

Although I am not what you might call a believer, I have always found church history to be pretty fascinating. I first studied the history of the Church not out of intellectual curiosity, but out of spiritual need. You see, I was having trouble with the religion that I was brought up in. My parents were extremely religious people, but I felt that the religion was hypocritical. They preached the love of God, and yet they believed that all sinners would go to hell. They talked about the forgiveness of God, but they thought that he actually had it in his heart to torture people indefinitely for committing limited sins in this lifetime. To me, this didn't make any sense. I didn't want to believe in a cruel God who would doom people to eternal suffering. I have researched the history of Christianity to find out how this belief has come about.

It turns out that church history is more complicated than people tend to present it as. There are all kinds of history of the Catholic Church books out there, but most of them are written with a particular agenda. Either they are written to bring people back into the fold, or they are written to denounce the church. I didn't really want either. I wanted to read some church history that was written from a fair and balanced perspective that gave every side its equal chance. I was interested in truth, not ideology. I leave ideology for the believers.

When you study early church history, you find out how political everything was. It turns out that one of the most important agendas for the early church was to consolidate belief. To this end, they repressed anyone who believed things different than the mainstream churches. The Gnostics and other heretics were oppressed for their ideas. Church history is about early Christians coming up with one story to share with all the believers. They emphasized Heaven and Hell because it would cause greater obedience. Had they been interested in diversity of thought instead of in creating a uniform code of belief, things might have been very different.

In the end, reading church history did not return me to my faith, but it did give me spiritual benefits. Because of my Christian history readings, I have decided to formulate my own beliefs independent of any religious doctrine. It has made me feel much happier than before.