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Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700

Diarmaid MacCulloch

London: Allen Lane (Penguin Books), 2003

832 pages, \$52.50 Hardcover

Finally, after twenty-eight years of teaching courses on the Reformation, I find a textbook that far outshines all others in the field. Finally, I have a Reformation textbook that would force me to be incredibly picky about finding any serious faults. Finally, I hold in my hands this fat volume of 708 narrative pages that I finished after two months of faithful morning reading over coffee, and I still feel my heart soaring. No, I am not author MacCulloch's agent, though I should be. No, he has not paid me for such effusive praise, for that would be "simony," and as we all know the Reformation, both Catholic and Protestant, attacked this all too common practice.

So why do I find this back-breaking tome so spectacular? There are three chief reasons for my eulogy.

First, MacCulloch's *Reformation* is far and above the most comprehensive book on the Reformation I have ever read; I find nothing left out that he has not covered. For example, he handles with breadth and depth both Protestant and Catholic Reformations. He deals with Reformation literate elites as well as illiterate commoners giving each its due. Women emerge as significant players in all facets of life during the epoch covered, and European Jews and anti-Semitic responses to them are not ignored. Not only does MacCulloch describe the standard Reformation areas of German lands and Western Europe; also we learn of Reformation in Scandinavia, Poland-Lithuania, Hungary and Transylvania. Beyond that he gives solid attention to missionary expansion by Catholics (largely the Jesuits) in India, China and the western hemisphere. With depth and sensitivity the last portion of the book deals with changes in daily mores (i.e., the impact of the new Gregorian calendar, the evolution of sexual ethics and practices, the tensions between fanaticism and tolerance, etc.). MacCulloch leaves no stone unturned in this masterful blend of breadth, depth and literary finesse.

Second, the author has produced a fair and balanced textbook without falling into that bland and phoney academics which poses as "objectivity." Instead he exemplifies profound empathy with all his subjects – even those, I suspect, he finds distasteful. How would I

describe his point of view? I surmise that he has a broad humanist (Erasmian) foundation that seems to reflect the capacity to straddle the two main western Christian traditions with a comfortable foot in either camp. However, I must confess that this assessment does not demonstrate any prophetic gifts on my part. MacCulloch says as much in his own words. (xxv) Yet what I find so compelling, even beyond his “catholic” sympathies, is that marvellous capacity to empathize with all the players of the Reformation drama. This renders his book inspiring on top of being scholarly.

Finally, MacCulloch’s *Reformation* affirms one of my shibboleths willy-nilly. He dispenses with the standard Reformation textbook format of “great MAN” history with “great ideas” that trickle down to the masses hungry for the Gospel. Yes, he does deal with Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, Ignatius, Contarini, *et al.* and their ideas, but his text also gives women their due (and not only as a “politically correct” add-on), and he portrays a whole world of turbulence and change (social, political, economic) without ignoring some of the leading figures who emerged as leaders.

Nonetheless, I will point out two negatives. First, I can’t for the life of me understand the value of the brief three-page appendix of texts, even given MacCulloch’s introductory apologia for the same. I think it adds nothing of real value to an already remarkable text. Finally, *Reformation* is too bloody expensive. Of course, that is no fault of Diarmaid MacCulloch. So, shape up Penguin Books. Let’s get this out in paperback and halve the cost. Then I will require *Reformation* for my introductory course in church history rather than just highly recommending it.

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