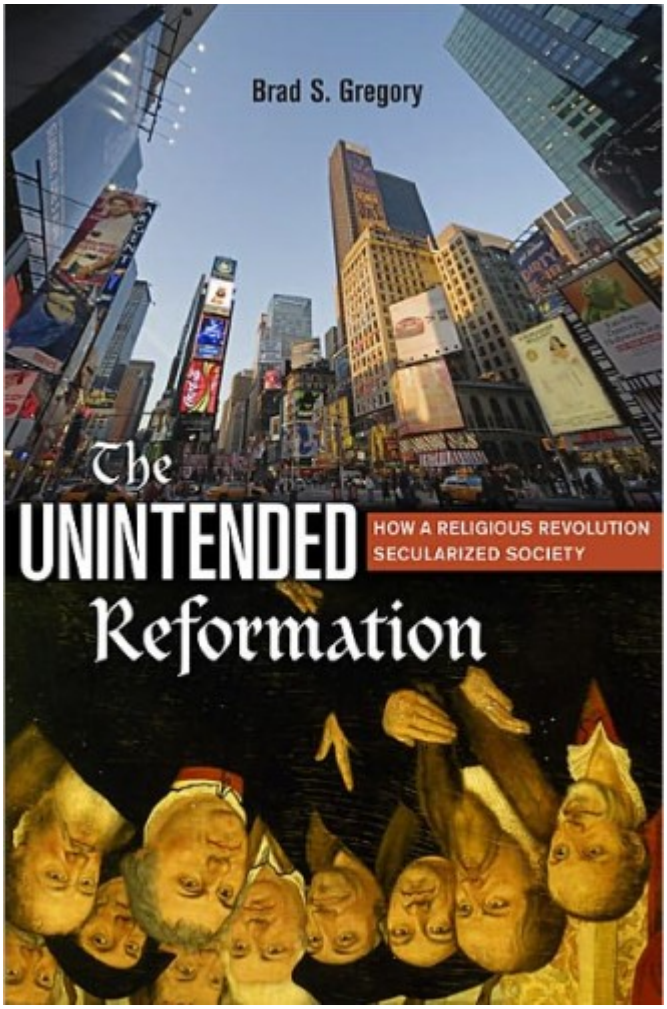
Blame it on Luther

by Ronald K. Rittgers in the January 23, 2013 issue

In Review



The Unintended Reformation

By Brad S. Gregory
Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

How has Western society come to be “hyperpluralized”—that is, how has it come to contain a dizzying array of incompatible claims about the true and the good? How are we to understand the increasingly fractious and polarized nature of politics,

especially in the United States, and the incessant culture wars that afflict this country? Why do we seem powerless to curb consumerism and the way it contributes to the problem of global climate change? Finally, why is the public square of most Western democracies so secular and why do our public universities have no place for God?

The answer, according to University of Notre Dame historian Brad Gregory, is the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant revolution of the 16th century is still very much with us, he argues, profoundly shaping our intellectual and institutional life, although most of us do not realize it. Rather than draw direct causal lines between the Protestant Reformation and modern society, Gregory focuses on the many unexpected and unanticipated ways that the religious and cultural upheavals of the 16th century gave rise to the modern Western world.

Gregory is one of the most important scholars of early modern European intellectual and religious history, and judging by the attention his book has received, *The Unintended Reformation* is one of the most important scholarly books in recent memory. Some reviewers have compared it favorably to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Critics, however, have castigated it as a piece of Catholic propaganda that only purports to be a work of history—although they also acknowledge the book's remarkable breadth and depth of learning.

Gregory's book is a sophisticated and demanding examination of what he sees as four decisive failures in Western history, the most important of which occurred in the 16th century. "Judged on their own terms and with respect to the objectives of their own leading protagonists," he writes, "medieval Christendom failed, the Reformation failed, confessionalized Europe failed, and Western modernity is failing, but each in different ways with different consequences, and each in ways that continue to remain important in the present."

Medieval Christendom failed because it proved unable to live up to its own highest spiritual and moral ideals, especially the ideal of *caritas* (charity or love), which was supposed to mark individual piety, government policy and the institutional life of the church, especially its hierarchy. While scholars such as Francis Oakley (of Williams College) have accused Gregory of yearning for a return to the supposed golden age

of medieval Christendom, Gregory acknowledges the many failings of pre-Reformation church and society, at least at the level of practice. He also readily concedes that medieval Christendom was not a monolithic entity but was composed of many different groups and even differing theologies. Nevertheless, Gregory insists that the medieval church was able to contain nearly all cultural and theological differences within itself. Medieval Christianity was an “institutionalized worldview” within which nearly all Europeans lived and sought to make sense of life.

The Reformation failed because it proved unable to reverse the failure of medieval Christendom. It failed to make Christendom more Christian and instead bequeathed to subsequent generations a heritage of religious and intellectual discord that has profoundly shaped the modern world, especially because of its highly subjectivized notion of truth.

The Reformation also failed because its basic principle of discerning divine truth based on scripture alone was deeply flawed, Gregory claims. He repeatedly points to the myriad doctrinal disagreements that occurred in the 16th century, arguing that the principle of *sola scriptura* proved unreliable as a guide to the divine will regarding salvation, sacraments and the relationship between church and state, along with a host of other topics.

Gregory insists that Anabaptists and Spiritualists of the Reformation era, while numerically less significant than Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans, were the exceptions that proved the rule regarding the inherently schismatic nature of *sola scriptura*. He argues that if one defines Protestantism solely in terms of the latter groups, then the doctrinal discord of the Reformation, while real, seems less significant and more easily managed. But if one includes the former groups in one’s definition, which Gregory is right to do, then one must acknowledge just how far-reaching Protestant discord was (and is). He labels “Pollyannaish” anyone who continues to believe in the perspicuity of scripture.

Gregory also maintains that Protestant theologies of salvation made it impossible for Protestants to continue the tradition of virtue ethics fostered by medieval Christianity. (Here Gregory is influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre.) Protestants denied the existence of a cooperating human agent into whom divine habits of virtue can be infused. They rejected the belief that growth in virtue, enabled by grace, is the goal and prerequisite of salvation. Protestants declared that humans are saved by grace alone, which is imputed through faith alone. Gregory believes that Protestants

thus had (and have) no logical basis for saying that growth in *caritas* is essential to Christian salvation; they only have a basis for saying that Christians should obey moral rules propounded by their superiors. Despite whatever intensification of devotion the Reformation caused—and Gregory acknowledges such intensification—its most important legacy was religious discord and the substitution of rules-based ethics for virtue-based ethics.

Faced with the reality of multiple Christian confessions and with wars caused in large part by religious conflict, early modern politicians sought to resolve Reformation-inspired discord through recourse to state control of the church. Temporal governments completed the subjection of the church to the state that had already begun in the late Middle Ages, and they used the churches to create confessionally specific institutionalized worldviews that required obedience, especially to the rulers.

This effort at state-controlled religion failed, for most Europeans resisted state-sponsored confessionalization. Religious warfare continued, causing rulers to grudgingly adopt policies of religious toleration—the clearest sign of the failure of Christian *caritas*. Religion was now relegated to the private sphere of people's lives, and toleration became the new compulsory state religion.

In order to provide the necessary coherence and cohesion for human society that medieval Christendom had once furnished and that the Reformation had destroyed, modern Europeans and North Americans turned to two other sources: reason and consumerism. Reason promised access to a notion of the good that would unite all enlightened human beings as they made progress together toward the ideal human society.

This project failed miserably. According to Gregory, those who continue to believe in the ability of *sola ratio* (reason alone) to answer life's questions are just as Pollyannaish as *sola scriptura* Protestants. Appeals to reason alone have been unable to furnish a sufficient foundation for the human rights that are so highly prized in Western democracies. The West can no longer provide an adequate rationale for its own way of life. It has no sense of the common good or a common truth upon which people agree; it has only competing versions of the good and the true and ever-intensifying cultural polarization between those who espouse them. In Reformation style, we seek to settle our many disputes through power rather than persuasion, because we no longer share the first principles that make persuasion, debate and dialogue logically possible.

Given the lack of a moral and intellectual consensus, Gregory argues, the West turned to consumerism for a sense of social cohesion. We can at least agree to produce and to purchase as many goods as possible. We have substituted a life defined by the good with a life defined by goods. Liberated from medieval condemnations of avarice, we shop until we drop because we can do no other. (Gregory is here indebted to Albert Hirschman.) Subjects in the modern "Kingdom of Whatever" have a right (and need) to shop. But modern consumerism must also be seen as a failure; among other things, it is killing the planet. This is how the Reformation unintentionally secularized the West and created a society that would have horrified the Protestant reformers themselves.

Another contributing factor to modern secularization must be mentioned, for it plays a crucial role in Gregory's book, almost as important as *sola scriptura* and its aftermath. It's the notion of metaphysical univocity. This is a rather obscure metaphysical presupposition held by some late medieval thinkers. (Gregory's analysis here is heavily dependent on Amos Funkenstein.) Metaphysical univocity refers to the idea that God shares at least one important characteristic or quality with the rest of the universe: being itself.

God is the highest being, to be sure, but God may still be located on the spectrum of being. God is therefore "mappable" in the same way that everything else in the universe is mappable. In short, God and the rest of creation can be talked about in the same way—God and creation occupy the same space, as it were. Gregory traces metaphysical univocity back to John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and argues that it was adopted by a number of late medieval intellectuals, assumed by Protestant reformers and clearly advocated by God-denying Enlightenment philosophers.

When the Enlightenment philosophers worked with metaphysical univocity, they concluded that because reason and science could explain more and more of the universe, God was a superfluous and therefore unnecessary hypothesis. When coupled with the decentering and splintering effects of *sola scriptura*, Gregory maintains, metaphysical univocity has shaped the intensely secular nature of our public universities. He thinks that the modern conflict between science and religion could have been avoided if Scotus and others had held to the traditional understanding of God as radically distinct from creation yet capable of being present within the created order. He also thinks that the modern secular university should unsecularize itself if it truly aims to be diverse: it should welcome religious points of view wherever they are expressed cogently, for the university no longer has any

rational grounds for excluding them.

To my knowledge, no critic of *The Unintended Reformation* has sought to refute Gregory's central argument about the fissiparous and therefore disastrous nature of *sola scriptura*—a fact that is quite significant. One can, however, find a more sympathetic treatment of the Protestant scripture-alone principle in Alister McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (which appeared before Gregory's book). McGrath concedes that *sola scriptura* has caused much division, but he also insists that its adherents did (and do) agree on the bare essentials of salvation—it involves faith in Christ and divine grace. He also maintains that divinely inspired scripture always has more gospel truth to convey to each generation of its humble readers and hearers; as they turn to the Word, they experience through it God's willingness to take on their own cultural "flesh" in order to seek and to save the lost in every ethnic group. *Sola scriptura* may be a dangerous idea, but it is also an extremely generative, dynamic and necessary one, according to McGrath, who is hardly a Pollyanna. (Gregory does not engage with McGrath's book in *The Unintended Reformation*.)

Some critics who have accepted Gregory's treatment of *sola scriptura* have objected to his argument about its broader implications for Western society. Susan Schreiner of the University of Chicago, for example, views the divisions of the Reformation and the rival truth claims that caused them as signs of human finitude and of the fact that human reason can arrive only at truths, not Truth. Unless we are willing to resort to authority figures and structures (such as the Roman Catholic magisterium) to define and defend Truth—a step Schreiner would reject—we must be content with the partial truths that may be gleaned from scripture, living in openness and humility as modernity slowly gives way to the next chapter of human existence.

Critics have raised other issues. John Hare, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, has demonstrated rather convincingly that Scotus did not espouse metaphysical univocity, and he argues that the concept is a red herring that Gregory should drop. Ascribing being to God is simply a function of the limits of human thought and language—we cannot think and speak of God without implying that he participates in being or existence with us, even if we believe that he is radically distinct from creation. Hare also suggests that Gregory drop the entire project of trying to locate a specific point in the past that explains the present. Limited human knowers simply cannot do this.

Regarding Gregory's handling of Protestant theology, much recent research demonstrates that the forensic imputation of divine favor is only part of the Protestant understanding of salvation. Union with Christ is an equally essential part of this story, and it provides a basis for viewing growth in *caritas* as essential to Christian salvation, although not as a basis for it. There is no self into whom divine virtues can be poured, but there is a new person—the new Adam or Eve—who is vitally joined to Christ by faith and who grows daily by grace in Christlikeness. This understanding of Protestant spirituality is a far cry from Gregory's account of a Protestant rule-based ethic (though how this indwelling-Christ-based ethic has played out in history is admittedly another matter).

The Unintended Reformation is finally a book about truth and what has happened to it in Western societies. Throughout the book Gregory invokes the principle of noncontradiction— that is, the idea that one truth claim cannot contradict another truth claim; if it does, both claims cannot be true. Early Protestants believed in this principle but unwittingly violated it by positing multiple Christianities with multiple contradictory truth claims. The results were disastrous for the status of Truth.

As noted earlier, Gregory has been accused of yearning for a return to a golden age of medieval Christendom, a charge he has consistently sought to refute. He wonders why readers accuse him of nostalgia when he so clearly admits the failings of medieval Christianity and even concedes that some branch of Protestantism may actually be the truest version of Christianity—although he insists that Protestants could not actually know this with any confidence. But as James Nuechterlein has observed, the medieval failures that Gregory acknowledges are limited to the realm of morals and practice; they do not include fundamental principles of how truth is discerned. Whereas Gregory treats the failures of the Reformation era and the modern era as failures of both principle and praxis—the failures of *sola scriptura* and lack of *caritas*, the failures of *sola ratio* and consumerism—he sees medieval Christendom as failing only in praxis. Gregory never criticizes the fundamental theological or ethical principles and ideals that undergirded medieval Christendom. He also says very little about how these principles actually worked—how, for example, the Catholic magisterium arrived at Truth; he only says that it did.

Gregory could have avoided the charge of indulging in nostalgia or of writing a thinly veiled Catholic apologetic if he had acknowledged that the medieval church's approach to truth was also fraught with difficulties. He could have noted, for example, that medieval Christendom and Eastern Orthodoxy made mutually

exclusive and incompatible truth claims regarding such weighty issues as the authority of the pope and the legitimacy of the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed.

Eastern Orthodoxy does not play a major role in the story about the West that Gregory tells, and so he is not obliged to deal with it in depth, but the very existence of an ancient and historically significant version of Christianity that made (and makes) truth claims that contradict those of the Catholic West should surely temper and inform Gregory's depiction of truth in medieval Christendom. Schismatic Protestants with their schismatic *sola scriptura* principle separated from a medieval church that was itself in schism with the Christian East. If unity of theological truth is the ideal, then one must conclude that medieval Christendom failed long before Protestants were on the scene—and not just at the level of praxis.

Does this change the fact that Protestants helped in significant and unintended ways to secularize the West? No. But it does change rather significantly how one views the status and fate of truth in Catholic and Protestant Christianity, which is a major concern of Gregory's book.