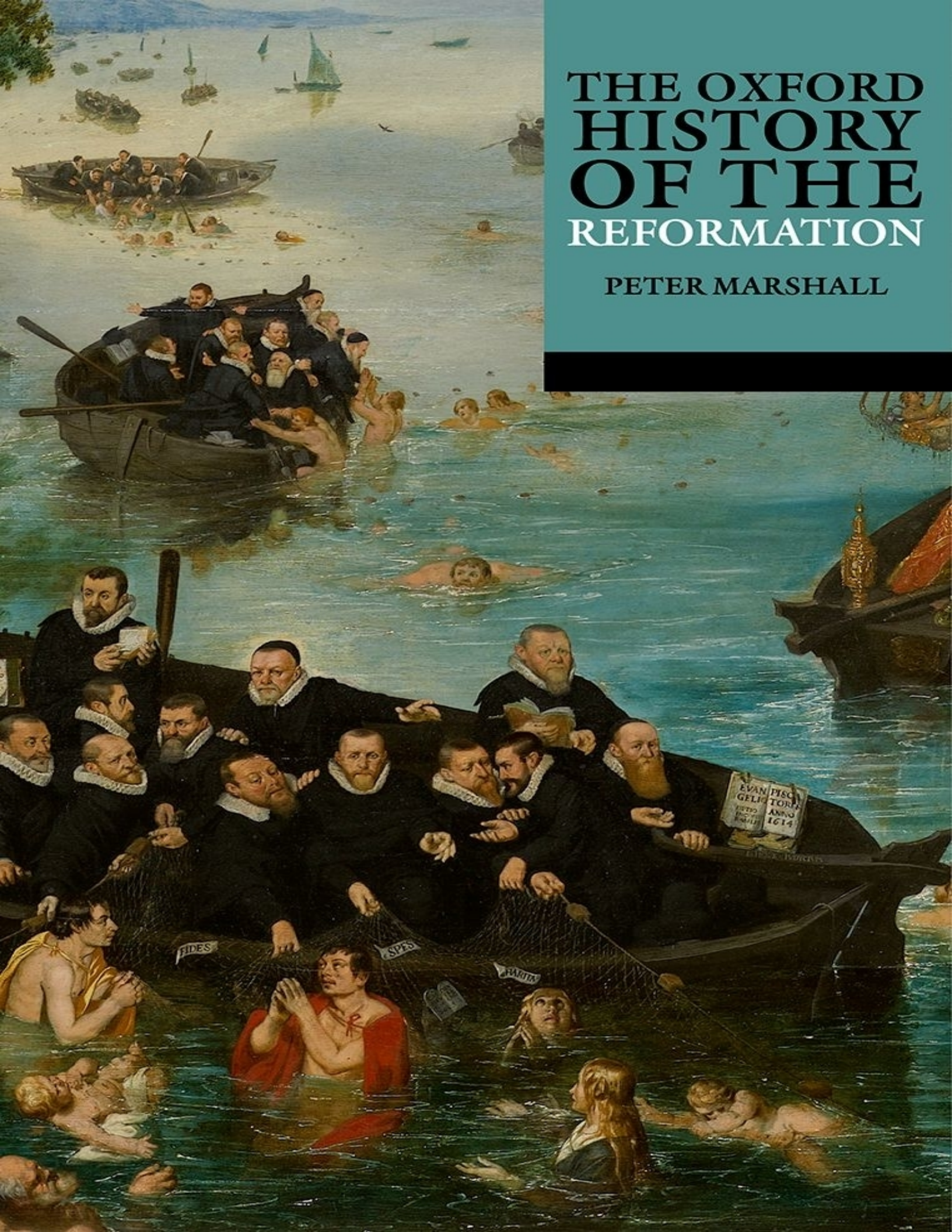


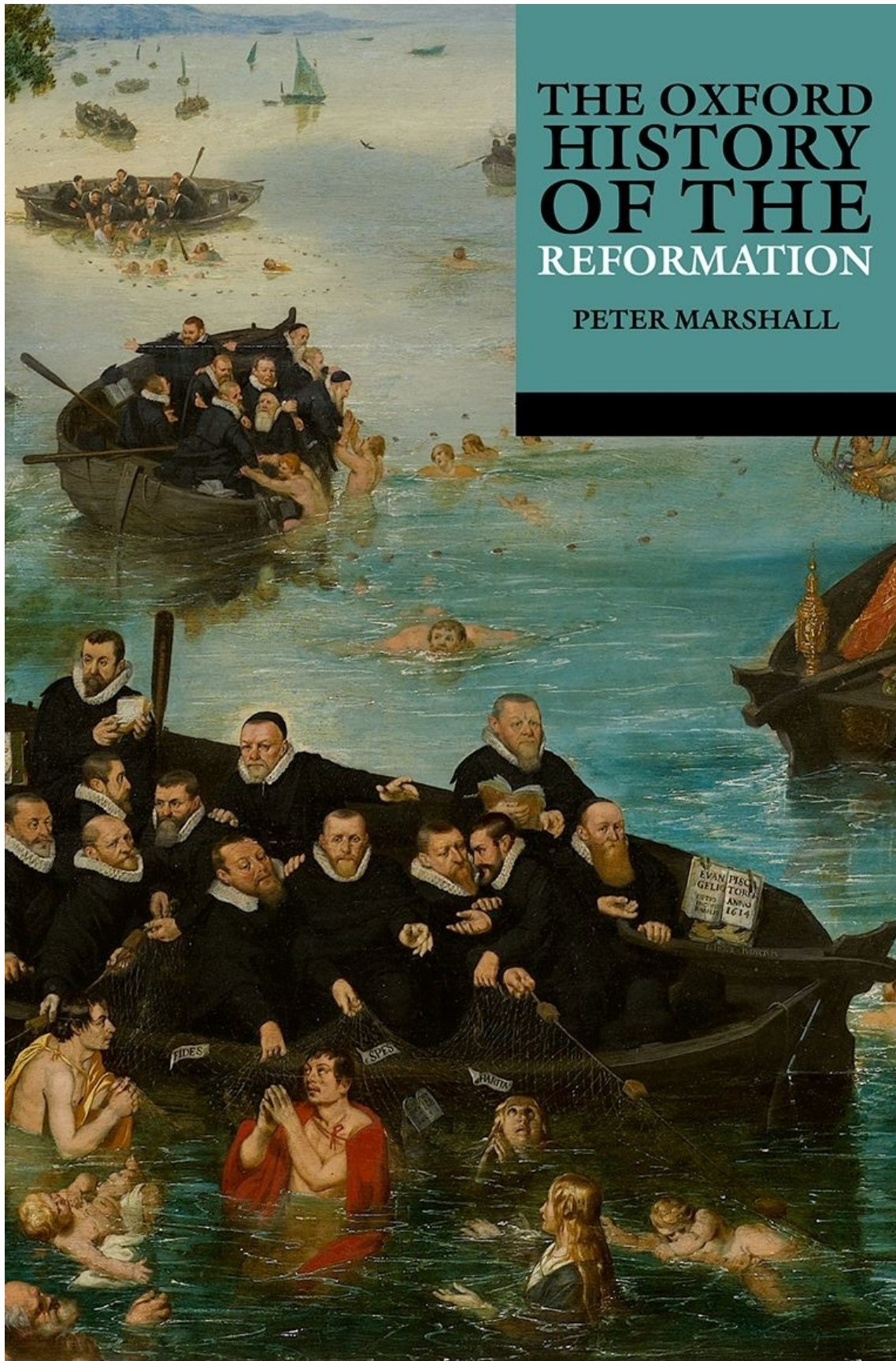
THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE REFORMATION

PETER MARSHALL



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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

HALF a millennium has now passed since the Augustinian friar Martin Luther drew up a provocative set of questions for discussion—his Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences—and may have nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. He did not intend it, and no one at the time foresaw it, but his action set in motion the momentous process of religious change which came to be called the Reformation, which gave birth to a new form of Christianity soon to be known as Protestantism, and which created bitter and lasting disharmonies in European (and later, global) social, cultural, and political life—dissonances whose echoes are still clearly audible today. Whether we like it or not, we are all children of the Reformation. But the nature of our collective inheritance has always been a contentious and disputed one.

As an object of historical study, the Reformation is an old topic with a new face. Recent scholarship has not sought to deny or refute some long-held assumptions: that the changes following from Martin Luther's protest in Germany were extremely important ones; that they ended up transforming numerous aspects of European culture and society; and that they mark a kind of boundary between the medieval and modern worlds. But the manner in which these changes were brought about, the roles assigned to particular individuals and groups, the length of time they took, and the question of whether they self-evidently represented 'progress' or 'improvement'—these have all been discussed and debated over the course of the last few decades in ways which would undoubtedly have puzzled or perplexed earlier generations of historians. The aim of the current volume—which brings together a team of scholars at the very forefront of current Reformation research—is to bring out some of the ways in which over recent years our understanding of the Reformation has become more complicated (and therefore more interesting), while retaining a clear and coherent perspective on the balance between continuity and change. The

chapters focus on particular themes, with individual stories to tell, and particular interpretative problems to discuss, but collectively they supply both a broad narrative of the key developments, and a cohesive overall assessment of how the Reformation looks from the vantage point of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

What readers will not find in these pages is much suggestion that the religious debates and conflicts of the Reformation era were merely a kind of code—a necessary language (since that was all that was available to contemporaries) for conducting and resolving deeper clashes over political power and economic resources. Our approach is traditional to the extent that we believe that the actual content of ideas mattered, and had the power to motivate individuals to act in ways that were not always in their own material best interests. But, equally, each of the contributors here is fully aware that, in the period we are studying, ‘religion’ was not what it has since become in much of the modern West: a narrowly defined, discrete realm of action and experience—the occasional reflective column in the opinion pages of a newspaper, the declining habit of church on Sunday. Our subjects inhabited societies where it was (almost) universally believed that God had not only created the world, but continued to take a close, direct, and controlling interest in every aspect of its governance and workings. To study the impact of the Reformation, therefore, is necessarily to pursue the political, the social, the cultural—questions of relations between rulers and subjects, masters and servants, and between women and men, parents and children. Over the longer term, the emergence of something like the modern Western concept of ‘religion’—an essentially private matter, the sincere adherence to which was compatible with other loyalties and obligations, and which might take acceptably plural forms—may have been one of the key outcomes of the Reformation. If so, it was a result few at the time foresaw and fewer still would have welcomed. That the Reformation represents a case study in the law of unintended consequences is one of the recurrent themes of this book.

Alongside a Reformation more unpredictable in its course and consequences than earlier generations supposed, we now also have one which was wider (theologically), bigger (geographically), and longer (chronologically) than in the days, not so very long ago, when textbooks on ‘the Reformation’ largely confined themselves without embarrassment to developments in (western) Europe, to the followers of Luther and Calvin,

and to the short period between 1517 and 1559. Luther and Calvin still matter, of course. Without them, and without the challenging and compelling religious ideas they formulated—justification by faith alone, the doctrine of double-predestination—the religious changes of the sixteenth century would have looked very different, and might well bear another name. The chapters by Lyndal Roper and Carlos Eire demonstrate how the spiritual, and physical, journeys of these key individuals, though they began in very traditional places, led and pointed to some truly new destinations. But Luther and Calvin, and the -isms to which they unwillingly lent their names, should certainly no longer define the character of the Reformation for us, as if in some pure and perfected essence. Brad Gregory's chapter highlights the importance of that loose network of reforming individuals and ideas—known variously as radicals or Anabaptists—who have nearly always been seen as marginal or exceptional, and as lying firmly outside a Reformation 'mainstream'. But he warns that this perception owes much to uncritical hindsight, and he argues that those anti-Roman groups and individuals who rejected the interpretations of scripture supplied by Luther and the other 'magisterial' reformers have as much right as anyone to be considered both founders and heirs of a quintessentially Reformation tradition.

A more inclusive approach to the questions of who qualifies as a 'reformer', and what consequently constitutes 'the Reformation', is also now readmitting the Catholics to a central place in the story. That important changes took place in those parts of a once united Christendom that remained in the papal allegiance, as well as in those that rejected it, has never really been in doubt. But the familiar designation (dating from the nineteenth century) of something called the 'Counter-Reformation' suggests a separate, reactive, and essentially negative set of processes. In books on the Reformation it is still in fact not uncommon for 'Reformation' and 'Protestant Reformation' to be regarded as essentially synonymous, and for developments within Roman Catholicism to be entirely omitted from the account, or relegated to an appendical chapter. But if we take as the keynotes of 'Reformation' the range of attempts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—from the top down and the bottom up—to transform the lives of ordinary Christians and point them in a more serious direction, and to create better ordered Christian societies, then what has come to be known as 'Catholic Reformation' deserves to be taken just as seriously as

the Protestant variety. By the end of the sixteenth century at the latest, Rome was arguably as much a centre of 'Reformation' as was Wittenberg or Geneva. In his chapter on Catholic Reformation and Renewal, Simon Ditchfield takes this process of 'de-centring' still further, suggesting that to see the (Catholic) Reformation as a purely, or even primarily, European phenomenon is to miss what was, over the longer term, perhaps the most significant development of the entire period. This was the beginning of Christianity's transformation into a truly global nexus of faith, within which, and from the outset, the new territories influenced the religious culture of the old almost as much as vice versa.

Recognizing that Catholics were the agents as well as the objects of constructive religious change should also remind us that reform was older than the Reformation. The once-prevalent (and still surprisingly resilient) idea that the movements spearheaded by Luther, Zwingli, and others were external insurgencies against a corrupt, complacent, unresponsive, and monolithic Church deserves to be finally laid to rest. The predominant impression from Bruce Gordon's survey of late medieval Christianity is of just how diverse, varied, and vibrant the religious culture of Europe was in the century or so preceding Luther's revolt. There were certainly patches of corruption (not least, in Rome itself), as well as pockets of overt dissent, in the communities of Hussites, Waldensians, and Lollards. But impulses towards reform were to be found almost everywhere in orthodox Catholic guise. The idea is increasingly taking hold—in scholarly circles at least—that in its first stages the Reformation was not so much a reaction against the characteristic ideals of late medieval Catholicism, as a radicalized expression of the hopes and aspirations for reform which were universally recognized, but all too often frustrated by various forms of institutional inertia.

Once underway, revolutions follow their own logic, and they adapt to circumstances on the ground over which they are being fought. There is no doubt that Germany, and, more specifically, Electoral Saxony, was the original epicentre of the quake. As Lyndal Roper shows in her chapter, distinctive local and regional features, such as the presence of a developed printing industry, had a decisive impact on how Luther's message was spread. But even here, and from the very earliest days, Luther could not completely control how his teaching was received and understood.

It is in any case somewhat misleading to imagine the German Reformation as the model or archetype, in respect of which all other Reformations are ‘variants’. The bifurcation of the Protestant movement into separate Lutheran and ‘Reformed’ branches was not a later schism breaking out in a hitherto unified body of reformers, but the institutionalization of tensions present among them from the outset. Zwingli at least claimed to have been ‘preaching the Gospel of Christ’ before anyone in his part of the world had even heard of Luther. In the awareness of contemporaries, Catholic and Protestant alike, of an international struggle against the forces of Antichrist (whose identity varied according to the perspective of the observer), the Reformation was certainly more than the sum of its geographical parts. But the parts should not be regarded as mere case studies serving to facilitate our understanding of a transcendent whole. Whether in small, self-contained Swiss city-states like Geneva, German princely territories, Italian archdioceses, ethnically and jurisdictionally complex lordships in eastern Europe, or the thinly populated kingdoms of Scandinavia, the Reformation exhibited distinctive—indeed, unique—patterns wherever it took root. Peter Marshall’s chapter on the pathways Reformation followed in Britain and Ireland, through the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, does not presuppose any kind of overt contrast with a notional ‘continental’ model. But it illustrates the complex and capricious interweaving in these islands of dynastic, political, cultural, and ethnic factors—an interplay that in other places took different forms and produced dramatically contrasting results.

In the British Isles, a series of drives to ensure the uniformity of the populace in the practice of the religion authorized by the State in fact ended up producing a marked plurality of belief and religious custom. This was a situation that few welcomed in principle and most learned to live with only reluctantly. The ideal of a population united through collective tenure of a single religious allegiance and identity was not unobtainable—it was more or less achieved in Catholic Spain, for example, or in Lutheran Denmark. But across Europe as a whole it was probably more the exception than the rule, as waves of Reformation, ‘Second Reformation’, and Counter-Reformation left tidal pools of minority religious culture along the shorelines of supposedly homogeneous political entities. In her chapter on the legacies of the Reformation, Alexandra Walsham discusses the paradoxical extent to which confessional coexistence and toleration were

accidental and unwanted by-products of the Reformation. Only at the very end of our period, and among a restricted group of elite thinkers, was a virtue made out of the necessity of tolerating those whose beliefs were patently ‘wrong’, and who could not be persuaded or coerced into a different way of thinking.

This raises the question of whether the Reformation, or individual Reformations, should be considered a failure rather than a success, as some scholars have indeed argued to be the case. If the definition of failure is one by which the high aspirations of idealistic clergymen never completely enshrined themselves as societal realities, then the accusation certainly stands. Reformers (particularly, perhaps, the zealous Calvinists discussed here by Carlos Eire) strove towards a vision of a genuinely godly society, purged of superstition, idolatry, and sin. Human nature—or, as reformers of various stripes might have seen it, the consequences of Original Sin—made complete victory in this area a virtually impossible goal. Campaigns of total moral reformation, whether promoted by Calvinist Consistories, Catholic Inquisitors, or Lutheran Church Visitors, almost invariably foundered on the rocks of rural conservatism and deeply ingrained popular custom. Elite investigators found low levels of literacy, and high levels of ignorance of the complex doctrines reformers wanted ordinary people to learn and internalize.

But if lay people across Europe did not all become paragons of piety and understanding, it scarcely follows that the Reformation just passed them by. The contributors to this volume are united in finding evidence of deep, meaningful, and lasting change, not just at the level of church organization and worship, but in the structures and patterns of everyday life. The Reformation created a series of new ‘confessional’ identities. This was so even for the inhabitants of the parts of Europe remaining loyal to Rome—for a Catholic who knew that he or she was not a Protestant was different from one who had never contemplated such a hypothetical alternative. Increasingly, confessional allegiance determined patterns of work and habits of dress, attitudes towards art and music, choice of marriage partner. Some historians have detected in Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic territories parallel and remarkably similar patterns of ‘confessionalization’, as Church and State worked together to align a sense of political identity and religious commitment, and to mould dutiful, obedient, and pious subjects. But to contemporaries of all stripes, the differences here seemed

more important than the similarities, and there is little support in the chapters which follow for any notion of the Reformation as a fundamentally uniform and unidirectional ‘process’, delivering similar social and political outcomes in societies that differed from each other only in culturally superficial ways.

Counting and identifying the trees is always important work, but it is important that historians keep an eye on the size and contours of the wood. What real difference did the Reformation in the end make? Alexandra Walsham dissects some of the received wisdom on this question, and interrogates a number of long-standing ‘myths’. It is much less clear than it used to be that the (Protestant) Reformation was the foundation stone of modern science, a spur to the development of capitalist individualism, or the root cause of a secularizing ‘disenchantment of the world’. Yet historians will continue to debate these questions: Carlos Eire actually does see in Calvin’s radical disentangling of spirit from matter the thin end of a wedge which would ultimately displace religion itself from its central place in explaining the nature of reality.

The Reformation, as many of us now understand it, and as reflected in these chapters, is a decidedly untidier phenomenon than it used to be: it is a long-term process (or set of processes) rather than an event; it is plural and multi-centred, and frequently paradoxical and unpredictable in its effects. Broadening the scope of enquiry in this way poses some greater interpretative challenges, but there is little doubt that it enhances rather than reduces the significance of the topic under review. Few aspects of life were left untouched by the ramifications of religious change, and if the consequences were multifaceted they were nonetheless profound. One consequence for authors and readers is that complete comprehensiveness is now harder than ever to deliver in a volume of this kind, if it is not to become excessively unwieldy. Ideally, there would be more here on later Reformation confessional culture in Germany, and on the European peripheries (such as eastern Europe and Scandinavia), as well as (following up on some suggestive sections in Lyndal Roper’s chapter on Luther) fuller discussion of the effects of religious reform on gender relations, and on the development of Christianity’s troubled relationships with Judaism and Islam. The Reformation’s momentous impact on art, music, and literature can only be slightly sketched in these pages. But if readers come away provoked by questions to which they are still seeking parts of the answer,

and are inspired to delve deeper into some of the issues raised, then the authors of this book on the Reformation will assuredly feel justified in their endeavours.

PETER MARSHALL

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