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Gregory's *Unintended Reformation*: Two Views

*Hyper about Pluralism:  
A Review Essay*

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**The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society**, by Brad S. Gregory. *Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 574 pp. \$39.95 cloth.*

Readers of Brad Gregory's book may after finishing it worry about the author's well-being. Almost anywhere a reader turns in this account of the long-term consequences of the Protestant Reformation, Gregory tallies up the endless failures that characterize the modern West. The consequence of these cultural upheavals is a hyper-pluralism that, among other things, turns morality into preference, marginalizes theology, and privatizes faith. So, for instance, the polarization of American society along the Blue State-Red State divide, or the challenge of global climate change, or the denial of truth claims by academics in realms of values and meaning—three matters that worry Gregory—"have been centuries in the making and are thus unlikely to go away anytime soon" (15). By the time readers come to the end of this metanarrative of declension, they will find no consolation. Although he wished for a "happier ending," Gregory concluded with a summary of failure: "The

*A bleak and unrelenting account of the West's failings.*

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intellectual foundations of modernity are failing because its governing metaphysical assumptions in combination with the findings of the natural sciences offer no warrant for believing its most basic moral, political, and legal claims" (381). Readers may wonder how Gregory goes about his daily routines after writing such a bleak and unrelenting account of the West's failings.

And yet, other aspects of the book reveal a highly functioning scholar. Here is an accomplished historian teaching not at one of the boutique Roman Catholic Great Books colleges where students sometimes graduate as monarchists but supervising graduate students at one of the United States' most selective Roman Catholic universities, an institution—in that matter that embodies much if not all of the diversity—in programs, faculty, and students—that Gregory laments. He is also the author of important monographs that have won awards not from nuns teaching history in parochial schools but from professional academic organizations that accommodate the fluctuating intellectual standards that Gregory bemoans. Furthermore, the publisher of the book is not one of the many pious presses that churn out inspiration and guidance for the faithful but one of the elite Ivy League university presses whose list reflects the very sort of intellectual relativism that is a consequence, as Gregory argues, of the sixteenth-century upheaval of religious life led by Martin Luther.

These mixed signals raise a basic question in assessing the book: does Gregory intend this book as a Jeremiad to expose the failings of a secular, liberal civilization that has lost its way because it abandoned the true faith taught and preserved by the Roman Catholic Church? Or is this a serious work of historical scholarship that simply connects the dots between early modern Europe and the post-modern West? In short, is this a book from which to learn the fatal lessons of departing from the faith once delivered or is it a work from which to understand carefully the continuities and discontinuities between the medieval and modern worlds that most people, academics included, blithely disregard on the basis of privileging the Enlightenment and accompanying political revolutions of the eighteenth century?

Gregory's answer when pushed has been to insist that

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this is first and foremost a work of historical investigation. Furthermore, he wants to show that historians too often operate in balkanized spheres of research and do not see larger connections. Whether historians, as opposed to theologians or moral philosophers, propose sweeping accounts of cultural and civilizational decline is another matter.

Gregory sings his song of lament in six stanzas which cover (in sequence) natural science's supplanting theology, the Reformation's introduction of doctrinal diversity, the rise of the confessional state and the political control of religion, the consequences of moral relativism, the appeal of profit motives and consumer choice in economic relations, and the obliteration of religious claims within the halls of the research university. Each of these episodes does not conform to a master narrative but in Gregory's telling each chapter follows a similar pattern—namely, Gregory's description of the Christian ideal in contrast to the contemporary West's disorder, followed by an account of late medieval and early modern intellectual developments, and then a relatively brief excursus through recent intellectual or institutional examples of the Reformation's unintended consequences.

*A song of  
lament in  
six stanzas.*

For instance, in the chapter on ethics, Gregory begins by invoking Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the decline of virtue. "[E]thical disagreements are pervasive, and there are no shared means to resolve them rationally," Gregory writes (180). The cause is the abandonment of Aristotelean virtue ethics, a departure that triumphed during the Enlightenment but that started with the Reformation. Instead of following the Greeks in an understanding of the good life that was both personal and social, the modern West has abandoned a shared sense of the common good in favor of empowering "individuals who desire heterogeneous goods and who affirm incompatible values to coexist in peaceful stability" (184). Never mind that Gregory ignores Christian debates on the compatibility of pagan and Christian understandings of the good life—how, for instance, the Christian virtues are merely add-ons to the pagan ones. He does concede that the Greeks and Romans may have overestimated human nature and that Christianity corrected pagan notions with teaching about sin, grace, and faith. Even so, the appropriation of Aristotle by medieval scholastics

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does not trouble Gregory since a Thomistic synthesis implicitly informs his assumption about medieval Christendom's shared way of life. "Whether late medieval Christians sought to imitate Christ directly or took their cue from the saints . . .," Gregory writes, "the end was the same: to live as part of the body of Christ extended in space and time. . ." (194-95).

Political theorists like Machiavelli and Protestants like Luther and Calvin challenged the high estimate of human nature involved in the medieval synthesis, and Gregory gives short shrift to excavating those differences. Indeed, the pattern for most of the book is to show that, once Protestant dissent disrupts Christendom's unity, the social implications of intellectual disagreement become much more significant than the ethical teachings themselves. Gregory writes, "much more directly consequential for the displacement of a substantive ethics of the good by a formal ethics of rights . . . were the persistent disagreements *between* magisterial Protestants and Catholics, and especially the recurrent recourse to wars by rulers from different Christian moral communities" (211). From the early modern era's religious wars, the road is all downhill—Anabaptists, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Milton—figures who failed "to promote a moral community and a substantive common good" (216). The culmination of these trends is the liberal political order which attempts to provide a secular foundation for ethics "independent of inherited Christian or other religious beliefs" (219). Today the West's only recourse to prevail against utopian schemes, for example, that offer a "biogenetically engineered" post-human species, is a set of ethical imperatives that look at best arbitrary (231). Of course, the long-term consequences of Machiavelli and Luther may be eugenics or designer-babies. The same could also be said of the exploration of space and man walking on the moon. At which point Gregory's historical judgments come across as exceedingly broad not to mention polemical. Whether or not historians' failure to tackle large-scale developments is a sign of intellectual cowardice or academic specialization run amuck, Gregory's argument sounds much more like a talk before an audience of religious activists than it does an address before a body of professional historians.

To say that each chapter follows a similar pattern would be

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an injustice to Gregory's sometimes breathtaking attempt to account for many of the features that we take for granted in the modern West. Still, each chapter exhibits sufficient similarities for readers not inclined to accept Gregory's view of civilizational decline to wonder again if the author is more an apologist than an historian. For instance, the chapter on God and science begins with late medieval theology and concludes with Edward O. Wilson. So too the chapter on theology begins with the theological consensus of early sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism and ends with Descartes, Hume, and Kant. The chapter on politics also commences with a description of the reciprocity between crown and altar throughout late fifteenth-century Europe and does not let readers off its wild ride until World War I and the subsequent rise of fascism and communism in the West. Likewise, the chapter on economics starts with the methods by which twelfth-century Europeans exchanged goods and follows the trail of increasing acquisitiveness down to the Walmart-style capitalism and its accompanying coarseness. Finally, the chapter on higher education starts with the monastic origins of European universities (e.g., Bologna and Paris) and concludes with John Henry Newman and the road not taken by countless Protestant, Roman Catholic, and state universities.

Each time Gregory insists that the Protestant Reformation is not alone responsible for these developments but that—because the reformers challenged church authority and introduced rival doctrinal teachings and patterns of devotion, not to mention prompting Europe's ruling class to take sides in the religious pluralism that Protestantism secured—the Reformation was the most influential factor in unleashing modernity's hyper-pluralism. For instance, in his chapter on science and the exclusion of God from metaphysics, Gregory shows that John Duns Scotus, a thirteenth-century scholastic, and William of Occam, a contemporary of Scotus, had already broken with the "traditional" understanding of God and started to relegate him to a status comparable to creation itself. Even so, Gregory writes that "the Reformation ended more than a thousand years of Christianity as a framework for shared intellectual life in the Latin West" (45). So too in his chapter on the university, Gregory provides reasons for thinking that Renaissance

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humanists, by questioning scholasticism's grip on intellectual expression, were the first to disrupt the medieval academics' commitment to seeing knowledge whole. Gregory refuses to attribute pluralism to the Renaissance. The Reformation stands out instead: it "eliminated any shared framework for the integration of knowledge . . ." and "repudiated the authority of the Roman church and much of Christian experiential knowledge" (326, 327).

One feature in each chapter that strongly suggests Gregory is engaged in historically informed religious polemic is his willingness to identify Christian norms. For instance, in his chapter on science Gregory writes that "God is not a highest, noblest, or most powerful entity within the universe," but instead "radically distinct from the universe as a whole" (30). Christians from communions outside Rome's would not take issue with that proposition, though whether historians would make such assertions is another matter. Yet, when Gregory comes to the chapter on church and state, he defines Christianity as "a shared way of life, not simply as an ideal but in practice, inescapably social because of Jesus's central command. 'Love one another as I have loved you'" (149). Or in the chapter on the secularization of knowledge, Gregory exhorts:

According to the Gospels, Jesus had not established an educational program of formal schooling—he called followers and commanded them to live a certain way. Hence medieval Christianity was resolutely anti-Gnostic. Knowledge of God's saving truth was not complicated or esoteric; yet it was difficult to *live* and therefore hard to come to know well. The better that one lived it—the holier one was—the clearer did its truth become a *sapientia* beyond mere *scientia* (308).

Historians of Christianity generally are not immune to descriptions of Christian faith that summarize doctrinal norms as historical subjects understood them. But historians, even believing ones, generally avoid articulating their own ideas about Christian truth. Still, in these three examples from the book, Gregory either cites a contemporary work on Roman Catholic fundamental theology (the first) or relies on his own convictions (the second and third). To be sure, one of the book's points is that historical scholarship has allowed secular patterns of knowledge to exclude theological claims. As valuable as that point may be, readers may be confused if unsure

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whether a statement of Christian truth is not properly attributed (to either historical subjects or the historian).

That Gregory does not keep these layers of Christian understanding straight suggests confusion on his own part, namely, not distinguishing between his own convictions and those of medieval Christians. And if Gregory does not carefully separate his own beliefs from those of his subjects, is it not possible for readers to think that his historical judgments—his verdict on the Reformation—also confuses belief with academic method? To be sure, the effort to keep history and theology in separate spheres can seem arbitrary and artificial. But without it, history can become ideological, something in which the historian imposes his own convictions on the past. Gregory explicitly tries to avoid this. In his introduction he repeats that his purpose is merely to execute a project of historical excavation that shows the long-term effects of sixteenth-century Europe. Lacking in his self-understanding is an awareness that this project bears remarkable similarity to that of Roman Catholic apologists or conservative social critics who tie the woes of the modern world to the pluralism that Protestants introduced. Gregory's argument may be permissible for the likes of the conservative intellectual Richard Weaver, who blamed the worst features of mid-twentieth-century America on William of Occam and nominalism. But that is not a responsible historical judgment, which may explain why the Library of Congress classified Gregory's book with other works on rationalism and religion (BL), not with the history of Christianity (BR) or the history of Europe (D).

The selectivity of Gregory's account is all the more apparent in his conclusion, which has to be one of the most depressing historical narratives recently published by the good people at Harvard University Press: “. . . medieval Christendom failed, the Reformation failed, confessionalized Europe failed, and Western modernity failed. . . . This sums up the argument of the book” (364). Although Gregory tries to spread the blame, he singles out the Reformation as “the most important distant historical source for contemporary Western hyperpluralism with respect to truth claims about meaning, morality, values, priorities, and purpose” (369). That Gregory cannot ask as Tertullian would have of the book's appropriation of

*Effects of original sin on medieval Christians insufficiently recognized.*

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Greek ethics and Christian soteriology, “what has Aristotle to do with Paul,” is an indication of the author’s own sleight of mind, an intellectual ruse that imagines a world free from Christian accounts of sinfulness where people really do love each other and share a common way of life. In point of fact, Gregory may not be sufficiently theological in his assessment of medieval Christendom because he fails to notice the effects of original sin on his medieval subjects. Gregory remarks that medieval Roman Catholicism’s failure was not a result of the “falsity of central doctrinal truth claims” or “the wide diversity of ways in which the faith was expressed from Scandinavia and Scotland to Sicily and Spain” (365). Some forms of pluralism turn out to be okay, especially when the Bishop of Rome has a large say in European affairs. Instead, what compromised medieval Christendom was the “pervasive, long-standing, and undeniable failure of so many Christians, including members of the clergy both high and low, to live by the church’s own prescriptions and exhortations based on its truth claims” (366). What Gregory fails to recognize in that assessment is that the teachings of Christ, Peter, and Paul could never become the norm for a shared way of life because people are sinners, prone to disagree, habituated to selfishness. He wants credit for recognizing medieval Christendom’s warts but ignores them when contrasting the medieval and modern worlds.

*A highly idealized portrait of medieval unity.*

In fact, if Gregory had accepted that diversity is par for human existence after Eden (as most historians and Augustinians do), that differences and pluralism are everywhere apparent even in the history of salvation, from the division of Judah and Israel to Paul’s challenging Peter about refusing to eat with Gentiles, he might not sound as alarmed as he does about the pluralism that so alarms him about modernity. He might even have broached the subject of why so many Roman Catholics who supposedly shared a common outlook wound up defying received authority and tradition and setting out on a different phase of life together in Western Europe. After all, the rise of Protestantism and its magisterial patrons was not the result of a foreign invasion of people without experience in the ways of medieval Christendom. Protestant reformers grew up with the patterns that Gregory argues characterized Christian Europe as much as all the recruits for the newly formed Society of Jesus.

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In which case, perhaps all the unity that Gregory attributes to the medieval world is a highly idealized portrait produced by a religious apologist who is nostalgic for simpler times. Whatever the explanation, Gregory's narrative is not the only way to tell the story of the modern West.