

The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society

By Brad S. Gregory

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In a work that is as much about the present as the past, Brad Gregory identifies the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation and traces the way it shaped the modern condition over the course of the following five centuries. A hyperpluralism of religious and secular beliefs, an absence of any substantive common good, the triumph of capitalism and its driver, consumerism—all these, Gregory argues, were long-term effects of a movement that marked the end of more than a millennium during which Christianity provided a framework for shared intellectual, social, and moral life in the West.

Before the Protestant Reformation, Western Christianity was an institutionalized worldview laden with expectations of security for earthly societies and hopes of eternal salvation for individuals. The Reformation's protagonists sought to advance the realization of this vision, not disrupt it. But a complex web of rejections, retentions, and transformations of medieval Christianity gradually replaced the religious fabric that bound societies together in the West. Today, what we are left with are fragments: intellectual disagreements that splinter into ever finer fractals of specialized discourse; a notion that modern science—as the source of all truth—necessarily undermines religious belief; a pervasive resort to a therapeutic vision of religion; a set of smuggled moral values with which we try to fertilize a sterile liberalism; and the institutionalized assumption that only secular universities can pursue knowledge.

The Unintended Reformation asks what propelled the West into this trajectory of pluralism and polarization, and finds answers deep in our medieval Christian past.

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Editorial Review

Review
A strikingly brave and wide-ranging work, in which a distinguished historian of early modern Europe interprets the contemporary world. The precision and clarity with which Gregory lays out his evidence and the accuracy with which he handles materials in many different languages and of many different kinds give this original book extraordinary credibility. It's rare for a book to attain this level of scholarship nowadays. An astonishing achievement. (Anthony Grafton, author of *Worlds Made by Words*)

A work of deep moral seriousness. Gregory's greatest contribution is his portrayal of the Reformation of Christianity as a central moment of disturbance and creativity in the modern Western world. In this endeavor, he has no equal among living authors. *The Unintended Reformation* is simply the most intelligent treatment of the subject by a contemporary author. It is also the most unconventional and most stirring engagement I know with the problem of how the West has dealt with its heritage of plural religions and concepts of values and happiness. (Thomas A. Brady, Jr., author of *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650*)

Gregory's insightful and compelling narrative invites us to recognize the surprising extent to which we are still what the Protestant Reformation and its heirs made us, a society of conflicting and contested truth claims. As he spells out the consequences--and the interest is in the detail--we become more sharply aware of sometimes unrecognized aspects of our present condition. (Alasdair MacIntyre, author of *God, Philosophy, Universities*)

A revisionist manifesto, sharp-edged and provocative, *The Unintended Reformation* analyzes the legacy of the Protestant Reformation with an eye firmly fixed on the present. Gregory challenges many revered assumptions and does so with verve and brilliance. Bound to stir debate for years to come, this magisterial history of the early modern era belongs on the shelf right next to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. (Carlos Eire, author of *A Very Brief History of Eternity*)

The Protestant Reformation is considered by many to be one of the pivotal events in the history of the Western world. No one can doubt the central role that Luther, Calvin, and other reformers have played in the lives of Christians through the years...[Gregory] approaches the continuing impact of the Reformation in what he terms a "genealogical" approach--one that sees the Reformation as the root of a tree whose branches reach into every aspect of modern life. Rejecting the "supersessionist" view, that contemporary Christendom constitutes a radically new understanding of God and of the world itself, Gregory insists that our views, even our presuppositions, must be reimagined and re-evaluated in ways that demonstrate how the Reformation continues to reach into our theologies, our laws, our lives...[A] rewarding look at the long reach of history, and how we are the poorer for ignoring it. (*Publishers Weekly* 2011-11-14)

[An] extraordinary new book...But however brilliant is Gregory's historical presentation (and it is brilliant), what ultimately distinguishes The Unintended Reformation is the sheer forcefulness of the narrative, which he pursues by examining the shift in perspectives on six distinct but interrelated themes since the sixteenth century: God, truth, institution, ethics, consumption and knowledge. The effect of this approach is to give the book an uncommon clarity: by going over what is essentially the single narrative in six different ways, each slight turn of the story illuminates the whole, and each new element comes across as both surprising and yet

strangely familiar. The Unintended Reformation is unquestionably the most important contribution to the way we understand our present condition since Charles Taylor's A Secular Age. But it is also as a stinging rebuke to all those well-nigh fictitious accounts of the emergence of the enlightened West out of the intellectual darkness and decrepitude of the Middle Ages that now distort our collective self-perception. Let's hope Gregory's book wreaks havoc on some of these myths that we persist in telling ourselves. (Scott Stephens *Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Religion and Ethics blog* 2012-02-10)

There could not be a more propitious moment for a book on greed and the historical roots of capitalism. Brad Gregory shows that historians have as much to contribute to contemporary debates about business and social ethics as most philosophers or economists...What is bold and unusual about The Unintended Reformation is that it comes from an explicitly Christian perspective and ends by arguing that only religion--properly understood as a doctrine of solidarity--can allow humanity to escape from the predicament of the modern, the material curse of poverty and the mental afflictions of prosperity. Gregory not only offers what is today a highly original combination of history and morality but also cogently explains why that combination is needed today. (Harold James *Financial Times* 2012-02-11)

This book is truly breathtaking in its scope, erudition and sheer nerve. There is no faulting Gregory's grasp of Reformation history, but to his analysis of what has happened since there could be many objections raised. This is relatively unimportant, however. Max Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism was not completely right either, but it was brilliant nevertheless. Gregory's is a work not just of genuine scholarship but also of sincere moral purpose, which, even if it annoys, frustrates or fails to convince, has opened up an immensely important debate. There may yet be time to fix some of what went wrong in the Reformation. (Lucy Wooding *Times Higher Education* 2012-03-09)

Restrained and erudite...Apart from furnishing an interesting and well written account of the Reformation, the book is perhaps most interesting when [Gregory] grapples with his opponents...[A] thought-provoking book. (Nick Carn *Financial World* 2012-06-01)

A lucidly written and far-reaching analysis that shows how the contemporary Western world continues to be influenced by the complex transformations that occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries. (J. Werner *Choice* 2012-07-01)

Charts how the godly Reformation led inexorably to the secularization of western society. (Piers Paul Read *The Spectator* 2013-11-16)

About the Author
Brad S. Gregory is Dorothy G. Griffin Professor of Early Modern European History at the University of Notre Dame.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kelli Ross:

Spent a free the perfect time to be fun activity to try and do! A lot of people spent their free time with their family, or their very own friends. Usually they carrying out activity like watching television, gonna beach, or picnic within the park. They actually doing same task every week. Do you feel it? Do you wish to something different to fill your own free time/ holiday? Could possibly be reading a book is usually option to fill your totally free time/ holiday. The first thing you will ask may be what kinds of book that you should read. If you

want to test look for book, may be the book untitled The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society can be very good book to read. May be it could be best activity to you.

Deborah Young:

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