comes to when and which files you back up. (Bear in mind that both of these programs are generally not as user friendly — take the time to learn how they work if you try them).

Where the heck is that file? Compared to Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7 sport a much improved search engine for finding files buried in the depths of our hard drives. But **Everything** (www.voidtools.com/) still digs things up faster. Type in a file name or part of a file name and the matches will instantly pop up in Everything's screen, which simply looks like a Windows Explorer window. This no-frills program was designed to use minimal resources on your computer, and its speed proves it.

If your Windows PC is slow when you turn it on, it's usually because a number of programs are launching so they can run in the background. But often these programs aren't necessary, and **Soluto** (www.soluto.com) offers a remedy. This app keeps track of how much time it takes for your computer to start up and identifies the programs that slow it down.

A very user-friendly interface shows the offending programs and offers recommendations on which ones to pause or delay. I managed to shave at least a minute on the boot time of a computer running Windows XP.

Ever wonder what's taking up all that space on your computer? **Disk Space Fan** (www.diskspacefan.com) gives you a visual picture of your hard drive, with a color-coded, animated pie chart representing files and folders by size. This program comes in handy for weeding out unneeded files.



Soluto helps Windows users speed up boot times.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

KEEP UP WITH THE CLOUD

Dropbox (www.dropbox.com) is great for accessing your files from anywhere and syncing them across different devices, whether it's a laptop or smartphone. Dropbox is an online storage service for backing up data, but it also lets you share files through software installed on your computer or mobile device.

To use Dropbox, sign up for an account, which gives you 2 Gigabytes of free storage, and then install the software on whichever devices you use.

Whenever you save a file in your Dropbox folder, it gets synced to all of your devices. For example, you might save a photo on your laptop, and later on you can show it to a friend at dinner on your iPhone, if it has the Dropbox app installed.

Sharing files with other people is as easy as placing it in your "Public" folder or creating a special folder, for which you can decide who has access to it.

The best thing about Dropbox: You barely notice it. It's automatically set so it doesn't hog your Internet bandwidth when uploading files, and you never have to fiddle with any settings. Just plop the file you want to sync in your Dropbox folder, and you can access it on any computer or device that has Dropbox software installed. And in a pinch, you don't need the software: You can also access your files through a Web browser.

A comparable service to Dropbox is **Zumodrive** (www.zumodrive.com).

If there is a drawback to free programs, it's that you might have to do a little more research and spend some extra time on user forums if you run into trouble. But for the most part, with these apps, you are getting what you *don't* pay for.

Hardcover: US

3,096 days in a dungeon

The autobiography of the Austrian girl held captive in a cellar is testament to the power of the imagination in the face of a most terrifying predicament

BY VANESSA THORPE
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

If ever the virtues of the key texts of Western children's literature should be questioned, then the story of Natascha Kampusch could be called upon as evidence. Kampusch's only reliable companions during her long, cruel incarceration in a cellar were books — *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Jungle Book* and *Alice in Wonderland* were all brought to her by her captor.

"The most important means I had at my disposal for combating boredom and for keeping me from going crazy was books," she explains in her memoir of imprisonment, *3,096 Days*.

Once Kampusch had finally burst free, beaten and half-starved — after eight years of

unseen sunsets and sunrises, she had become something of a butterfly when it came to self-expression. Her autobiography is testament to the power of the imagination in the face of a most terrifying predicament. While some commentators have seen Kampusch as Little Red Riding Hood, going missing in her scarlet jacket on her first solo walk to school and then held at the mercy of a man named Wolfgang, her memoir shows her to be more of a Crusoe, a resourceful soul cast adrift on an island of madness. Like Defoe's hero, although often in fear and pain, she is constantly planning ahead.

Early on in the cellar, she remembers a wartime story about women who had avoided rape and so puts lemon peel on her skin to

fake an infectious disease.

Kampusch's grim tale would be compelling whatever the skill of the writer, but her memoir manages to be both a brave attempt to get across a message and a sad song about the bleakness of many lives.

She calmly recounts not just the tricks of the sadistic kidnapper, such as his pretence that he was the nicest member of a more frightening gang waiting off-stage, but also gives her reader a taste of the nightmarish fantasies that stalked her own mind.

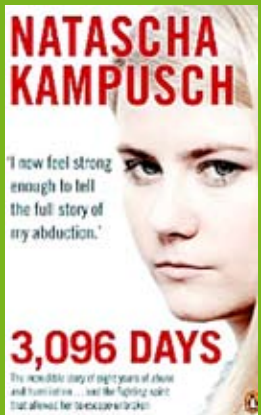
Subjected to violence, starvation, molestation and sensory deprivation, Kampusch describes how she adapted "intuitively" to new "customs," just as if in a foreign country. Before her capture, this

needy little girl, who had once yearned to be an actress, had been deeply struck by a series of television reports about young girls who had gone missing in her region of Austria. So her story touches on a hideous contradiction. Child kidnapping, we know, is rare and yet it happened to Kampusch exactly as she had feared it would.

Her anger is reserved for those who were shocked by her need to talk about her torturer. Of course he was important to her, she argues. And he was not a monster, just a sick man.

Society, she concludes, however, needs its beasts. "It needs the images of cellar dungeons so as not to have to see the many homes in which violence rears its conformist, bourgeois head."

PUBLICATION NOTES



3,096 DAYS
BY NATASCHA KAMPUSCH
256 PAGES
PENGUIN