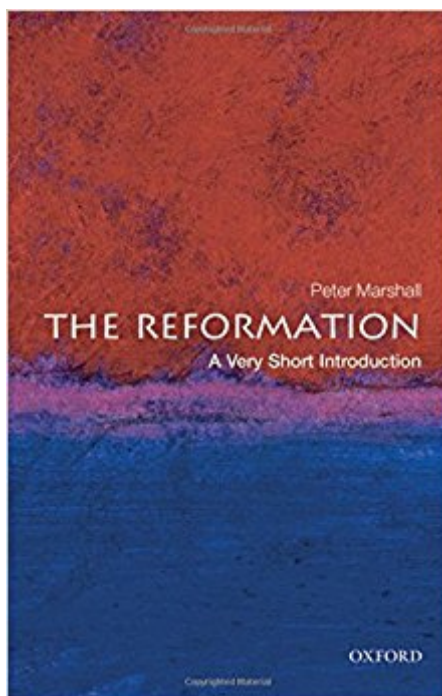


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The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

The Reformation was a seismic event in European history, one which left an indelible mark on the modern world. In this Very Short Introduction, Peter Marshall illuminates the causes and consequences of this pivotal movement in western Christianity. The Reformation began as an argument about what Christians needed to do to be saved, but rapidly engulfed society in a series of fundamental changes. This book provides a lively and up-to-date guide that explains doctrinal debates in a clear and non-technical way, but also explores the effects the Reformation had on politics, society, art, and minorities. Marshall argues that the Reformation was not a solely European phenomenon, but that varieties of faith exported from Europe transformed Christianity into a truly world religion. The complex legacy of the Reformation is also assessed. Its religious fervor produced remarkable stories of sanctity and heroism, and some extraordinary artistic achievements. But violence, holy war, and martyrdom were equally its products. A paradox of the Reformation--that it intensified intolerance while establishing pluralism--is one we still wrestle with today.

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Customer Reviews

The Reformation: Questions for Consideration and Discussion Was the Reformation inevitable? Did ordinary people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries really understand or care about theological concepts? How was Christianity "exported" beyond Europe during the Reformation and what were the difficulties of doing this? Did the Reformation(s) make European societies more tolerant or more intolerant? What is the relevance of the Reformation in today's world?

This is history as it should be written: meticulous, provocative and intelligent. By studying the past for its own sake, and on its own terms, it also illuminates the present and the future * William Whyte, Church Times * It has hardly ever been told better * Alec Ryrie, English Historical Review * Besser kann man es nicht machen [it couldn't be done better] * Peter Blickle, Historische Zeitschrift *

This is the third book I have read in the Oxford Very Short Introduction series. And I continue to be impressed. I have done some reading on the reformation and taken two different History of Christian classes that included the reformation. But even at only 135 pages of content, this book was able to add to knowledge of the Reformation. The plan of this book is to debunk some of the myths while showing how much the different sides of the reformation really agreed. Here is the thesis statement from the book: "Myths are not lies, but symbolically powerful articulations of sensed realities. It is probably safer to believe that all the myths about the Reformation are true, rather than that none of them are. The goal of producing a totally unmythologized account of the Reformation may be an unachievable, or even an undesirable, one. Nonetheless, this little book - drawing on the best, not always impartial, modern scholarship - will attempt to explain what sort of phenomenon the Reformation was, to assess its impact across religious, political, social, and cultural areas of life, and the character of its legacy to the modern world." What I most appreciated was the focus on the areas of agreement theologically. Without glossing over areas of disagreement, the areas of disagreement were often exemplified by a "mentality widespread in the Reformation era, and still with us in various secular and religious guises: a desire to shore up the identity of the majority group by stereotyping and dehumanizing an excluded minority." The book starts with a brief history of the Reformation. Marshall takes a broad view of what the Reformation consisted of, so it looks at Luther to the mid 1700 when the main religious wars of Europe were concluding. In many ways, a brief overview history like this can be better than the detailed history that can occasionally lose the forest for the trees. The rest of the book spends times looking at how the Reformation affected the understanding of Salvation, the politics of Europe, the formation of society and culture, the way that Christianity look at others outside of Christianity and the legacy of the Reformation. For me, the two most interesting parts were the view of salvation and culture. Marshall starts with discussion of salvation with this quote: "The Christian metanarrative hinges on two fixed points of reference. Humanity lost the friendship of God through an act of primordial rebellion: the 'Fall' of Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world, an 'original sin' that marked and stained the natures of their descendants henceforth. But God himself took the initiative in restoring that friendship, assuming a human identity in Christ, who, in an ultimate act of love and sacrifice, suffered death on the cross

and 'atoned' for Adam's sin. The door to Salvation, shut in the Garden of Eden, was potentially open once more. This much was agreed by all mainstream thinkers of the Reformation era. Contention raged over how individual Christians might actually proceed through that door, the role of the Church in preparing them to do so, and whether the door was open for all or just for a few."It may not be clear in that quote, but Marshall includes the Catholic theologians of the era as agreeing and has a good section on the Council of Trent and why in most areas Catholics and Protestants agreed about much of their theology. It is interesting to me that culture was one of the areas that was more likely to have real disagreements. Principally this is because of different understandings of the role of art. I knew that Luther wrote a lot of hymns and encouraged congregational singing. But I did not know that was an innovation. Prior to Luther, there was choral singing, but it was not in the church. Luther moved choral singing into the church as part of worship. But many other of the arts did not have a similar advantage. Visual arts were mostly banned from Protestant churches because of a difference of opinion about the first commandment. (Protestants tend to view "you shall make no graven images" as the second commandment. While Catholics tend to view it as a modifier on the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me".) So early Protestants (and some today) view any artistic representation of not only God, but any visual art as suspect because it is creating an image. This is not that much unlike the difference between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic church 800 years earlier, with the Roman Catholics on the opposite side. On the whole, this was a very good introduction to the Reformation and I think did a good job of minimizing some of the mythology of the protestant world that is still perpetuated and still is detrimental toward proper understanding of Catholics as part of the universal body of Christ.

Peter Marshall did an excellent job of making the Reformation (actually, Reformations) understandable. Although I am still unclear on some of the theological and philosophical divides between Catholicism and Protestantism and their ideological offshoots, I have a much better grasp of the subject matter thanks to Marshall's clear writing. In about 130 pages, Marshall explores the philosophical, cultural, and political effects of the religious movements collectively known as the Reformation. There is a valuable chronology at the back of the book that will make this a go-to reference material even after you've read the text. As with the other Very Short Introductions in the Oxford series, this has fairly short chapters that are broken down into several headings, which makes the book easy to read and easy to go back and find passages later. For a potentially hot topic, the text seemed well balanced and did not appear to favor either religious camp, so there was a distinct lack of "us-versus-them" mentality in the text -- as it should be for an academic

work. Marshall also mentioned Max Weber and his "Protestant work ethic," in which Weber argued that it was the Protestant work ethic which drove Protestant nations to develop faster and more thoroughly than Catholic nations with similar resources at their disposal. Marshall offered some brief, but insightful, reasons why Weber may have been way off base in his conclusions, arguing cogently that it was a combination of factors that dictated how nations developed rather than a single philosophical difference. I would recommend this as a first read on the Reformation, although there may be some names that person new to the subject would still need to look up. But these Very Short Introductions aren't "Dummies" books; despite the word "introduction" in the subtitle, there is a tacit assumption that you have some background in history or at least have heard some of the names mentioned in the text. This is not an insurmountable obstacle to reading the book, though.

Grappling with the meaning of Mendelssohn's "Reformation" Symphony, and the composer's use of the well known Lutheran hymn "Ein Feste Burg," in his powerful final movement, I came upon Peter Marshall's compact, enlightening book on the Reformation published in 2009 by Oxford University. Lucid, thoughtful, wide ranging, at times even wry, this is a modern, even-handed dissection of the sixteenth century beginnings of the Protestant faith which explains the Catholic counter reformation as well. Marshall is a superb writer - well equipped for these short succinct history treatises - who packs his tight sentences with meaning, never wandering on incidentals while moving through his points effortlessly. He ends, eschewing overstatement, with this compelling thought: the Reformation advanced the meaning and purpose of human existence, enhanced the mutual obligations of people in a society and exposed "the balance of conscience and political obedience" in a rational society. I look forward to reading more of these short histories by the Oxford University Press.

Interesting, well-written introduction to the Reformation. Marshall covers a lot of ground and does so in a way that's easy to follow and informative.

This book can be useful as an introduction to deeper Reformation study, or as a summary for someone with casual interest. It contains brief chapters summarising the various 'reformations' that sparked across Europe, differing ideas about salvation, politics, society, culture and relations to other contemporary religions.

Marshall develops the idea that the incomplete success of Reformation -i.e it did not replace one

monopoly with another - is the real success of the Reformation. Out of the parallelism of the two religion, the need for tolerance was borne. This tolerance became the backbone of modern democracy.

Decent introduction to a complicated subject.

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