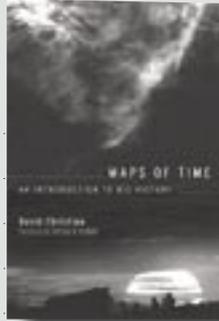


Book Reviews

Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History, David Christian, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 642, ISBN: 0-520-23500-2



—Reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This remarkable book of 600+ pages is apparently the first consciously to fulfill the expectations of a new university discipline, the study of “Big History.”

Historians have often been content to probe tiny slivers of history. One reason is that, apart from merely attempting to describe what *happened*—basic facts—they have been reluctant to hazard any guesses about what was *happening* on the whole. Even to suggest that there is direction, movement, a “plot” that is unfolding, is a very risky business, almost as risky as promoting a religion.

This book begins with the Big Bang, reporting that the theory postulates an expansion with the very first second of time that is larger than our galaxy. That is, proponents of the Big Bang would have us to believe that a very small object blew up larger than an object (our galaxy) that would take 100,000 years to traverse at the speed of light. This blow up took place in not one or two years (and not 100,000) but in less than one second, actually in one trillionth of a second (p. 497). Hard to believe? Most cosmologists nowadays adhere to this theory.

I haven’t found out exactly how soon the universe settled back down to the speed of light, but using ordinary arithmetic, if light goes 186,000 miles per second it goes only one hundredth of an inch in a trillionth of a second. And we are to believe that before the expansion of the universe slowed down it was going 100,000 light years in the time light would take to go one hundredth of an inch? Thus, as fast as light goes it would appear to go astronomically (literally) slower than the speed of that first Big Bang. Fine.

Speaking of *instantaneous* mysteries, the book also suggests that all we know about the appearance of modern humans would lead to an interesting conclusion about the emergence of man: “on the paleontological scale, it was an almost instantaneous event” (p. 145).

Having written in the last issue the article “The Most Precarious Mission Frontier,” I am fascinated by the fact that right in the Contents page of this book we are told that the big story moves from 1) the inanimate universe, to 2) life, to 3) humans, as its major stages—as I did in my article. Although the author is named David Christian there is no great evidence of a Christian perspective. He does state that

Christianity added the further idea that this universe had been created perhaps 6,000 years ago by God, in the course of five days (p. 21).

He did not say the *Bible* teaches this. Readers may assume that this is believed not only by Christians but is the inevitable meaning of the Bible, which of course is only what some people take the Bible to mean.

When he gets into the modern period, again, religion does not seem to matter a whole lot in the explanation of the radically new acceleration of history.

He also properly questions whether western-style development is sustainable. He quotes a very insightful Gandhi,

God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West ... if an entire nation of 300 million people [India back then] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts (p. 475).

David Christian, noting the extravagant global industrialization (since Gandhi said that in 1928), comments,

We appear incapable of stopping processes that threaten the future of our children and grandchildren (p. 475).

He examines several theories about this latter day explosion: Demographic Theories, Geographical Theories, Idealist Theories, Commercial Theories, Social Structure Theories. He favors the impact of “a global network of exchanges (p. 363).”

In dismissing Idealist Theories, which is where religion might enter, he says,

Even the most subtle idealist theories have difficulty explaining why attitudes [toward work, for example] have changed so decisively at a particular period in human history. If Protestantism led to science and rationality or modernity, what led to Protestantism (p. 355)?

Exactly. But he does not pursue the question of what led to Protestantism.

This review only scratches the surface of this unprecedented and valuable book.