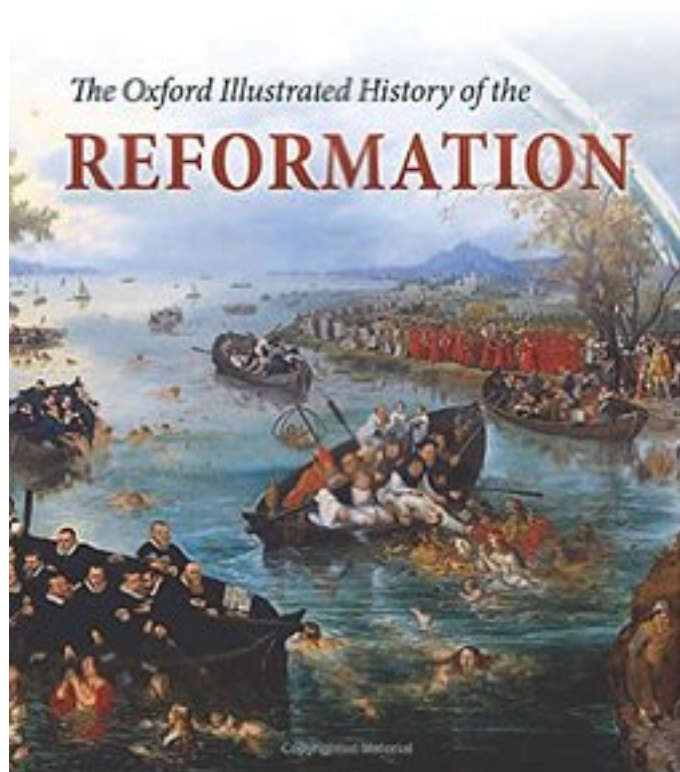


## The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation

PETER MARSHALL



With this prosaic title, you might be forgiven for expecting a predictable narrative accompanied by pictures of dour, bearded reformers being executed in various unpleasant ways. In fact it contains seven essays by leading Reformation historians, with an array of fascinating pictures that are not just illustrations but integral parts of the argument.

Peter Marshall's introduction is anything but anodyne, firmly overthrowing familiar and tired interpretations of the Reformation era while warning that this volume does not assume religious conflict to be merely a convenient vehicle for political and economic tensions, insisting rather that "the actual content of ideas mattered".

All seven essays rejoice in the fact that the history of the Reformation is "untidier than it used to be", and they do some vigorous rethinking of old assumptions. Bruce Gordon gives a vivid account of the richness and variegation of the late medieval Church, though perhaps emphasising its turbulence more than its strengths. Lyndal Roper's scintillating essay on Luther gives a fresh light on this passionate and paradoxical reformer who in two years' time (be warned) will be the latest subject of the anniversary craze.

Carlos Eire's authoritative account of Calvinism and its impact holds fewer surprises but Brad Gregory's discussion of the so-called "radical Reformation" challenges the historical tendency to judge Reformation movements by the amount of political authority they managed to accrue, and makes a good case for making groups like the Anabaptists more central to the study of religious change.

Peter Marshall's consideration of "Britain's Reformations" for once actually discusses all of Britain, not just what was happening in the Home Counties, with a particularly sensitive analysis of the politicised nature of religious change in these isles and the complexities of their cultural impact.

Breaking away from the old idea that there was a mainstream Protestant Reformation with a radical fringe, which then prompted a Catholic reaction, this volume importantly gives just as much weight to Catholic as to Protestant Reformation.

Simon Ditchfield's absorbing essay on "Catholic Reformation and Renewal" takes the place of what would once have been entitled "Counter Reformation", beginning not in Rome, but in Goa, and describing the panoply of global Catholicism, from the Philippines to Canada and from Mexico to China. He argues that the role of the Council of Trent should be both diminished and re-contextualised. The real engine of change within global Catholicism was the impact of the missionary encounters outside Europe: it could be said that we are still undergoing "the conversion of the Old World by the New".

Peter Marshall's introduction makes clear that "religion" is not defined here in the modern sense of a "discrete realm of action and experience", but is understood in its early modern manifestation as something which embraces politics, society and culture. The realm of the senses was central to this, and this could have been given more consideration. But each of the essays makes lavish and pointed use of images, from the Lutheran wagons trundling the scholastic theologians to Hell, and the true believer to Heaven, through the Chinese and Japanese madonnas of the early seventeenth century, to the elegantly gruesome nest of snakes which was the Calvinist Piramide papistique.

The volume concludes with Alexandra Walsham dispassionately anatomising some of the broader common notions about the Reformation; how it contributed to the growth of toleration, the rise of literacy and rationality, and the "disenchantment" of the world, in which (it has been claimed) supernatural forces were expunged from systems of belief.

She challenges all of these, demonstrating that the true legacy of Reformation change was much more complex, and often the opposite of what we assume. The path to toleration was a twisted and unexpected one, and whilst this was undoubtedly a great age for books, this was not a Protestant achievement; rather, we see "parallel textual communities" emerging among Catholics and Protestants.

Meanwhile there was arguably a "re-enchantment" of the world for many, as Protestants grappled with eschatological anxiety and sought providential intimations of the apocalypse, and Catholics sought out new saints and miracles to win over hearts and minds.

The Reformation ended, no less than it had begun, in turbulence, acrimony, vitality and dissent, populated with just as many angels and demons as before. Yet it had also changed the lives of Catholics and Protestants alike, through new religious experiences, striking examples of dedication and heroism and an often bruising encounter with political authority. This book does a fine job of unfolding the intricately decorated and richly textured fabric of this extraordinary era.

Peter Marshall (Editor) - The Tablet