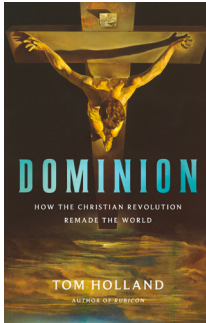


Christianity in the World: Review of Tom Holland, *Dominion*

Michael Plekon



Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Tom Holland's recent work, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, is a remarkable history of the Christian faith and Church and how it shaped the world. Much to his credit, Holland's book stays true to its title. When he says the whole world, he really means all of it, including other faith traditions, people of no faith, and even some of Christianity's greatest despisers, like Himmler and Stalin.

Thanks to his Cambridge training, Holland is as strong a scholar as he is a gifted storyteller, and he weaves a tapestry from the lives of the women and men who made up the Christian movement. His work is larded with notes, most often from primary sources. We travel through the best known events of Christian history and encounter anew the lives of the larger-than-life "celebrities" of the Christian movement: from Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples on down through Paul, Irenaeus, Augustine, Cyprian, Benedict, Martin of Tours, Aquinas and Francis, Dominic and Clare, Luther and Calvin. We also revisit luminaries of our time, such as Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. We hear from them in their own words, and often find ourselves surprised by things we would little suspect they'd thought or said.

One of the great features of this magnificent narrative is the encounter with dozens of lesser-known figures. Some of

them, I must admit, for all my study of the Christian story, were barely familiar or completely unknown to me: the Quaker reformer George Lay, Elizabeth of Hungary's cruel mentor Master Conrad, the amazing scholar Johann Schreck, along with astute observers of world-changing events like Otto Dix. Under Holland's scrutiny we also discover notable yet little-known side stories, like that of Nietzsche, or the account of J.R.R. Tolkien's faith traced through his work on *The Lord of the Rings* during World War II.

Geographically, we are guided from the Middle East, all throughout Europe, from east to west, and then to the New World, as well as to Asia and Africa. Holland thoroughly demonstrates the global scope and cosmic, transcendent vision of Christianity. Like Diarmaid MacCulloch in his brilliant book *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, Holland leads us into corners of the Christian story that are normally bypassed in favor of the "great figures" and "significant events" approach, but while he uses the diaries and letters of numerous seemingly-unimportant Christians to great effect, it is much more than a "history from below." With enormous discernment, Holland shows us that laity are as crucial as bishops, popes, and patriarchs; parish pastors as eloquent as great theologians; and that women followers of Jesus should be heard equally with their brothers.

All of this brings me to remember the work of George Fedotov, a man of the Russian émigré theological circles of interwar Paris who continued what I call a “new hagiography.” He applied the tools of historiography to get below the layers of codified writing and thinking about saints, to get a better view of them as women and men of faith and action. He pursued this with numerous Russian saints in a volume many know, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, published in 1948.

The remarkable theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, his student, continued this approach in her work. Having been gifted with knowing her, I too have sought to look at “saints as they really are,” as Dorothy Day urged us. Professor Fedotov, I think, would have welcomed this work of Tom Holland and recognized its theological value. We are given the history of a people of God and the communities they formed through their realization that they were the body of Christ. This is the kind of attention to the empirical, material realities of history that Nicholas Afanasiev said kept us from careening into Nestorianism or Docetism. One cannot tell the story of God’s work in the world without taking seriously the world and the people in it—those with and through whom God chooses to act, or to “pitch his tent.”

As a historian who has written about the Persian and Roman Empires as well as Islam, Holland guides us through the culture, politics, economies, and social systems of these empires, alongside the world of Judaism, and leads us up to

the time of Jesus of Nazareth. Like N. T. Wright’s massive *The New Testament in Its World* (2019) and John Jillions’ excellent *Divine Guidance* (2020), reviewed in the previous issue of *The Wheel*, this book brings us to supposedly familiar figures, events, doctrines, and practices—in short, the sweep of the history of the Christian movement—in a fresh, surprising way. He shows us how profound the imprint of Jesus of Nazareth, his teaching and life, still is in so many aspects of our seemingly secular, godless world.

Holland is, it so happens, a striking personal example of just this imprint or shaping. In this work he shares how much his revered godmother loved Christ and everything about the Church, and strove to hand onto him the very best of the Gospel. While still not calling himself a Christian, Holland explains that he came to see the truth that sustained Aunty Deb as real. In an interview after the book’s publication, he went even further: “When I have experience of the sublime, when I have a sense of something beyond me, that is Christian and that there is nothing that I find more moving really than the narrative of the Passion and the Resurrection and perhaps that is still a faint guttering flame of faith that is there to be tended and may become a more fuller flame in due course.”¹

Today, when so much that passes for church leadership and teaching has become stale and routine and predictable, Tom Holland’s study is riveting and immensely important. Life-giving would not be too much to say. ✱

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¹ Tom Holland, “St. Paul’s ‘Depth Charge’: Why Historian Tom Holland Changed His Mind about Christianity,” *Unbelievable?* radio show and podcast, July 2018, <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Unbelievable-blog/St-Paul-s-depth-charge-.Why-historian-Tom-Holland-changed-his-mind-about-Christianity>.



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