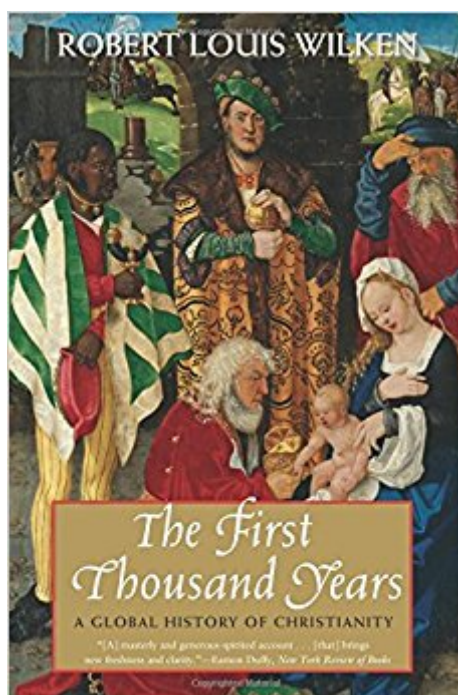


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# The First Thousand Years: A Global History Of Christianity



## Synopsis

How did a community that was largely invisible in the first two centuries of its existence go on to remake the civilizations it inhabited, culturally, politically, and intellectually? Beginning with the life of Jesus, Robert Louis Wilken narrates the dramatic spread and development of Christianity over the first thousand years of its history. Moving through the formation of early institutions, practices, and beliefs to the transformations of the Roman world after the conversion of Constantine, he sheds new light on the subsequent stories of Christianity in the Latin West, the Byzantine and Slavic East, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Through a selected narration of particularly noteworthy persons and events, Wilken demonstrates how the coming of Christianity set in motion one of the most profound revolutions the world has known. This is not a story limited to the West; rather, Christian communities in Ethiopia, Nubia, Armenia, Georgia, Persia, Central Asia, India, and China shaped the course of Christian history. The rise and spread of Islam had a lasting impact on the future of Christianity, and several chapters are devoted to the early experiences of Christians under Muslim rule. Wilken reminds us that the career of Christianity is characterized by decline and attrition as well as by growth and expansion. Ten years in the making and the result of a lifetime of study, this is Robert Louis Wilken's summa, a moving, reflective, and commanding account from a scholar at the height of his powers.

## Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press (November 12, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300198388

ISBN-13: 978-0300198386

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 56 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #10,402 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #22 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Church History #24 in Books > History > World > Religious > Christianity #33 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > History

## Customer Reviews

Praise for *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*: "Magnificently learned [and] deeply felt. . . . An attentive reader of Wilken, whether believer or nonbeliever, will be touched anew by his survey of

Christian intellectual life." — Michael Dirda, *Washington Post Book World* "Brilliant . . . a riveting story." — *Publishers Weekly* "Compelling. . . An outstanding achievement." — Maria E. Doerfler, *Commonweal* "Ambitious and wide-ranging . . . [This] highly accessible volume abounds with lively tales and fascinating connections, and the color illustrations are a delight. Wilken's recent scholarship has also given him a global perspective of impressive sweep." — Philip Jenkins, *Christian Century* "Elegantly written [and] highly readable." — *First Things* "Compelling. . . An outstanding achievement." — Maria E. Doerfler, *Commonweal* "Readable and reliable." — Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, *Catholic Books Review* "[A] masterly and generous-spirited account . . . [that] brings new freshness and clarity." — Eamon Duffy, *New York Review of Books* "[W]ilken's book would make a nice addition to the library of a pastor or seminary student seeking an up-to-date overview of the first millennium of Christian history. His writing style makes it easy and interesting to read. . . . His emphasis on the spread of Christianity beyond the Roman empire shows that the gospel has had a global reach from the very beginning of the church's history." — Joel Otto, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* "[An] extraordinary achievement. . . . [The First Thousand Years] is a perfect introductory text: it has a clear storyline that incorporates more people and places than any comparable book on the market." — Daryl R. Ireland, *Fides et Historia* "Robert Wilken has written the best kind of authoritative historical survey. Its treatment is learned, thorough, but also accessible for all aspects of early Christian history, and especially for the great significance of Islam to the entire Christian world from the seventh century forward." — Mark Noll, author of *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* "A marvelous and unique survey, learned and authoritative, yet also a perfect introduction to the early history of Christianity. Robert Wilken redraws many boundaries, expanding horizons, summarizing and analyzing with consummate skill. This beautifully written book sets new standards on multiple levels, and should stand for a long time as the benchmark by which all other surveys are measured." — Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* "This is a rich and wonderful book, not only because of Robert Wilken's narrative gifts, but because of his immense scholarly range and sympathies. His is one of the few treatments of Christianity's first millennium for Anglophone readers that embraces the faith's whole history, cultural and geographical, Eastern and Western, Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian, European, Asian, and African." — David Hart, author of *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* "Robert Wilken reminds us

that our association of 'global' developments in culture, communications and economics with the beginning of the Third Millennium forgets the world of the First Millennium, which was integrated by a universal faith. " This book is both unique and timely, the fruit of broad erudition and deep reflection." •Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Archbishop of Chicago "Christianity is a historical religion, yet much of its actual life from the New Testament until early modern times remains largely unknown. " Robert Wilken, one of our best historians, provides here a fascinating account of Christianity's first millennium, the undivided church which is the patrimony of all Christians. " Written with elegance, grace, and insight." •Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School

An excerpt from Robert Louis Wilken's *The First Thousand Years*: In the early sixth century, a merchant set out from Egypt to sail to the southern coast of India. Like earlier visitors from the Roman Empire, he had undertaken the long journey to bring home peppercorns from the Malabar coastal region, and he called India the land where "pepper grows." The name of the sixth-century traveler was Cosmas, and because of his journey to India he is known to historians as Cosmas Indicopleustes, Cosmas the Indian Navigator. Cosmas was a Christian, and in his *Christian Topography* he reports on Christian communities discovered in his travels. He spent some time in Malabar, the southwestern coast of India, in present-day Kerala, where he found a church with a bishop appointed from Persia. He also visited Socotra, an island in the Arabian Sea, approximately two hundred miles south of Yemen and east of Somalia, where there were Christians with clergy who received their ordination from Persia. But even more striking, he got as far as Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and there he discovered a church composed of "Persian Christians" performing, in his words, the "full ecclesiastical rite." Our histories tell us little about the mission to the Far East. As the spread of Christianity to northern Europe was the work of Latin-speaking monks, and the spread of Christianity among the Slavs was the work of Greek-speaking monks, so the spread of Christianity to the east was the work of Syriac-speaking monks from the Church of the East. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

For this non-expert Catholic, this text was an extraordinary learning experience. What made it so was the way that Robert Wilken organized his text in such a way that each chapter's relevance to what we think, believe, and practice today adds to the impact of every chapter. What we see in this text is the effort of different early theologians, popes, etc. to wrestle with the unplumbable mystery of the

Incarnation, and how each of these thinkers perceived it with differing emphases which led to different practices, and devotions, and styles of art and architecture, etc. Which leads me to what I consider to be the most important line in the whole book, which occurs on page 133, and is attributed to Symmachus, a Roman senator, where he says: "What difference does it make by what wisdom a person seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a mystery by one path." To the practicing Christian, this book offers so much. We see in its early chapters Jesus' and his immediate followers emphasis from the beginning on community, and on building a community. We see the beginnings of Christian symbolism in the catacombs. With Constantine, we see the beginnings of Christendom, and the initial outlines of the tormented relationship between church and state. We see the origins of a theology of the Holy Spirit at Nicea, and the beginnings of anti-semitism, as well as of monasticism and asceticism - all as relevant today as they were then. There are wonderful chapters on Eastern Christianity, and on the gradual emergence of the authority of the Bishop of Rome, and on the rise of Canon Law, and the historic implications of how the church dealt with Arianism, Donatism, and Pelagianism, and on rise of Islam with all its profound implications. In short, this is a fabulous read. I suspect that there is no better history of the Christianity's first thousand years than this.

Wilken's overview of the First Thousand Years of Christian history is exceptionally well-written. His short chapters are engaging and full of details and anecdotes that bring the story he is telling to life. I especially liked the fact that Wilken included material on eastern, African, and Egyptian Christians which are often left out or minimized in other surveys of church history. As a teacher, I was pleased to see that most chapters could stand on their own as short reading assignments for students, but the book hangs together well and transitions are smooth. The work is accessible to those who know very little about the history of Christianity but useful even to experts in the field. One of the most pleasant history texts I've read in a long time. Note: I read this book at the same time that I was reading David Bentley Hart's *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2,000 Years of the Christian Faith*, and the two books work well together. Both seek to branch outside of the traditional focus on Latin Christianity, and both cover much of the same ground. However, the overlap proved rewarding rather than redundant.

Amazing to find out just how bad the Muslims treated the Christians. And this book lays out history of Christianity in a way to allow us to see our future. One of the most informative and interesting books I have read in a long time. Every politician should have to read this book.

Wilken does a superb job in dealing with the first 1000 years of Christianity. What impressed me is that he is scholarly--yet can write for the lay person and non-scholar too. There are "morsels and tidbits" in this history that will stay with you forever! Pastors will find great sermon examples here like I did. It is not a "pop" book by any means and I read it quite slowly and thoughtfully. But I couldn't wait to get back to it when I had to lay it down. History lovers will devour the book...and curious readers will be truly rewarded. Non-Christians will be interested in how Christianity became a world religion. A truly 5 star book!

Ok

This is a fascinating and very readable history of the growth of the Church from a small band of mostly unschooled disciples to the dominant force in Western civilization. Mr. Wilken obviously has a very broad and comprehensive understanding of history. He very capably describes so many developments that altogether shaped the Church -- martyrs, arts, architecture, social interaction, scholarly writings, monasticism, etc. He puts each development in perspective, showing it's importance and it's enduring impact. Very interesting reading.

The book is practically new. Thanks!

A thorough review of the history from Christ's crucifixion through the next ten decades. Very enlightening and helpful; a definite "must read" for those who yearn for more understanding and a deeper appreciation of how Christianity was spread from the eye-witness accounts down through so many generations. In my opinion, very well researched and documented and made interesting!

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