



Early History of the Christian Church: From its Foundation to the End of the Fifth Century

(Volume III)

Louis Duchesne

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This is the final volume of the 3-volume set originally published in French as “*Histoire ancienne l’Eglise*” (Paris, 1905-1910). As its two predecessors, this third volume is from the English edition (NY 1909-1924), fully edited with linked footnotes.

Duchesne’s classic work served as the standard introduction to the early church for many years.

To quote Walter Ullmann (1910-83), the late professor of Medieval History, and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge:

“Duchesne’s works show him not only a master of prose and lucidity but also a master who handles the primary source material with a dexterity and skill which is given only to the few. ... Only a man endowed with the true historical sense, dedication and vocation could chart his way through the virtually impenetrable thicket that still envelopes the age of early Christianity in the East as well as in the West with its dogmatic, doctrinal, sectional interests poorly documented as they still are. ... [His] pronounced combination of [historiographer] and editor was rare – even at the time he lived and worked.” (*Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, Année 1975, Volume 53, No. 4, p. 1287 – 1289).

Orthodox Catholic historian Warren H. Carroll, the late founder of Christendom College, lauded this specific work as “excellent and thorough,” noting: “Though privately an early modernist, Duchesne, in this classic did not challenge orthodox doctrine nor engage in indiscriminate debunking.”

A French church historian of first rank, Louis Duchesne (1843-1922), was ordained to the priesthood in 1887 and completed his theological studies at Rome. His interest in the history of the early church was intensified by his travels in Greece and Asia Minor. He became a professor of ecclesiastical history at the Institut Catholique in Paris in 1885. In 1895 he was nominated director of the French School at Rome, a position he held until his death. He was elected a member of the French Academy in 1910. He died in 1922, in Rome, and is buried in the cemetery of Saint-Servan.

Historians today concede that Catholic historical scholarship came to a legitimate maturity in the 19th century, especially through the publication of sources. Duchesne, by his close study of these sources, called into question some of the legends of the saints. Considered too modernist by the Church during the time when the movement of Modernism was formally condemned under Pope Pius X, Duchesne’s 3-volume “Early History” was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1912. Around the same time, Pope John XXIII, then just a professor of church history at the seminary in Bergamo, was similarly denounced for recommending Duchesne’s “Early History” to his students.

Pius’ successor, Pope Benedict XV, while still condemning Modernism, dismantled the so-called “witch hunt” engendered by the “Modernist crisis” and called for freedom of discussion when the Church had not pronounced on an issue. The Index of Forbidden Books was essentially abolished in 1966 by Pope Paul VI.

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