

The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society

Brad S. Gregory

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The latest monograph of Brad Gregory, professor of early modern European history at the renowned University of Notre Dame, is a book that has every appearance of being academic, and it sure is, but it is in the end equally as much apologetic and maybe even evangelistic in nature. It can also be read as an apology for Roman Catholicism against the Reformation, which Gregory depicts as a disastrous moment in history for the development of the Western world, and as a disguised evangelistic message addressed to the spiritual descendants of Luther so that they may end their five-hundred-year separation and return to the fold of Rome. The author claims that the blame for the secularization of university, politics, and society is to be laid primarily at the feet of the Reformation. If Gregory's book were not so thick, one could see it as a pamphlet—or rather, as five hundred pages filled with theses to counter the ninety-five theses that went out from Wittenberg and into the West so as to change it as it had never been changed before. Gregory has managed to arouse widespread discussions about his book, which is quite an accomplishment because scholarly works on the whole pass more or less under the public radar. All the same, many of the discussions have been quite critical, and this will be true also for the present review, though critical also in a positive sense.

The structure of Gregory's work is as clear as his style. It is, after all, "intended for anyone who wants to understand how Europe and North America today came to be as they are" (2). In six chapters, he—with the support of an impressive amount of literature—provides an overview of the intellectual, cultural, and social history of the last five centuries. Every chapter begins with a description of the current situation in one essential area of life, after which Gregory retraces how things came to be as they are. Gregory's assessment of each of these six domains is quite negative. In the first chapter, he begins by pointing out how God has been placed outside of scholarship and how the relationship between God and creation has been dissolved. Chapter 2 describes how Christian doctrines have come to be relativized, while chapter 3 gives an overview of the way in which politics—or, more specifically, the state—has gained increasing control over the churches. A fourth chapter depicts the road to the subjectivization of moral norms, followed by a chapter on the rise of a society oriented to material pleasure. Gregory closes his book with a chapter on the university, which today has become secular to the point of aggression.

The common thread running throughout these chapters is that the instigator for these negative developments is the Protestant Reformation. However, the Reformers were preceded by the real culprits who set God at a distance from the world, namely, the medieval theologians Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, in contrast to the Catholic

theologian Thomas Aquinas who still maintained a close connection between God and humanity. The path of decline began, so Gregory argues, when Luther chose in favor of Ockham and against Thomas. For example, because Luther concentrated on humanity's relationship with God, the church began to lose its significance, and it became easier to concentrate on humanity alone apart from God. Because the Church of Rome no longer had authority and disappeared as the normative interpreter of Scripture, the way was opened for scriptural criticism. Because the pope and the ecclesiastical hierarchy had to make way for the priesthood of all believers, a veritable cacophony of opinions arose that led to immense divisions within the church. Finally, because Luther and Calvin argued that good works do not contribute to one's eternal salvation and because everything is the result of God's grace, the doing of good works—and therefore morality as well—became less important also in regard to the economy, which led to the rise of capitalism. In fact, Gregory suggests that the Dutch Calvinists in particular were responsible. The Golden Age in the Netherlands arose from Calvinism and led to both capitalism and colonialism; together, these two contributed to the social and moral malaise of the United States.

Gregory's work raises numerous questions—more, in fact, than can be listed in this review; I will limit myself to a mere handful. Gregory has, in fact, rehashed a whole host of old counter-Reformation theses. Many have already been refuted numerous times, and are no longer accepted even by the majority of Roman Catholic historians. This is also a serious drawback of the work. Not only are many of Gregory's theories questionable at best and at times even easily refuted, but his monograph also runs the risk of setting scholarship back several decades into the old blame game in which Catholics and Protestants used to engage. Furthermore, it seems highly problematic to maintain, as Gregory's work appears to suggest, that there was great theological and ecclesiastical unity before 1517, and that division came only with the Reformation. This is hardly true; in fact, one might argue that the Reformation led to greater unity at least within the Roman Catholic camp. After all, the Council of Trent, in reaction to the Reformation, definitively established—with a host of *anathemas* pronounced over the Protestant teachings—Rome's doctrine and put an end to the great doctrinal diversity that had existed in the medieval period.

Questions can also be raised concerning the author's method. Gregory gives the impression that history is intellectual history alone and that external factors such as the context in which the events were played out had no role in it. Furthermore, what he describes are—as indicated in the title—"unintended" consequences of the Reformers' actions. Gregory therefore does not ask whether what happened was in line with what the Reformers advocated. He also fails to consider the Roman Catholic contribution to the six developments he outlines, leaving the impression that climate change and the gap between rich and poor can simply be assigned to one party alone and as if it is a case of "Protestant robbers" against "Catholic cops." Would there really have been less pollution and more social justice if the Reformation had not taken place? If only historical processes were this simple! One gets the impression that Gregory sketched out some lines in history, and then attached a number of fitting historical facts to them while ignoring the rest.

Were Ockham and Scotus not “Catholic” as well? Were there not many Roman Catholics after them who similarly relativized doctrine and harbored capitalistic inclinations? Was the situation so simple that you can say: Nietzsche is the prophet of nihilism; this was because of his Protestantism; therefore, the Reformation is to be blamed for nihilism? I hardly think so. After all, it is just as unfair to say: Had there been no Reformation, there would have been more celibate clerics and therefore more victims of sexual abuse. I think we should avoid such dangerous simplicities.

The basic premise can therefore be reduced to this: that there would have been no such thinkers as Nietzsche if there had been no Reformation. I actually do not find this hard to believe because Rome would no doubt have done to him what it did to John Hus. Did Rome not try to do away with Luther as well? If this is how we are going to maintain unity, I would prefer to live with a bit of schism in the church instead.

In spite of the above, it would be most imprudent simply to discard Gregory’s work, for he does ask a number of pointed questions. The value of this book lies in the fact that it reveals the current relevance of the sixteenth century, and in fact shows how relevant those events in themselves really are. Gregory thus confronts Protestants with a past that has been marked by division, and a past and present pervaded by biblical criticism and liberal theology whose disastrous results are epitomized by the many empty benches we find in churches today. He holds a mirror up to the universities that are eager to trade theology in for religious studies, and complains about seminaries that likewise—and without much reflection on the consequences—have made room for concentrating on human religious experiences instead of on the message of humanity’s sin and God’s grace. It was after all the pope who in Erfurt last year confronted the German Protestant church with the question of whether they still understood what Luther’s message was. Gregory might have a point when it emerges from his argument that the message of the Reformation can nowadays be found better in Rome than among many of those who claim to be Wittenberg’s heirs. Gregory’s work also has value in that he shows how history is not a process that just happens, but that choices are made, that the course of history can be influenced, and that there is such a thing as human responsibility. This makes it all the more regrettable that he failed to observe how the Reformation, too, could have been avoided if only Rome had made an effort to listen to Luther and to the voices of the laity, rather than launching an attack of its own. Luther asked for discussion but received a bull of excommunication. That, too, was a choice that Rome did not need to make.

Having said this, I still admire Gregory’s openness and the way he throws down the gauntlet to invite frank discussion. His is the voice of one who is concerned about the world, who is worried about the state of Christianity, and who, on the basis of his faith convictions, dares to speak out as a scholar on what he considers to be good or bad. Here is a scholar who does not stay in an ivory tower but tries to make his research serve the world. His monograph would only have benefited had he as a historian made more use of the existing alliance between historians and theologians. Gregory is a convinced Roman Catholic; he leaves no doubt about this, and it is his every right. He has nailed his theses

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to the proverbial door, and if Protestants want to avoid the same mistakes Rome made in the sixteenth century, they would do well to listen to Gregory, instead of chasing him out, and enter into discussion with him on both an academic as well as an ecclesiastical level. His book and his theses deserve that.

—Herman J. Selderhuis
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