

The Imaginative World of the Reformation, by Peter Matheson

reviewed by [L. DeAne Lagerquist](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

The Imaginative World of the Reformation. By Peter Matheson. Fortress, 153 pp., \$24.95; paperback, \$15.00.

Many of today's scholars and church folk find the Reformation era and its concerns hard to comprehend. It is possible, of course, to know a great deal about what happened nearly 600 years ago, about the ways people thought and about how their social location conditioned their actions. Unfortunately, neither a "doctrinal archaeology" nor "social reductionism" allow us to understand the Reformation in any profound way. Indeed, we tend to be slightly embarrassed by the whole movement.

Peter Matheson asserts that in our postdenominational era the doctrinal distinctions sorted out by the Reformers, around which modern denominations were formed, often are misunderstood or dismissed as insignificant. Even thoughtful ecumenists are more keen on the similarities than the differences between denominations; and antiecumenists hardly present an attractive picture of the Reformation.

Matheson suggests that we have misunderstood the Reformation. Seeing it from another angle might allow us to appreciate its dynamism. That angle directs our view to the imagination rather than to doctrinal disputes and social forces. Matheson explores the various strands of the Reformation through manifestations of the imagination, such as published images, preached metaphors and dreams of utopia. In these rich and multiple materials he finds that "the Reformation can be seen as an infinitely varied, but coherent and extended, metaphor for the bountifulness of God's grace."

Reproductions of two dozen well-selected 16th-century images illustrate the book. Matheson takes account of the destructive aspects of the Reformation--its anticlericalism and apocalypticism--as well as its visions of utopia for many and new life for individuals. The discussion of Argula von Grumbach's life is especially

engaging. Unfortunately, in this rich account of one laywoman's efforts to live out the Reformation, the role of the imagination in those efforts fades into the background.

The wider scope of other chapters (each originated as a lecture in a series presented by Matheson at the University of Edinburgh Divinity School in 1998) is more suited to Matheson's call for a new interpretive strategy. Matheson, a historian and principal of the Theology Hall of the Uniting Church in Melbourne, launches a new interpretive project as he presents his idea of the movement's animating vision. "The Reformation . . . was more a song or a symphony than a system, more lyric than lecture, more a leap of the imagination than one of those social restructurings we are so heartily sick of today. It certainly produced systems, lectures and structures as well, but they were secondary," he writes.

As God's grace extended into all realms of life, it brought with it the potential to break through religious, social and political hierarchies, thus undermining the structures of mediation. Even as the imagination generated new metaphors to convey the mystery of life, the world became disenchanted. Matheson turns our attention to this irony. His work suggests a way to understand the Reformation more deeply and to discern its affinities with our own time.