

\\"The Unintended Reformation\\"

Michael Sean Winters | May. 3, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Stop what you are doing. Tell your boss you must, absolutely must, run to your local, independent bookstore and buy Brad Gregory's [?The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society.? \[1\]](#) This is the best and most important book I have read in a decade, apart from those by Mark, Matthew, Luke & John, of course.

Gregory, who teaches history at Notre Dame, seeks to show how the changes wrought by the Reformation unintentionally led to the ideological, social, political, intellectual and economic consequences that still shape the world in which we live today, and, especially, how the internal contradictions of our current world appear incapable of resolving themselves unless we reacquaint ourselves with the historical context, and the historical choices, from which those contradictions emerged. Here we detect the first of Gregory's contributions: Since the publication of *Montaillou, village occitan*, in 1975, the whole thrust of contemporary history has been towards microhistory. Ever more scholars look at ever more discrete locales and ever more discrete periods, and eschew larger narratives. History has become the domain of specialists producing works of little interest to general readers, a grave problem in a society that could learn a lot about itself by learning a bit more about history, especially in the United States where all sorts of historical claims are made with more flourish than facts. Gregory tips his scholar's hat to the specialists, and acknowledges that their work has informed his own, but he sees the need for something less narrow in scope and more relevant to a general readership. ?A different approach is needed if we are to avoid being overwhelmed by specialized scholarship, the proliferation of which tends to reinforce ingrained assumptions about historical periodization that in turn hamper an adequate understanding of change over time,? Gregory writes, and proceeds to help the reader achieve an ?adequate understanding of change over time.?

Gregory is not only concerned to write a broader, more comprehensive narrative, but also to beat back the temptation to engage in a supersessionist historical account. In such a view, modernity replaced the medieval with the same finality and obviousness and historic determinism with which some Christians believe their faith replaced the Covenant with Israel. Instead, Gregory deploys what he calls a ?genealogical? approach, ?seeking to identify and analyze long-term historical trajectories with their origins in the distant past that happen to remain influential in the present.?

Finally, Gregory hopes that his history will show something about how the Western mind has been shaped by the changes he recounts in ways that remain problematic. ?Denials of truth and of nonsubjective moral norms in the name of toleration and diversity are self-defeating and self-contradictory ? unless one is prepared to go the whole way, and grant that genocide, rape, slavery, and torture are acceptable. Thankfully, only the pathological would claim as much, although why this is so is unclear if ethics lacks any objective basis. Yet how to ground truth claims about morality and values amid swarms of incompatible, shifting assertions about them remains a genuine and pressing problem. We must make moral arguments if the condemnation of such evils is not to be a matter of mere individual choice or lucky-for-us majoritarian preference ? if we are to articulate why, for example, exploitative, abusive human relationships are always and everywhere wrong. A historical analysis of the genesis and character of our situation that at a minimum could illuminate the nature of the problem seems

desirable.? Gregory proceeds to illumine.

Gregory looks at six different issues in examining how we went from late medieval Christendom to the world we inhabit today. He repeats many times that these issues are examined discretely to organize the argument, but they all affected one another in various ways and were part of one, complex, historical story. The first chapter is the most philosophically challenging, looking at how the ?rejection of the long-standing Christian view of God?s relationship to creation beginning in the later Middle Ages,? led to what he terms a ?metaphysical univocity.? Here, the first culprits predate the Reformation: Duns Scotus and Occam with his razor. Their thought resulted in the laying aside of the traditional Jewish and Christian insistence on the radical transcendence of God, replacing it with a God who, in some sense, shares ?being? the way creatures do, albeit in a more exalted fashion. Gregory leads this insight through Newton and Spinoza, we visit with Descartes and Kant and Hume and Hegel. It is quite a tour de force and this first chapter requires careful attention and the occasional dusting off of college philosophy books. Do not be deterred. Gregory is right to put the heavy philosophic lifting first, as metaphysics remains the ground from which other intellectual pursuits start, even if those who engage in such pursuits scarcely take the time to consider the metaphysical assumptions they make. Before heading on to other topics, Gregory does not want the reader to make the same mistake. It is important to refresh our memories about these first principles, to be reminded about Heidegger?s Sein and Dasein, although I always thought Heidegger was Insane. (Couldn?t resist!)

The second chapter looks at how the Protestant Reformation and modern philosophy ?led in divergent ways to unintended pluralisms based respectively on the Bible and reason.? Here he examines how the competing truth claims of the different Reformers, and their inability to find a nonsubjective basis for assessing the claims they all put forth on behalf of sola scriptura, led first to the relativizing of religious doctrines and, when reason was invoked to clear up the squabbles, and after it enjoyed its eighteenth century heyday, reason too found it in the dock, charged by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault with purporting to a significance it did not deserve.

The relationship of the state to religion is the topic of the third chapter. Gregory shows how the reformation, and the sectarian violence that sprang from it, led to ?a lasting legacy of the modern state?s control of religion and its eventual midwifery of secularization via religion toleration.? There was something to be said, at least in the second half of the sixteenth century, and first half of the seventeenth, for the proposition that if the only things Christians know how to do is kill each other, better to privatize religion, and shift the devotion once accorded to the Church to the state, in what historian John Bossy has called the ?migration of the holy.? The confessional state gave way to the secular state, but the former conferred its power over religion to the latter. Gregory brings this discussion to the founding fathers, and the bishops who signed on to their recent statements about religious liberty might especially want to consult these pages. Those who are worried about the slippery slope of governmental control over religion may not realize just how far down the slope they already are!

Gregory?s fourth chapter examines the transition ?from medieval Christianity?s ethics of the good to modern liberalism?s formal ethics of rights via the disagreements and disruptions about the Christian good during the Reformation era.? He begins this chapter with a fine recapitulation, but important critique, of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, writing, ?Despite his proper insistence on the relationship of moral philosophy to social relationships and politics, MacIntyre ignores almost entirely the concrete disruptions of the Reformation era. Aristotelian virtue ethics was not rejected in the first instance or primarily because of a direct assault by Enlightenment thinkers, as a corollary of post-Aristotelian natural philosophy, because of the increasingly specialized character of academic inquiry in late medieval universities, or even through its repudiation by early modern Lutherans, Reformed Protestants, and/or Jansenists ? even though all of these played a role. Rather, its repudiation stemmed more fundamentally from its continuing association with Roman Catholicism in an era of deadlocked doctrinal controversy and religio-political violence.? The dialogue, then, between Gregory and MacIntyre, does not really lead to different conclusions about the precarious ?I had almost written ?state? ? the precarious situation in which the West finds itself, but the philosophic analysis of the one here finds a denser

historical explication of the circumstances by which competing philosophic approaches were adopted and discarded.

This is brilliant stuff, and obviously not merely of historical significance. Take the situation of Mr. Chen Guangcheng, the Chinese activist who sought refuge in the U.S. embassy this week. I think all Americans, and certainly Gregory, would agree that America's form of government is preferable to China's. But, the replacement of Christendom's substantive ethics of the good with modern liberalism's formal ethics of rights, involves a price. In America, the tragedy of abortion continues to point to the difficulties we have in reaching any kind of Rawlsian "overlapping consensus." Politicians of all stripes regularly invoke the Declaration's words about "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" but, having set aside concern for a substantive ethics of the good as inevitably contentious, we have no means for reaching a conclusion about how the right to life interacts with the right to liberty. Millions of unborn children have died because our culture still gets that equation wrong. Yet, we must also acknowledge that, in China, the state remains confessional, they embrace, and enforce, a "substantive ethics of the good," and there they force people to have abortions. Mr. Chen, after all, has made opposition to China's forced abortions his principal cause. So, the problems of liberalism, acute though they be, do not require anyone to think any alternative is preferable.

The fifth chapter, my favorite, looks at how capitalism, subsequently joined with consumerism, changed the conception of the good life into a conception of what Gregory calls "the goods life." Novak, Weigel, Douhat et al., need to read this chapter through twice and file a book report with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The sixth chapter looks at the secularization of knowledge in the modern academy. I neglect to add more here because I have gone on long enough.

Such an ambitious book could easily have become tedious and abstruse. Fortunately for the reader, the text is littered with the kind of elegant, pithy sentences that turn a work of historical seriousness and intellectual sobriety into a page-turner. A few examples will suffice. Gregory compares Erasmus and Machiavelli and their respective views of Pope Julius II, writing, "Erasmus satirized Julius posthumously as having been barred from heaven by St. Peter himself. Machiavelli blended cynicism with commendation, whereas Erasmus was shocked; but *Il principe* was written by a hardened veteran of Italian political machinations, whereas *Julius exclusus* was the work of the morally earnest proponent of a humanistic *philosophia Christi*. In their respective ways, each comprehended the papacy in the early sixteenth century." Or this: "capitalism has colonized the desires of the vast majority of modern Europeans and North Americans, regardless of their metaphysical beliefs, in ways that conduce to self-interested conformity." Or this: "The history of the Reformation and very probably of Western modernity as well would have looked dramatically different if those who insisted on sola scriptura and abominated interpretative individualism had agreed among themselves about what the Bible taught and thus about what Christians were to believe and do." Or, finally, this: "The secularization of knowledge was a historically contingent process that derives from the religious disagreements of the Reformation era, even though it has been for a century or so an ideological imperialism masquerading as an intellectual inevitability." Those are some mighty well-crafted sentences. The book is filled with them.

This is a great book. This is an important book. This is even an urgent book, a claim few historical books can justify. Please read it. Please buy a copy and keep it on your desk and buy another copy for your local library. Yesterday, I had lunch with a friend and walked him to a local bookstore afterwards to buy it! Also, if you happen to be in the Chicago area, there will be an event, sponsored by the extraordinary Lumen Christi Institute next Tuesday, May 8, where Gregory will discuss his book with Mark Noll and Rachel Fulton Brown. More info on that event can be found by [clicking here](#). [2]

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/The-Unintended-Reformation-Revolution-Secularized/dp/0674045637/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1336047812&sr=8-1

[2] <http://www.lumenchristi.org/unintended-reformation/>