

## Foreword

Stephen Neill's classic book *The Christian Society* is an exemplar of social history – an approach to historical writing that emerged in the 1960s with great force, profoundly impacting the teaching of history in Western universities.

True to form, Stephen Neill was ahead of the game. His book was published in 1952, before the massive revolution in historiography occurred. Whether or not Neill was conscious of this social turn in historical writing, his book was consciously written from a social history perspective. In his Preface he acknowledged that he was putting aside 'dogmatic and theological considerations' in order to pursue a study of the whole history of Christian society.

Neill was extremely interested in non-Christian cultures, and he wrote widely about comparative religion, indigenous societies, world history, and accounts of missionaries when they first encountered civilizations unknown to the West. What is fascinating about Neill is that he was doing this well before most Christian historians or theologians had thought about it. Neill was at the vanguard of so many disciplines, which is precisely why his writing resonated, and often set the pace for works produced in his wake. He was a trailblazer that very few could match in breadth. When Neill wrote about something, others paid attention and, inevitably, unpacked ideas and concepts that he so innovatively articulated.

Stephen Neill's fundamental approach in *The Christian Society* was to investigate how Christians in various societies around the world, over the course of nearly two millennia, had interacted with the environments surrounding them. There can be no doubt that Neill's twenty years in South

India played a role in this profound curiosity. Very few missionaries soaked up the society in which they were entrenched as effectively or as perceptively as did Neill. In south India, there is still an amazement about how fluently he learned to speak the Tamil language – so terribly difficult for Westerners to learn. It was told to me that if a person were standing behind a tree and heard Neill speaking Tamil, it would be impossible to discern that he was a non-native speaker. Neill's Tamil was perfect, without accent. His vocabulary was huge. Although a colonial bishop, and at heart an imperialist, Neill was deeply respected for his knowledge of South Indian society. His expertise on Indian society is what earned him his stellar reputation as the most competent scholar of Indian Christianity in his time. His attitude was colonial, but his comprehensive knowledge of Indian society was never in doubt.

In *The Christian Society* Neill unleashes his powerful intellect on the whole history of the Christian church, from Palestine all the way to the deserts of New Mexico. Neill was a voracious reader, in sixteen languages. He lived and lectured in French Geneva. He was an extraordinary professor in Germany at the University of Hamburg. As a student at Cambridge, he cleaned up virtually all of the competitions due to his prowess in Greek and Latin. He mastered Indian languages. He translated Italian works into English for publication with Oxford University Press. He studied Icelandic purely for his own curiosity. His knowledge of Portuguese was on display when he produced his volumes on Indian Christianity for Cambridge University Press.

Very few scholars could have produced the profound scholarship encountered in *The Christian Society*. Perhaps more important, however, was that very few scholars were even interested in this kind of scholarship in 1952. If it was published today it would still be fascinating. Granted, the field of World Christianity is doing precisely this kind of thing, but only the rare scholar can function as fluidly as Neill

did in understanding other world religions. He published many fine scholarly works in comparative religion, but he was equally authoritative when writing his classic *History of Christian Missions*.

Neill wrote around 70 books and literally thousands of articles, reviews, chapters, speeches, sermons, and reports. It was stated to me by someone who knew him in India that he read almost all the time, even while he shaved. Neill was an insomniac, and a bachelor to the end, and he chose to read widely in his spare time. This all combined to create in Stephen Neill a great writer, a rare man who could write and deliver the most prestigious Bampton Lectures, but who could also provide pastoral support for young seminarians in danger of losing their faith.

Stephen Neill writes so well. The pastoral warmth often shines through. The brilliance is there. The breadth of expertise and sheer curiosity of the world's people and cultures and institutions is on display in this book. What is much more difficult to describe is why and how Neill is so enjoyable to read. One sees why Neill sold so many books – indeed even academic books! He communicated complex ideas clearly, and with vivid words. It is said that Stephen Neill is one of those rare writers whose footnotes are as interesting as his main text.

*The Christian Society* is a powerful read still today. Neill's goal was to look at the Christian church as an organism that had to learn to function within the environment in which it was planted. Neill makes no theological judgments in this book. He does not try to superimpose his ideals of which societies were more Christian or less Christian. That was not his goal in this book. Rather, he tries to help us see why the church did what it did at unique places and times throughout its history. Churches became imperialistic. Some struggled to survive, and even died during the rapid advances of Islam. Some Christians became militaristic; others chose the pacifism of Jesus. Some indigenized so thoroughly that

they absorbed entire civilizations and transformed cultural geographies. Other churches were planted, only to remain segregated from the societies in which they existed. There is no discernable metanarrative, as each society had to navigate these factors on its own.

The year 1952 was obviously so different from 2022, but even 70 years ago Neill was noticing a growing secularity in Europe. On the other hand, there were also powerful forces emerging in the global church at the time. Sub-Saharan Africa was just starting to show itself as the new center of world Christianity. It was certainly not a complete process, but clearly Africa had the potential to become the next Christendom. Which it did. Thousands of Africans were embracing Christianity daily during that euphoric time. Globally, there was an ecumenical spirit in the air, as the World Council of Churches had captured the imagination of the world church like never before. The Soviet Union provided a staunchly atheistic front that allowed for the Western world to conceive of itself as the Christian world. Ironically, it was the Western world – namely Western Europe – that would take a secular turn in the late twentieth century as the Soviet Union began turning en masse to its Christian roots. The colonial world was starting to break up in 1952, as India led the way – a topic on which Stephen Neill was a recognized expert. The animosities of the Second World War had subsided, and the United States supplanted Britain as the world's great superpower. All of this was known to Neill, whose finger was squarely on the pulse.

*The Christian Society* is a gem of a book. It is a rare 1950s piece that still has unmistakable relevance. Today, the discipline of history has repositioned itself as 'world history', and Stephen Neill's writings are a clear testament to that epochal turn in its infancy. Howard Zinn's famous book *A People's History of the United States* hit the shelves in 1980, but for Stephen Neill that approach to writing was already old hat. Neill wrote social history, and world history,

decades before it became fashionable to do so. It is uncanny how ahead of the curve Neill was in this book.

The world has changed much over the last 70 years, but Stephen Neill, in 1952, was clear-eyed about where things were headed. His greatest advantage in forecasting the future was his expertise on what had happened in the past. Stephen Neill's prognostications were accurate because he understood historical patterns. Of course history does not repeat, but it does produce discernable echoes. Stephen Neill had a remarkable ability to bring those echoes and patterns to light, largely because he was a worldly Christian. He knew this world. He understood culture. He lived in many different places, from India and Africa to England and Switzerland. He was worldly in so many ways. His knowledge of Greek literature could be as impressive as his knowledge about the Anglican Church.

All of these factors coalesce to make for an engrossing read, written in an enthralling voice. Stephen Neill's writing talent is on full display in *The Christian Society*, and it is thrilling that a new generation will have the opportunity to take this tour de force into the absorbing story of Christianity's dance with humanity's manifold societies.

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The Life and Times of Stephen Neill*  
14 September 2021