

Gregory, Brad S. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. 574 pp, hb \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-04563-7.

In recent years, scholars from a range of disciplines – chiefly philosophy, theology, and history, but also literary criticism – have produced a surprising number of ambitious volumes asserting that seemingly arcane theological and ecclesial debates within Christendom were so foundational to early modernity in the West that their impact continues to exercise decisive influence upon our own era. Of course, the notion that inner-Christian theological debates have had implications for more secular realities such as law, politics, economics, etc. is nothing new; however, what is striking about this recent spate of texts is their drive towards comprehensiveness in demonstrating that theological debates – including controversies concerning the institutionalization of authority – can function as a sort of collective Rosetta Stone, a means by which to untangle most if not all of the strands constituting the hotly contested territory of how best to diagnose the “condition” of modernity (not to mention “late” or “post-” modernity). Given both the scope and the subsequent impact of such works as Mark C. Taylor’s *After God*¹ and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*² upon interdisciplinary conversations, it seems that we might be entering a time in which the term “magisterial” functions less as an adjective and more like a genre in its own right.

A recent intervention into this genre is Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation*, which bears its thesis in its subtitle: “How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society.” The “revolution” in question is the trajectory inaugurated by the European Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the “society” in question is precisely our own – the twenty-first century West (and, to the extent that other parts of the globe have adopted the characteristic features of Western modernity, the planet as a whole). Gregory, a professor of early modern European history at Notre Dame, has written a volume that bears all the hallmarks of an agenda-setting text. First, it ranges widely both historically (covering trajectories from later medieval centuries through the Enlightenment, and occasionally beyond) and conceptually (encompassing discussions of metaphysics, the politics of emerging nation-states, economics, transitions in university curricula, etc.); at the same time, however, it filters these diffuse topics through one focused inquiry, namely the ways in which these different aspects of modernity owe their peculiar character to the legacy of the Reformation. Second, it reflects the well-established scholarly belief that intellectual genealogy – tracing the contingent developments of ideas across time, with special attention to the “roads not taken” at key moments – is a necessary step in combating the various philosophical and political maladies of the modern age (which itself assumes that modernity is characterized chiefly by its defects, perhaps even to the point of being a “failed experiment”). And third, as early reactions to the text in both academic and popular journals have already shown, it is controversial: anyone working in my field (historical and systematic theology) has by this time almost certainly read at least one of the numerous high-

profile reviews of Gregory's work, and has noted the varying levels of ire that it has raised in various quarters of the academy. What this means is that most readers picking up this book for the first time likely will have failed to sequester themselves from being influenced by the debate around the book that is already happening.

To be sure, Gregory demonstrates throughout the text that he is not afraid to pick a fight. In his methodological introduction to the text, he explicitly denies that historians should hold back from applying insights gained from their study of the past to cultural commentary on the present; thus, nearly a third of the total text of his book consists of discussion of the state of the twenty-first century West. The notes that he strikes concerning virtually every major discourse of contemporary Western society – including politics, moral philosophy, economics, ecology, religion, science, and academia – are consistently pessimistic and polemical.

Indeed, across this wide survey Gregory's core complaint remains the same: Western society no longer has any agreed-upon first principles, no fixed points of axiomatic agreement, by which to adjudicate what Gregory terms the "hyperplurality" of contending viewpoints that characterize the modern marketplace of ideas. This lack of consensus undermines the ability of every facet of Western experience to shape life into a meaningful whole. Throughout the book's chapters, one by one, potential unifying achievements are assessed and found wanting. Politics? Even as our world faces unprecedented economic and environmental challenges, no single vision of the good life funds any point of agreement or compromise among world leaders. Economics? A vision of the good life as moderation and self-discipline has given way to what Gregory continually calls "the goods life," the belief that accumulation of material goods is the be-all and end-all of life and that any classical virtues that might temper that acquisitiveness will be derided as archaic (in no small part because they threaten the ideology of unfettered economic growth). Science? The fact that, on Gregory's account, the natural sciences have capitulated to the belief that specifically religious assertions are out of bounds as postulates for answering what Gregory calls "Life Questions" (broad, existential matters of ultimate importance to human life as such) means that sciences are now incapable of addressing reality as it is actually lived by the majority of the Earth's population. Ethics and morals? With a nod to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre³, Gregory contends that the lack of any shared societal vision as to what an "ethical" life might look like has fragmented the guild of professional moral philosophers to the point where their work is utterly incapable of addressing any serious word to what Gregory calls the regnant and relativistic "culture of Whatever."

The corrosive effects of hyperpluralism upon these discourses are, on Gregory's account, rooted in more fundamental failures at the level of religion: "Scientific inquiry, economists' claims, philosophical reflection, and the study of human cultures and traditions augment further the open-ended religious and secular pluralism that prevails in Western society at large with respect to the Life Questions" (81). In order to link hyperpluralism (what Reinhard Hütter, channeling Jürgen Habermas, has called "unintelligible profusion"⁴) with Western cultural decay, Gregory asserts a more fundamental connection between hyperpluralism and secularization, with the latter construed as the loss of religion as both a metaphysical orientation

and as a unified, pervasive broker of culture and intellectual discourse. In other words, the engine that drives the most pernicious effects of hyperpluralism into Western society is secularization. That is the essence of the story that *The Unintended Reformation* wishes to tell.

According to this narrative, the onset of the Reformation was not simply an inter-ecclesial dispute with implications for the practice of the faith; rather, it was a fundamental rupture of a previous state of cultural equilibrium as transmitted through the Western Catholic church. At various points throughout his book, Gregory insists that this relative harmony saturated virtually every aspect of medieval culture in the West: “Western Christianity on the eve of the Reformation comprised an institutionalized worldview, a many-layered combination of beliefs, practices, and institutions [...] Deeply embedded in social life, political relationships, and the wider culture, Christianity has as its ostensible, principle *raison d’être* the sanctification of the baptized through the practice of the Christian faith, such that they might be saved when judged eternally by God after death” (83). To his credit, Gregory acknowledges and describes the ways in which the actual behavior of medieval Christians – particularly those in the upper echelons of political and ecclesial hierarchy – often fell far short of Christendom’s professed theological ideals, to the point where the reformers had ample reason to lose faith in the moral and teaching authority of the Roman church. He also gives some attention (although less than one might hope for a historian of his caliber) to the numerous disputes and contestations within medieval Catholic theology and practice.

Indeed, the fact that the Reformation was to a certain degree justified is central to Gregory’s argument. It is apparent to even the most casual reader of nascent Protestant texts that the reformers shared their Roman interlocutors’ assumptions concerning the centrality of faith to life and of the church to faith; the dispute was centered on whether medieval Catholicism embodied or betrayed that ideal. There can be little doubt the late medieval church suffered from what Gregory calls “failures of charity” (on fronts both political and theological). Gregory’s relatively sympathetic treatment of the intentions of Luther, Calvin, et al. distinguishes his account from the trope employed by Catholic opponents in the first few centuries following the Reformation break, namely, that of ascribing intellectual or moral defects to the Reformers.⁵

However, the overarching narrative of the book does fit into another well-established, if more generous and modern, category of counter-Reformation critique: the notion that Protestant valorization of private judgment (as regards matters of scriptural interpretation and church doctrine) and predilection towards schism would extend past the inner-ecclesial intentions (however noble) of the reformers, and would in fact come to undermine the common structures of society as a whole. For Gregory, the cumulative effect of this divisiveness is nothing less than the single most important factor linking hyperpluralism to secularity; thus, he insists that our modern inability to handle the Life Questions with any sustained clarity is the unintended but inevitable outcome of the Reformation legacy. Thus, “the most important, distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism pertaining to the Life Questions is the Reformation insistence on scripture as the sole source for Christian faith and life, combined with the vast range of countervailing ways in which the Bible was interpreted and applied” because “the sort of

disagreements about answers to the Life Questions characteristic of the early Reformation have never gone away – they have only been transformed, modified, and expanded in terms of content even as efforts have been made to contain and manage their unintended and undeniably enormous effects” (92-3).

Prima facie, such a domino-effect view of ecclesial schism is nothing new. From the outset of the Reformation controversies, Catholic opponents of the so-called “magisterial” reformers argued that belief in the clarity of Scripture to the individual reader and the ability of individual believers to rightly interpret the gospel that Luther and his contemporaries were espousing was naïve, and would open a Pandora’s Box of divisiveness via a host of incompatible interpretations. Those warnings were quickly validated by Luther’s vexation at how quickly the relative stability of the initial Reformation settlements fragmented into a host of spiritual and political contestations, from the so-called “enthusiasts” or “Radical Reformers” whom Luther derided as *Schwärmerei* to the provocation of the Peasant uprising. In the centuries following the Reformation, the accusation that ecclesial fissiparity and reliance on private judgment breeds social decline would be taken up in more a more sophisticated fashion by such thinkers as Jaime Balmes and John Henry Newman (and in less sophisticated fashion by others, including Massimo Salani, who recently made headlines for claiming that the global growth of fast food reflects a degradation of communal sensibilities – and thus is traceable to Protestantism).

While, as stated above, Gregory is sympathetic to the reformers’ religious impulses in their loss of confidence in the medieval church, he also accuses them of naiveté for thinking that their principles of *sola scriptura* and the ability of individual believers to rightly interpret scripture would be enough to allow the Protestant communions to adjudicate religious truth. Because the Reformation dissolved into a host of irreconcilable religious options (many of them augmented by a spiritualist turn away from the text of the Bible itself and towards a kind of neo-Gnostic reliance upon direct dispensations from the Holy Spirit), and because those religious disputes quickly became violent, various engines of “toleration” through secularization became increasingly attractive (most prominently in the Enlightenment’s confidence in rationality as a tool for moderating religious passions). Where religion failed, reason, scientism, and (especially) the market stepped in.

This last piece of the puzzle – the analysis of how secularization through hyperpluralism mapped historically onto the emergence of modern capitalism – is where Gregory’s book improves upon previous influential accounts of “secularization via toleration” (most notably, Stephen Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis*⁶). As a historian, Gregory is at his best when detailing how ecclesial and market discourses converged at crucial points to advance the “management” of toleration and pluralism in ways that would facilitate the emergence of modern habits of production and consumption (e.g., the retooling of avarice as material success). Theologians and sociologists who today cast hyperpluralism as a symptom of the dominance of the late capitalist “market” – and there are many – will find Gregory’s narrative a useful ally on that front.

Unfortunately, such application of grittier historical data on Gregory’s part is inconsistent throughout the book; indeed, at times, his overarching narrative (once more: Protestantism leads

to pluralism, which leads to secularization, which leads to hyperpluralism, which leads to the decline of the West) depends upon significant oversimplification, if not outright cliché. At moments where it would be crucial for Gregory to trace evidence of ideas manifesting themselves “on the ground” rather than solely in the space of theological discourse, he resorts instead to bare assertion (for instance, his reliance on the faddish notion that the “disenchantment” of the world characteristic of secularism is traceable to the advent of nominalism and “univocal” metaphysics⁷). These tenuous maneuvers coincide with his strange lack of engagement with art and cultural production during and after the Reformation, which is all the more odd given that there is ample evidence to suggest that, for many Christians in Europe and England, the site of the Reformation’s most disruptive effects were aesthetic (related to art and liturgy) rather than doctrinal.⁸

More egregious are the distortions brought about by Gregory’s stubbornly pessimistic reductions of modernity to a condition of thoroughgoing and degenerate relativism. While he acknowledges at several points that modernity’s relocation of ethical discourse away from ecclesial traditions and towards more abstract language of human rights has brought about advancements in the latter that are “incomparably preferable to the appalling brutalization of men, women, and children in modern dictatorships” (233), his drive to show that such appeals to human rights no longer rest upon an agreed-upon metaphysical foundation leads him away from any substantive analysis as to how passion for social justice has in fact sustained many moderns, secular and religious alike. Meanwhile, given his fascination with how the medieval church was able to balance the catholicity of orthodoxy with a generous variety of local traditions, his silence about the vitality of the global Christian church and its increasing influence upon Western Christians casts his pessimism about the fate of religion in the West in a rather parochial light. If we are to believe that the experiment of modernity is a failure, then more of its variegated facets (cultural and religious) than what Gregory allows to surface must be given their day in court.

But even if the forest of *The Unintended Reformation*’s broad narrative ultimately proves unconvincing, nevertheless the book does provide some valuable data for rethinking our perspective on certain historical trees. Like James Simpson’s recent (and equally polemical) *Burning to Read*⁹, Gregory makes a strong case for how the waning of Protestant confidence in scriptural perspicuity (as well as the failure of Protestant supplements to scripture, such as prefaces and commentaries, to ward off the onset of individualized spiritualism in subsequent hermeneutics) rendered many of the Reformation’s signal achievements unstable, and he demonstrates in vivid detail how that instability resulted in situations in which many Europeans experienced the Reformation chiefly through its “radical” offshoots – and through violence. Similarly, historians of the Reformation will benefit from wrestling with Gregory’s criticism of the contemporary tendency to marginalize study of the Radical Reformation in favor of the “magisterial” Reformers, despite the disproportionately higher impact of the former upon the lives of Christians in the sixteenth century.

The definitive text relating the Reformation to modernity in its various permutations has yet to appear. When it does, it will tell a nuanced, diffuse story that does not lift up the (unquestionably

significant) impact of late medieval events upon our era at the expense of downgrading those aspects of the modern experience that do not conform neatly to a linear script. That said, whoever writes that book will benefit from the genuine flashes of insight available from Gregory's work, both where it convinces and where it does not.

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Notes

1. Taylor, Mark. *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
2. Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
3. Cf. especially MacIntyre's seminal discussion in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). At several points throughout his book Gregory indicates his debt to MacIntyre's discussion; indeed, it's probably no exaggeration to say that how one ultimately feels about the narrative put forth by *The Unintended Reformation* may depend a great deal on how one feels about the foundation established by MacIntyre's work. Put simply, both MacIntyre and Gregory offer historical narratives by which an original synthetic harmony (Aristotelianism/Thomism for MacIntyre, medieval Catholicism for Gregory) undergoes rupture, either by the disaggregation of philosophy from teleology and tradition (MacIntyre) or a period of theological and political turmoil that corrodes the ability of the institutional church to shape common visions of the good and shared answers to Life Questions (Gregory). While such disruption initially feels like liberation and enlightenment, it eventuates in a sort of sort of emotivism that masquerades as relativistic freedom when in fact it enforces the interests of an increasingly dominant "marketplace" of ideas – pluralism as a material and ideological shopping mall.
4. Hütter, Reinhard. *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).
5. Cf. David Steinmetz, "The Catholic Luther: A Critical Reappraisal" *Theology Today* July 2004, 187-201: 61.
6. Toulmin, Stephen. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

7. The notion that many of the ailments of modernity can be traced back to the rise of Scotus and metaphysical univocity is characteristic of such theological currents as “Radical Orthodoxy,” particularly in its various attempts at cultural analysis. Cf. especially Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (Oxford: Routledge, 2001).
8. Cf. *inter alia* Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
9. Simpson, James. *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).