

Brad S. Gregory. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 2012. Pp. 574.

It has become fashionable among sociological cognoscenti to speak of the consequences of the Reformation as “unintended.” Brad Gregory’s title seems to be following Charles Taylor’s lead in *A Secular Age*, where Taylor resorts to the “unintended” motif several times. With the fifth centenary of Luther’s Wittenberg door approaching, it is to be expected that there will be some discussion about the impact and relevance of the events that followed on the modern world.

The “unintended” line has some advantages. It allows some of the consequences of the Reformation to be linked with the present, while ultimately letting the protagonists off the hook as far as undesirable outcomes are concerned. It also has the advantage of avoiding the overkill of previous interpretations, both positive or negative, which constructed an expressway between the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and even in some cases between Calvin and Voltaire! A certain agnosticism appears legitimate concerning the engendering of modernity by the Reformation. Direct links are tenuous at best, and “unintended consequences” are speculative constructions, with questionable feasibility.

One gathers that this book was written over a number of years, showing as it does an impressive garnering of knowledge and reflection—the detailed endnotes cover 140 pages, and there is a considerable index. The author, who is associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, shows considerable breadth of cultural acumen in this analysis, which concerns the present as well as the past. In fact, what he says in a conclusion entitled “Against Nostalgia” is in some ways the most stimulating part of the book, following on from six “long-term narratives” on the themes of the sidelining of God, the relativization of doctrine, the privatization of worship, moral subjectivism, consumerism, and the social secularization of knowledge.

Gregory’s ace in the hole is that he is not a common, garden-variety period historian who concentrates on a limited time scale and throws out a few hazardous conclusions. Each of the themes is presented in the flow of history over the period, so avoiding the compartmentalization that is the blight of many historical studies. Gregory writes cultural history, and he does so in an enthralling way. His perspective is that “the historical intelligibility of the past in no way implies the inevitability of the present”; the method is described as “*genealogical*, in seeking to identify and analyze long-term historical trajectories with their origins in the distant past that happen to remain influential in the present.” Reformed theologians will

have no difficulty appreciating the assertion that beliefs influence behavior, that beliefs differ radically, and believers and antireligious “believers” (*sic*) can both be unperturbed by the hyperpluralism to which they contribute (pp. 11–12).

So the introduction predictably engages supersessionist models of history that interpret the past as a “sequential series of epochal blocks” that account for the present. In this respect even Taylor is not immune from criticism (pp. 9, 14). The present is incredibly diverse and includes differing religious worldviews; the question remains as to how one development produces such a diversity of variegated convictions in the ways people believe and live. Apart from that, the supersessionist approach, advocated by both Enlightenment crusaders and postmodern deconstructionists, naïvely assumes that the secular present has triumphed over the religious past, a world left irretrievably behind. Gregory’s critique is juxtaposed to these diagnoses: there is no self-evident reason for the exclusion of religion or for taking it to be done for. Religious worldviews of undeniable intellectual sophistication exist today “as part of Western hyperpluralism. They have not been ‘left behind’ or ‘overturned’ by ‘modernity’ or ‘reason.’” The conclusion is that “philosophical efforts to contrive a universal, self-sufficient, rational replacement for religion, for all their historical intelligibility and desirability in the context of early modern Christian doctrinal controversies, were self-deceived from the outset, and those intellectuals who continue to carry on likewise are engaged in a similarly self-deceived enterprise.” In fact, the modern *Zeitgeist* has singularly failed to provide a rational substitute for religion with respect to life questions. Moreover, it condemns us to Zygmunt Bauman’s moral blindness and directionless liquidity, as history runs in a direction no one planned and no one particularly wished it to take (pp. 381–84).

The argument is unpacked as one might expect. Gregory suggests that present confusion about human flourishing is traceable to the changes set in motion by the Reformation. The late medieval institutional situation was marked by a gulf between faith and practices that raised questions as to how life might be lived in a more consistently Christian way. The protagonists of the Reformation sought to answer the problems, but unwittingly disrupted the religious fabric that held early modern societies together. The turn to the Bible and the authority of *sola Scriptura* was inconclusive doctrinally and moreover led to a new complex of unresolved problems and antagonisms. Unlike some commentators, Gregory sees religious conflict and war as a factor of disenchantment. This aspect could have been developed further, as suggested by Joseph Lecler’s neglected classic *Toleration and the Reformation* (1960).

The outcome of conflict among the antagonists engendered a desire to render life stable and secure by the eventual therapeutic distinction of public and private spheres, with religion functional in the subjective sphere and objective reason ruling in public life. The unintended consequences of the Reformation became progressively visible in epistemology, morals, and political life. The individualization of truth claims led to tolerance and freedom of conscience, morality was removed from the realm of metaphysics, and individual “rights” came to the fore politically with the separation of church and state.

How was it possible to begin with Reformation and end up with secularism? Gregory seeks to trace this story from various angles; he claims that it issues from the fragmentation not only of religious belief, but also of secular foundationalism. Prominent in the present situation are the following assumptions: that science undermines religious belief as the source of all truth, whereas it does nothing of the sort; that morals can be unmoored from their Christian foundation in the secularized “values” of liberalism, whereas faith assumptions that have no naturalistic basis are illicitly smuggled in; and that the pursuit of knowledge is a purely secular enterprise where religion has no place, whereas the secular academy would benefit by more openness in unsecularizing itself (pp. 284–387). Reason has failed to produce satisfying answers to Life Questions, and we are left with a core ideology reduced to the liberal autonomous self and its gratification in the hedonism of an obsessive consumer “kingdom of whatever” (p. 377).

Gregory’s narrative, which issues in a head-on critique of secularism, is as convincing as it is impassioned. He exposes with disturbing lucidity the plight of the present vacuum in which secularism, capitalism, and consumerism make a heady cocktail that erodes communitarian values, in which self-interest dominates, and in which valueless economics become an end. “Ash-heap lives,” as Francis Schaeffer somewhere said.

One question that remains, however, is “what if?” Even if we tend to agree with the author that the Reformation had unintended consequences, the filiation, even if “unintended,” is perhaps less direct than Gregory suggests. Was Luther’s hope not originally a renewed church, and did Calvin cease to hope for a return of the church to the biblical gospel? Was not the Reformation, in its day, a great opportunity lost?

And then there is another twist in the story, related to the ongoing spiritual struggle between light and darkness. Did the Reformation generate “unintended consequences” or idolatrous opposition? This question may lie outside the walls of secular academia—but in order to have a global vision of the effect of the Reformation on the present, could not Groen van

Prinsterer's and Abraham Kuyper's analysis of the idolatrous opposition of revolutionary politics against belief in God help us see that there is more to our situation than the spin of the unintended?

**PAUL WELLS**

---

Andrew T. B. McGowan. *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*. Leicester: Apollos; London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 221.

Andrew T. B. McGowan argues that he stands in a trajectory set by John Murray and wants to bring Reformed theology more into accord with the Bible. The issues under consideration are covenant and headship. He divides his work into three sections: historical considerations, a constructive proposal, and implications. It will be most helpful to review the book according to these three divisions.

The historical section begins with a chapter on covenant theology in the history of the Reformed tradition, but the bulk of the historical treatment covers debates about covenant theology beginning in the twentieth century. It is helpful that before he makes a positive theological case, McGowan surveys the positions of Karl Barth and followers, then John Murray, Meredith Kline, and the Federal Vision (FV) movement because these writers are the ones who determine the issues and the context of current debates about Reformed covenant theology. McGowan calls for an irenic reading of debate partners and is usually very good at reading irenically himself. Although many treatments of Reformed covenant theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exist, far fewer examine changes in covenant theology beginning in the twentieth century. McGowan has done us a favor by providing a succinct survey of the figures and issues involved.

That said, there are some important things to note about this historical section. First, it appears that McGowan sees a closer relationship between Barth, Murray, and FV than many would be willing to accept, including myself. This is not to deny that there may be some shared interests between them, but it is at best a contentious move to cite positions from these three together as if they would all approve of one another. Second, McGowan's presentation of historical covenant theology raises some concerns. Writing that "covenant theology was expressed in different ways, such that there was no one definitive covenant theology, although most of the key elements were agreed" (p. 14) overstates the variations of early modern covenant theology. There is no denying that there were various expressions of