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Who Won the Reformation?

Ross Douthat NOV. 1, 2017

The Western world has not known quite what to do with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The powerful Protestant establishments that would have once celebrated the quincentenary wholeheartedly are mostly weak or impotent or gone, and while the disreputable sort of Calvinist and the disreputable sort of Catholic still brawl online, in official ecclesiastical circles the rule is to speak of the Reformation in regretful tones, like children following a bad divorce who hope that now that many years have passed the divided family can come together for a holiday, or at least an ecumenical communion service.

Meanwhile, the secular intelligentsia can only really celebrate the Reformation's anniversary in instrumental terms. From the perspective of official liberalism, most of the Reformation fathers were fundamentalists and bigots, even worse in some cases than the Catholics they opposed. So for the Lutheran and Calvinist rebellions to be worth memorializing, it must be as a means to secularizing ends — the liberation of the individual from the shackles of religious authority, which allowed scientific inquiry and capitalism to flourish, made secular politics possible, and ultimately permitted liberalism to triumph.

Looking back through the chronoscope of religious history, then, the modern secular liberal is a Leninist: He watches Christendom tear itself apart and thinks, *the worse the better*, since only out of the wars of religion can his own society be born.

Of course this is a harsh way of putting it. But a 500th anniversary is a good time to be a little bit harsh about the world we all take for granted, a world that was built on the wreckage created by Christian civilization's civil war. Neither the Protestants nor Catholics won that war between the faiths: The instrumentalists did, the Machiavellians, the Westerners who wanted political and economic life set free from the meddling of troublesome priests and turbulent prophets. And so 500 years after Luther threaded his 95 tweets together and pinned them to a door in Wittenberg, it's their propaganda that deserves the most scrutiny, the most skepticism, the strongest doubts.

At the heart of that propaganda is a simple story about authority and the individual. First, this story goes, Protestantism replaced the authority of the church with the authority of the Bible. Then, once it became clear that nobody could agree on what the Bible meant, the authority of conscience became pre-eminent — and from there we entered naturally (if with some bloody resistance from various reactionary forces) into the age of liberty, democracy and human rights.

The problem with this story is that like all propaganda it edits selectively and treats the experience of various fortunate groups as the measure of a much messier reality. The Reformation and its wars did indeed diminish religious authority, secularize politics and allow certain kinds of individualism to flourish. But they also empowered (and were exploited and worsened by) the great new gods of modernity, the almighty market and the centralizing state, which claimed their own kind of authority over everyday life, making the divided churches into handmaidens or scapegoats, and using Christianity as an excuse for plunder rather than a restraining counterforce to worldly lust.

This simultaneous expansion of commercial power and state power made the Western world more orderly and rationalized and much, much wealthier. It also licensed cruelty and repression on an often extraordinary scale. It produced some remarkable experiments in religious tolerance, our own Constitution among them. It also encouraged secular inquisitions that made the original look tame. It opened new opportunities for the rational and industrious. It also weakened or destroyed the places where one might retreat from commerce or refuse the world. It led to huge leaps forward in health and life expectancy for all. It also brutalized religious

resisters, stacked non-European bodies like cordwood ... and eventually revived the worst tendencies of the old Christendom, anti-Semitism and millenarianism, in fascist and Communist experiments that added the genocide of millions to the modern state's list of crimes.

Even in our republic's mother country, England, which escaped some of the worst horrors of the Continent, the Reformation's religious conflict ended in victories for a brutal centralizing form of power. It was religious fanaticism that burned heretics and stripped altars and briefly raised up a Puritan theocracy. But the rapaciousness of Henry VIII and the police state of Elizabeth I, the evisceration of the old Catholic culture and the suppression of popular protest and dissent, the ethnic and religious cleansings carried out on England's Celtic fringe — these were very modern projects, and their purpose wasn't liberty but subjugation, not religious tolerance so much as the elimination of any religious challenge to the state.

In Hilary Mantel's popular novels about Reformation England, "Wolf Hall" and "Bring Up the Bodies," the figure of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's enforcer, is presented as a sympathetic proto-modern alternative to the dueling zealotries of popery and Calvinism — more broad-minded and humane and secular, less bigoted and ascetic.

But Cromwell was also a ruthless killer who served a cruel tyrant. Which makes him an apt choice, even if Mantel does not intend it, to embody the secularizing forces that triumphed over Protestants as well as Catholics — because Cromwellism, mass murder in the service of secular power and commercial wealth, has just as strong a claim as liberty or individualism to define the world that succeeded Christendom's collapse.

Here the objection will be that, yes, the road to modern liberalism was a bloody one, but it all could have been much worse. And indeed, worse could be imagined. It is possible to imagine a world where Western Christendom remained united but Europe refused the gifts of science and the church sank into permanent corruption, with Ottoman armies delivering a coup de grâce. It is also possible to imagine a world where an undivided Roman church harnessed science and technology to its

own sort of religious-totalitarian ends, and became a theocratic boot stamping on a human face, forever.

So perhaps the modern world as we know it was the best we could do, the only path to liberty and pluralism and mass prosperity, however many Cromwells it required to get here.

But my own (biased, Catholic) guess is that given the technological and social changes already at work in early modern Europe, the great new modern powers, the state and the commercial interest, would have come to bestride the world no matter what happened to Christian unity. So a church that remained undivided probably wouldn't have been able to strangle modern science or capitalism in the crib even had it wanted to. But it might have served as a stronger moral check on the new powers, a stronger countervailing force against greed and secular absolutism, than the divided churches that Europe had instead.

It is hard to read the history of Western colonial ventures, in which for hundreds of years it was mostly the intensely religious (as compromised and corrupted as their churches often were) that remonstrated against mass murder and enslavement, that sought to defend natives and establish norms for their protection, and not suspect that a still-united Western church would have found it easier to turn its moral critiques into more effective practical restraints. And it is harder still to read the history of the 20th century and have any kind of confidence that the world made by Thomas Cromwell and his successors was better than a world where Protestants and Catholics did not divide.

Indeed in secular liberalism there is an implicit tribute to this possibility, a kind of yearning for a vanished Christendom, that arose in part as a response to the horrifying place where secular politics ended up last century. What are our pan-national institutions, our United Nations and European Union, all our interlocking NGOs, if not an attempt to recreate a kind of ecclesiastical power, a churchlike form of sovereignty, on the basis of thinner, less dogmatic but still essentially metaphysical ideas — the belief in human dignity and human rights?

As the church did before its crackup, and might have done thereafter, these modern ecclesiastical agencies do have some gentling effect. But they are a made-up

religion whose acolytes at some level know it — and the thinness of their metaphysics, their weak claim on human loyalties, makes them mostly just a pleasing cloak over the dark power that's actually stabilized the modern world, the terrifying threat of nuclear war.

I'm being grim on purpose; more optimistic views than this are possible. But since the unity of Christendom isn't coming back any time soon and our own society has a thousand incentives to lie to itself about how religious division was for the best, it's worth considering the dark version of the long view.

The modern world offers many gifts, and the fact that Catholics and Protestants now dwell together without bloodshed is certainly one of them. But to assume that this division was a necessary means to a happy secular and liberal ending is to assume that we actually know the ending — even though the story so far has given us many novel forms of tyrannies as well as greater liberties, and the price of the modern experiment has been millions of unremembered dead.

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