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Gregory's *Unintended Reformation*: Two Views

*Faith over Love a Formula  
for Social Atomism*

Christopher Manion

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

"A critical attitude and close assessment of evidence are necessary prerequisites for doing history," Reformation historian David Gregory writes. And if history is the study of documents, Gregory is a master historian.

Gregory describes certain assumptions regarding method that are essential to the proper study of Reformation history. He lays these out in his earlier work, *Salvation at Stake*.<sup>1</sup> There, he observes that historians of the period often "slight doctrine and spirituality," and thus "miss the character of early Christianity." Moreover, many of them also bring to their work a reductionist approach "based on their own, usually implicit, modern or postmodern beliefs."

He has written *The Unintended Reformation* to examine just where that reductionist approach originated. One doesn't have

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<sup>1</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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to believe in the transcendent to appreciate its importance to those who do. Gregory thinks his generation of scholars has failed at that task, and that is a problem. “What people believed in the past is logically distinct from our own opinions about them. Understanding others on their terms is a completely different intellectual endeavor than explaining them in modern or postmodern categories,” he explains.

A problem hampering Reformation studies today, Gregory argues, is that nonbelievers often can't take Reformation believers seriously. Secular scholars routinely don blinders (often unawares), a fundamental flaw which inhibits not only their work but the entire academic field to which they belong. This criticism is central, because Gregory identifies that flaw as the result, however unintended, of the events and ideas which he chronicles in this massive study. In fact, it is quite likely that his uneasiness with the work of his contemporary colleagues in the field was a major inspiration contributing to his embarking on the writing of *The Unintended Reformation*.

*Reformation studies hampered by inability of secular scholars to take believers seriously.*

“This book is intended for anyone who wants to understand how Europe and North America today came to be as they are,” he writes—and that undoubtedly includes how Reformation studies, and the study of history in general, have arrived at their current sad state. The American Historical Association reports that the number of college history majors has fallen by fifty percent since the 1960s, a historical fact that historians cannot blithely ignore.

## II

Gregory takes facts seriously. He is intensely thoughtful, pulling together material from sources that number in the thousands and mulling them over, one at a time. The accumulation of detail and nuance in *The Unintended Reformation* is indeed impressive, and Gregory's constantly moving finger demonstrates the truth of his book's epigraph, in which Jacques Maritain cautions that it is hard indeed to tell exactly which tributary the water in your river came from.

Delving deeply into numerous texts, Gregory seeks the seeds of what he calls the “most salient sociological fact pertaining to the Life Questions in the early twenty-first century,” i.e., “the overwhelming pluralism of proffered religious and

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secular answers to them” (74). While he traces that problem through several historical tributaries, it is obvious that a strong motivation for his study is also his target: contemporary life in research universities that are packed with those who “reject any substantive religious answers to the Life Questions” (76).

*Gregory somewhat indebted to academic community of which he is critical.*

This is not to attenuate the importance of contemporary scholarship. After all, even clueless hedonists can discover documents from the distant past, gather them, archive them, catalogue them, and present them in accessible form to their academic peers for inspection and analysis. Gregory relies on many such resources—indeed, he could not have written this expansive work without them. He is somewhat indebted to the academic community of which he is critical. Indeed, he never ceases to be a part of it, which the reader must bear in mind when reading the last chapter recounting the growth of universities.

Gregory begins with a philosophical note on the slow but steady departure from classical philosophy in the late medieval period. Focusing briefly on Duns Scotus and Occam, he follows the thread of thought that made God the increasingly approachable object of natural inquiry, removing Him from the radically “other” that is the realm of theology.

This erosion of the connection between *esse* and *ens* was a critical factor in bringing on the Reformation; indeed, Etienne Gilson “dates the end of the Middle Ages to that point when there is despair of reconciling in any way reason and revelation.”<sup>2</sup> Here Gregory finds the seed of the desire to reduce God to a subject of natural philosophy, thus rendering being itself “univocal” because “it is predicated in conceptually equivalent terms of everything that exists, including God.”

Once identified, Gregory deals with this philosophical insight only briefly. After all, he is a historian, not a theorist, but he offers ample new material for those interested in developing his themes theoretically.

Gregory concentrates on individual historical figures and their sometimes slight but nonetheless significant contributions, as he recounts the slow erosion of the unity of Christian faith in the tumult that followed the diverse truth claims that

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<sup>2</sup> See James V. Schall, *The Mind That Is Catholic* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 175.

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arose during the Reformation. The key to the Reformation, he maintains, was the rejection of the authority of the Church and her teachings. Early on, he argues, “their repudiation was not based primarily on the church’s rampant abuses, the sinfulness of many of its members, or entrenched obstacles to reform. All of these had been obvious to conscientious clerical reformers and other open eyed Christians for well over a century. The Reformation’s upshot was rather that Roman Catholicism, even at its best, was a perverted form of Christianity even if all its members had been self-consciously following all the Roman church’s teachings” (86).

Even if Catholics, clerical and lay, had been living lives in virtually perfect harmony with Catholic teaching, would the Reformation still have happened? Apparently, reformers rejected the church’s teaching on its own merits—or *demerits*.

This finding remains in the background as he moves forward through the years, because no other age finds Catholics living in virtually perfect harmony with Catholic teaching either. In fact, towards the end of the book, Gregory seems to argue that virtuous lives must be the foundation of a Christian response to the “failure” of the West today.

*Reformers rejected the church’s teaching on its own merits—or demerits.*

But to respond, we must first understand. That is Gregory’s goal. To address the point in question, he uses a sermon of Saint Giles of Viterbo, the Superior General of the Augustinian Order, at the opening of the Fifth Lateran Council in 1512. There Giles observed “that the root problem in the church was not what it taught but how appallingly so many Christians lived. In Giles’s dictum, ‘human beings must be changed by the dictates of religion, not religion by human beings’” (144).

Religious truths can’t be “changed,” and they are the most important truth claims for Gregory. When religious truth claims came into dispute—when Luther introduced the notion of *Sola Scriptura*, each individual Christian allowing his understanding of Scripture to be guided by the Holy Spirit, the Reformation planted a seed that could not be uprooted. As a consequence, rival truth claims and novel interpretations of Scripture proliferated quickly, leading gradually—and, yes, unintentionally—to the hyperpluralism of the twenty-first century.

With these carefully annotated findings drawn from pro-

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digious research, Gregory proceeds to review their impact on the relationship of church and state, ethics, economic life, and universities in the centuries since. He studies the effects of the Reformation's invitation to hyperpluralism in each of these realms. His work is best considered as a whole, he writes, and his thesis does indeed emerge more cogent and persuasive once the reader has absorbed the entire book.

A "truth vacuum" emerged to be filled by an increasingly powerful state.

That thesis is clear: first theology and then reason were unloosed from their traditional moorings in reality, leaving what we might call a "truth vacuum" to be filled by an increasingly powerful state (shorn of the heavy hand of a powerful, unified Church) that was free to impose its own laws to curb the moral chaos.

Here, one irony fueled the fire of secular power: those who rejected reason and taught *sola scriptura* found that they were stuck with reason and that they had constantly to use it in defending their interpretation of Scripture from rival interpretations. Not only did this lead to an infinitely open-ended number of truth claims but to the current situation in which there is simply no way to determine which claim is true. Very quickly all truth became subjective—subject to individual "conscience"—informed not by the church and her teachings, but by the individual's own private perception of the good.

The desire to flee the resulting collapse—for that is what it was—led to Weber's "value-free science" and the development of an ersatz belief system, a roughly hewn and often autocratic civil religion that offered a secular myth that might resuscitate the notions of the common good and tradition. (Here Gregory invokes Tocqueville in his brief discussion of the United States, but passes over how *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* actually reflects his thesis in the context of eighteenth-century France.)

Slowly but surely, these developments led to the independence of physical science, which in turn led to the independence of universities from religious truth as well as the decoupling of political institutions and nations from the religious truth that had once inspired them. Gregory devotes a chapter to the parallel development of economics as an independent field, as free from moral rules as science. Curiously, today what Gregory describes as secular "acquisitiveness" has found

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its way back into religion via the Prosperity Gospel: "God wants you to be rich," Evangelicals tell the poor as they course the world in their private jets. He admits that he could have given a more "comprehensive" account, but he has certainly addressed sufficient material to make his point.

In his chapter on "Secularizing Knowledge," Gregory renders a fascinating account of the course of higher education from medieval days to the present. His lucid account of the role of universities during the Reformation and its impact on their growth in later centuries is riveting. He follows the thread that leads to the unique (and plainly destructive) role that universities play in the life of the West today.

This compelling chapter deserves to be carefully read, but, in a word, it is fair to say that it depicts today's university life as a microcosm of the "overwhelming pluralism" that plagues the Western world. One might rephrase Giles to describe Gregory's view of the contemporary academy: "scholars must be changed by the pursuit of truth, not truth by secular charlatans posing as scholars."

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### III

Thus far the consequences. But the reader is invited to ask whether they were really "unintended."

Gregory evidently thinks so: "The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century sought to address serious problems besetting late medieval Christendom. They would doubtless be shocked if they could see where their insistence on Scripture alone has unintentionally led, to a situation so radically at odds with their deepest hopes for the renewal of Christian faith and life. Yet unwanted disagreements about the Bible's meaning coupled with the enthronement of theology in the confessionalized universities of early modern Europe set the stage for the secularization of knowledge" (364).

Catholics know that we cannot pick and choose among the truths of the Faith, setting aside the unpopular parts. Gregory's account seeks to demonstrate what happens when that selective process is writ large over the course of history.

But what about intentions? One wonders: is our own time unique in that "reformers" intentionally propel society towards chaos? Did not Marx's total critique in his Eleventh

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Thesis on Feuerbach's call for fundamentally changing the world constitute a rebellion against reality in the nineteenth century? And what about Rousseau and the Jacobins in the eighteenth? One wonders, when in history did men of action [not?] recognize, however inchoately, the cause-and-effect that Gregory describes, and then decide to employ its power to satisfy their ambitions?

#### IV

We noted above Gregory's stated view that "the key to the Reformation was the rejection of the authority of the Church and her teachings. That rejection was not based on . . . the church's rampant abuses, the sinfulness of many of its members, or entrenched obstacles to reform."

In his conclusion, however, Gregory seems to have changed his mind about the relative importance of the Reformation's causes. "The failure of medieval Christendom was not a function of the demonstrated or demonstrable falsity of central doctrinal truth claims of the Christian faith as promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church," he writes. "The failure of medieval Christendom derived rather from 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 about the Life Questions" (366).

"Sins were everywhere," Gregory continues. "In one way or another, this is precisely what exercised so many committed reformers within the church from the eleventh into the early sixteenth century." Let us leave aside the notion of "demonstrated or demonstrable falsity" of the church's various "doctrinal truth claims." Such claims are by their very nature beyond rational "demonstration." That's why we call them "revealed truths." Perhaps we might suggest that, while "sin was everywhere" before the Reformation, it was, and is, "everywhere" during and after the Reformation as well, and will be until the end of time. Simply put, Salvation History is the history of sin and God's redemption of sinful man.

Gregory relies more than once on the principle of non-contradiction. In that spirit, we might conclude that Gregory's two views on the causes of the Reformation are not so much in

*Gregory of two minds about the relative importance of Reformation's causes.*

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contradiction as they are in tension—a tension which prevails into our own era and, as Augustine suggests in the *City of God*, this tension will abide until the Second Coming.

Eric Voegelin observes that history is replete with efforts to overcome the “existential tension” of sinful man plodding through his works and days, tempted by the notion that “new knowledge” conferred on a certain person or group might solve the riddle and allow man to escape from the dull and ordinary and sinful course of mundane history. Such a notion can powerfully tempt both the intellect and the will.

Gregory hints at one of the results of this temptation when, of all things, he mentions Woodrow Wilson’s messianic “interventionism” in the “world’s service” as he led the United States’ entry into World War One to “Make the World Safe For Democracy.” One recalls the words of Clemenceau regarding his partners at Versailles, Wilson and Lloyd George. Asked how the conference had gone for him, he replied, “Not badly, considering I was seated between Jesus Christ and Napoleon.”

Voegelin observes a constant gnostic temptation to “immanentize the eschaton,” to bring into world history the perfection that Christianity promises only beyond history—when that existential tension of life (Plato calls it the *metaxy*, the “in-between”) will finally be relieved.

But Gregory is not a theorist, and *The Unintended Reformation* is only a preamble to a theoretical work. It offers ample material of interest to the theorist, to be sure, as well as questions that deserve more theoretical treatment. Gregory acknowledges that others have addressed them more thoroughly, but none has done it in the very original and challenging way he has.

If only a preamble, what comes next? One of the themes raised in desultory fashion by Gregory is *Caritas*—charity, in the broad sense of the term (including *agape* and *philia*—and, since we’re talking about sinful man, *eros*). This theme deserves further study, because it could well be central to the history that Gregory recounts.

For instance, Gregory makes a critical observation: “Promoted from its traditional subordination to *Caritas* among the three theological virtues, faith was redefined by Lutheran and

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reformed Protestant theologians as the all-or-nothing cornerstone of Christian life, the result of no human merit, goodness, effort, or cooperation with God” (208).

This is a profound insight. Faith for the Reformers is intensely personal. It frees the individual to decide for himself what is true. And faith is ultimately temporal, since the saints in Heaven need it no longer. Charity, on the other hand, is by nature social, and eternal. It binds us all together to its source and perfection, Jesus Christ, who is inseparable from His Church. We can say, then, that one of the unintended consequences limned by Gregory is the virtual destruction of solidarity, the Mystical Body of Christ united by *Caritas*.

We are on our own. In his conclusion, Gregory clearly implies that only with a religious reawakening can we escape what Pope Benedict XVI calls “The Dictatorship of Relativism” that worships private opinion as the ultimate truth, however banal and perverted it might be.

Where should the historian of today go to study this forceful account further—and even more deeply?

Perhaps we might begin with Saint Augustine of Hippo. More than any other individual, Augustine provided the foundation for what came to be known as Christendom—the very civilization whose ravaging illness Gregory diagnoses and explains.

Gregory briefly refers to Augustine on occasion, as well he should: besides the Bible, Augustine’s *City of God* and *Confessions* were the most widely read books in Christendom until the fifteenth century, when Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* appeared.

Gregory does not dwell on Augustine’s profound impact on history and the central role that *Caritas* plays in it, both practically (in the course of mundane history) and theoretically (his account of Salvation History changed forever what we today call “the philosophy of history”).

Had Gregory delved more deeply, he might have found in Augustine the answer to what he sees as a conundrum: “The medieval church influenced but never managed thoroughly to transform, according to its own ethics of the good, the moral behavior, social relationships, and political life of the baptized” (196). Had Christians lived more “genuinely Christian”

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lives, things might have been different, he sighs (366-67).

Perhaps we could say the same of our own day. Was that “transformation” the goal of the Reformation—even though it failed (368)? Yes—but has not religion always sought to “transform” us? For Augustine, *metanoia* plays a central role in the life of the Christian, when he chooses *amor dei* over *amor sui*. But that is a free choice, inspired by Divine Grace. In the Preface of Book I of the *City of God*, Augustine describes what happens when man chooses self-love—*amor sui*—over love of God. This choice, also voluntary, leads to the rise of the *libido dominandi*—the driving passion of the will of the “earthly city, which, though it be mistress of the nations, is itself ruled by its lust of rule.”

Augustine had to deal with “reformers” in his own time—Arius, Pelagius, Donatus—all of them Catholic clergymen. We now refer to them as “heretics.” Like all challenges to truth—divinely revealed as well as the Natural Law—their doctrines threatened chaos.

Gregory the historian has ably traced the intellectual impact of the Reformation and the disaster that ensued. As he points out, earlier irruptions of Christian millennial movements eventually died out. But why did the Reformation succeed?

Harkening back to Duns Scotus and Occam, as the understanding of *esse* versus *ens* eroded, that bright golden thread that had held together pre-reformation Christendom became tarnished, then weak, and then broken, as the social fabric falling into countless tatters of rival Truth Claims and Faith Claims.

*Social fabric  
tattered by  
rival Truth  
Claims and  
Faith Claims.*

Gregory’s title implies that this was “unintended.” Perhaps it was. After all, every human action aims at some perceived good. “I wish this book could have had a happier ending,” he writes (381), and we concur. Ruefully contemplating the hyperpluralist West today, perhaps we can sigh, with Prufrock:

“That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all.”