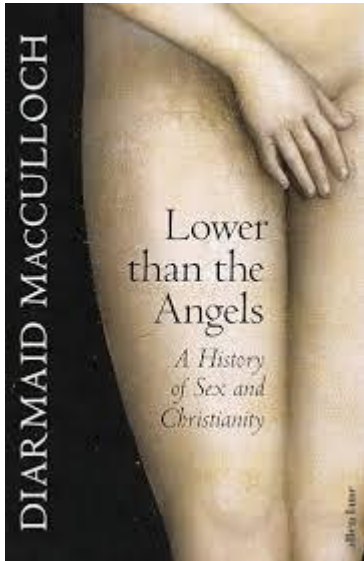


Diarmaid MacCulloch Lower than the Angels



Diarmaid MacCulloch is a prolific writer of big books on the history of the church. This one is in that tradition (500 pages) and is a variation on what, for him, is a familiar theme. The aspect of church history that interests him here is the story of how the church has dealt with the topic of gender, sex and marriage across the years.

This book is inspired by the prevalence of ‘heat’ over ‘light’ in the current debates on sexuality in the church today and he attempts to encourage his readers to engage with the actual rather than fondly-imagined facts of this story.

MacCulloch is a clever and witty writer who likes to provoke his audience so it is no surprise that early on he declares that traditionally a marriage was a legal arrangement between two men: the father of the bride and the father of the groom. He points out that there was no such thing as a ‘church wedding’ until the 5th century and this was only so that the church could gain financially from the arrangement.

The Bible doesn’t offer a single model of marriage – polygamy being a favourite of earliest times, a practice that is still sometimes difficult to shift in cultures across the world today. And the nuclear family model finds its roots more in Roman secular culture than it does in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Celibacy is a relatively late teaching of the church but one which was much-embraced by writers clearly horrified by the existence of women in general and the sexual act in particular – often even within marriage.

MacCulloch doesn’t reach any firm conclusions in the book – after all, the debate is still on-going. But he implies that the church has most often spoken with its most unambiguous and weaponised voice from the position of its most profound ignorance, fuelled by fear and hatred, thereby doing untold damage in many of its pronouncements. The church will continue to strike new moral poses as fashions come and go but this book is really a corrective to those who declare it is possible to trace a single theology on the matter that goes back to our biblical beginning. Our ability to hold contradictory ideas together at the same time may be needed for some of that much-needed light to appear and this book will hopefully encourage the church to pause and think before it speaks.