H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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

Reviewed by Kathleen Crowther
Published on H-HRE (September, 2012)
Commissioned by Amy R. Caldwell

In *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad S. Gregory sets out to show how the modern world began in the Reformation. He criticizes the current overspecialization of the discipline of history both because it prevents historians of the Reformation from attending to the ramifications of sixteenth-century events and decisions in the present day and because it prevents modern historians from taking the distant past seriously. We cannot, he argues, understand the current state of the Western world, including the pressing problems of our highly polarized political culture, rampant consumerism and the attendant global warming, and human rights violations without understanding their origins in the Reformation. *The Unintended Reformation* is highly erudite and covers an enormous amount of ground. It is also pugnacious and provocative; Gregory pulls no punches. I suspect that many readers, like myself, will find themselves in strong agreement with some parts of the book and equally strong disagreement with others. This, I think, is a major strength of the book. The five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation will be in 2017, and it is high time for historians to debate and discuss the long-term consequences of this watershed event.

Gregory's major and most successful argument is that the "hyperpluralism" of modern Western societies, as well as our increasingly polarized political cultures, is the direct result of Reformation-era controversies over doctrines and morals. Sixteenth-century Protestants broke with centuries of tradition when they insisted that "scripture alone" should be the basis of Christian doctrine. They soon discovered, to their chagrin, that different people could derive different doctrines from the same scriptures. As Gregory puts it, "Protestant appeals to scripture alone produced an unwelcome pluralism of competing Christian truth claims" (p. 100). Appeals to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and later to reason similarly failed to produce a single, agreed upon reading of scripture or set of rules for living. In the end, the only way Protestant groups (and Catholics) were able to command assent to their particular readings of scripture was to back them up with political force; the "magisterial" reformers and Catholics managed to do this while the "radical" reformers did not. This led to "the coercive, prosecutory, and violent actions of early modern confessional regimes" (p. 160). Where *caritas* had once reigned as the central virtue in European Christianity, it was replaced in the early modern period by "obedience" to both divine and secular authorities. By the eighteenth century, Europeans were weary of violence and war in the name of religion. The solution they adopted, which remains in place today, was a policy of religious toleration, a policy enshrined in laws and enforced by state power. The new doctrine of religious toleration asserted that religious beliefs and practices were a private matter. Everyone was free to believe or not believe what they liked, but not to impose these beliefs or practices on others. We now live in what Gregory sarcastically calls "the Kingdom of Whatever" (p. 112). Hence was born the modern liberal state in which an ethics of rights replaced an ethics of the good. But Gregory contends that the "solution" of religious toleration only worked when the majority of Americans and Europeans actually still shared a core set of Christian religious beliefs and moral principles. As America in particular has become increasingly pluralistic in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, sharply divergent notions of what is "good" or "moral" for both the individual and the society of which he or she is a part have led to an extremely polarized political culture where basic civility, let alone compromise and consensus, seems increasingly impossible to attain. Gregory's account of the ways in which modern pluralistic societies developed out of Reformation battles over truth and morality is insightful and compelling. However, one may accept Gregory's historical argument without entirely agreeing with his judgment that the Reformation was "an unintended disaster that has fundamentally shaped the subsequent course of Western history" (p.160). Some of us find the Kingdom of Whatever a more congenial place to live than does Gre-

gory.

In the first chapter, Gregory attacks the widespread modern perception that science and religion are incompatible. He begins the chapter with a discussion of Max Weber's claim: "To be a modern, educated person [is] necessarily to be without religious belief, because science reveals a natural world without God" (p. 26). Not only do highly educated literate atheists or agnostics hold this view, but so do young earth creationists and proponents of intelligent design who claim that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution contradicts the Bible and is incompatible with Christian faith. Both of these groups, according to Gregory, share a fundamental misunderstanding of the "traditional" view of God. In the traditional view, which Gregory links to such influential theologians as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, "God is not a highest, noblest, or most powerful entity within the universe." The Christian God is transcendent, "radically distinct from the universe as a whole, which he … created entirely ex nihilo" (p. 30). "It is self-evident," Gregory concludes, "that a God who by definition is radically distinct from the natural world could never be shown to be unreal via empirical inquiry that by definition can only investigate the natural world" (p. 32). This view of the relationship between God and his creation was challenged in subtle but significant ways by John Duns Scotus (ca. 1266 to ca. 1308) and William of Occam (ca. 1285 to ca. 1348). Instead of a radically transcendent God, these two influential thinkers posited a God who was "some *thing*, some discrete, real entity," or the "highest being among other beings." Following Scotus and Occam, there was a gradual but inexorable trend toward "the domestication of God's transcendence and the extension of his presence from the natural world" (p. 38). This part of Gregory's argument is compelling, and if he wanted establish the historical importance of medieval scholastics, I would be persuaded. However, he argues that the crucial turning point in the development of the modern view of the relationship between science and religion is the Reformation. He moves onto very shaky ground when he states that the current dominance of the "nontraditional" univocal nominalist view of God is a result of the religious upheavals of the Reformation. As he acknowledges, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and most other Reformers subscribed to the traditional Christian view of a transcendent God. It is also the case that nearly all natural philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did so as well. And it is demonstrably false that the Reformation "had the unintended effect of sidelining explicitly Christian claims about God in relationship to the natural world" (p. 40). Prominent and highly influential naturalists, both Catholic and Protestant, did indeed make direct claims about God and his creation in both their published and unpublished works. These naturalists included Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Paracelsus, Isaac Newton, Robert Hooke, and Robert Boyle, as well as many other less well-known figures. Debates about the compatibility of heliocentrism and scripture cut across confessional divides. There were numerous examples of cross-confessional communication and collaboration in the study of the natural world, perhaps most famously the organization of the publication of the Catholic canon Nicholas Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* (1543) by the Lutherans Georg Rheticus and Andreas Osiander. In the end, Gregory does not make a persuasive case that the roots of contemporary attitudes toward science and religion lie in the Reformation.

Gregory's statements about science throughout the book might best be described as ambivalent. While he lauds the "explanatory successes of the natural sciences" and admits that medicine and technology have improved the lives of millions, he holds "secularization and scientism" responsible for "subverting modernity's most fundamental assumptions from within" (p. 376). Specifically, he argues that the concept of "human rights" on which modern liberal democratic states are based, is inseparable from the Christian concept of the soul. Only if human beings were created by God and endowed with souls could we possibly have "rights." Otherwise we are just another species scrabbling for survival on a medium-sized planet in an indifferent universe. Science teaches us, according to Gregory, that "human beings are no different in principle from any other living organism," and even that "no living or nonliving system of matter-energy is ultimately different from any other." Gregory insists: "Those who think one can both defend an objective basis for rights and reject a belief in the reality of the soul or its equivalent should think harder" (p. 225). Well, I thought hard about this and I still do not agree. First, neither evolutionary biologists nor particle physicists assert that human beings are indistinguishable from earthworms and stars. Science–or "metaphysical naturalism"–has done nothing to undermine the belief that human beings have the highest cognitive faculties and most complex social organization of any other animal on the planet. It is not necessary to believe in either a creator God or a divinely endowed soul to desire the greatest flourishing of the greatest number of people. And as a sociological fact, many people who do not believe in God or the soul do desire human flourishing. Second, the proposition that human beings have souls has not historically been associated with the idea that all human beings were

in any sense equal or that we have some basic set of rights. Belief in the soul was shared by ancient philosophers, like Aristotle and Plato, as well as by medieval and early modern Christians. But neither the ancient pagans nor their Christian successors saw any inherent incompatibility between the accepted wisdom that all human beings possess souls and the gross discrepancies in wealth and power, the enslavement of certain groups of people, and the social and legal inferiority of women. Gregory himself points to "traditional Christianity's self-justificatory naturalization of socioeconomic hierarchy" (p. 255). In sum, belief in the human soul is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the development of human rights, and there is no compelling reason for believing that scientific naturalism is undermining human rights.

Gregory notes that his "genealogical" analysis could be extended into other areas of modern life, including "sex, marriage, and families" (p. 365). But I found this omission puzzling and disappointing, in part because "family values" are such a major area of controversy in modern American political culture, and in part because attention to gender and sexuality would certainly have enriched and complicated his discussion of human rights. The lack of explicit discussion of these issues is all the more troubling because throughout the book Gregory makes offhand comments about "traditional" marriages and families, and it is frequently unclear what he means by this. For example, Gregory decries the "de facto reliance on emotivist, individual preference to determine the good as such and a seemingly inexorable trend toward increasing permissiveness necessarily coupled with ever more insistent calls for toleration." He then adds in parentheses: "Consider the transformation of traditional sexual morality and its consequences over the past half century" (p. 187). It is completely unclear what transformation and what consequences Gregory has in mind as he does not offer any elaboration. He could mean that in the past half century, pre- and extramarital sex have become more widely accepted, as have births outside of marriage. He could mean that since the 1960s, birth control, abortion, and homosexuality have all been legalized. He could mean that the divorce rate has risen or that gay marriage is now possible. Or he could mean that societal awareness of the high incidence of rape and child molestation has grown and that these are more likely to be perceived as crimes and prosecuted as such than they were in the past (although the recent scandals in the Catholic Church and at Pennsylvania State University demonstrate that this transformation is far from complete). All of these changes and more have occurred in the past half century, and their causes and consequences deserve more than a parenthetical aside. And Gregory would do well to remember that in the "traditional" Christian families that he claims were "socially and politically efficacious," husbands had the legal right to beat their wives and children for real or perceived infractions (p. 176).

Gregory's conclusions are grim: "Judged on their own terms and with respect to the objectives of their own leading protagonists, medieval Christendom failed, the Reformation failed, confessionalized Europe failed, and Western modernity is failing" (p. 365). But the solution–or partial solution–that he offers is little short of absurd. We should, he claims, "unsecularize" academia. In other words, religious truth claims should be discussed and debated in research universities. He seems to have in mind here not the teaching of comparative religion, in which all religious truth claims are held to be relative, but actual theological debate about God and the created world and the human soul. But having shown in painstaking detail what happened when people argued about religious truths in the sixteenth century, how can Gregory believe that twenty-first-century people could arrive at solutions for contemporary problems by reenacting those same debates?

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Kathleen Crowther. Review of Gregory, Brad S., *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society.* H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35103

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.