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## Multiple Reformations and a Deeply Divided House

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# MULTIPLE REFORMATIONS AND A DEEPLY DIVIDED HOUSE

*Louis C. Midgley*

Review of Diarmaid MacCulloch. *The Reformation*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2004. xxvii + 832 pp. with appendix of texts and index. \$35.95 (hardcover). \$22.00 (paperback).

IN this fine book, Diarmaid MacCulloch provides a learned, clear, richly detailed, and even encyclopedic account of “many different Reformations” (p. xix), not merely a story of what happened when Martin Luther (1483–1546) complained about indulgences and other manifestations of corruption in the Latin portion of Catholic Christianity. MacCulloch deftly uncovers signs of what Paul Tillich liked to describe as a Catholic substance and a Protestant principle at work in Western (Latin) Christianity. The conflicting forces representing these competing principles tore Europe apart during what is often called early modern European history. MacCulloch describes in rich detail what was at work in both Protestantism, in all its enormous diversity, and in the Roman Catholic Church, with its *magisterium* (official teaching office). His complex, subtle, multilayered account challenges the overly simple, naive notions of heroic reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin doing battle with demonic forces centered in Rome.

MacCulloch demonstrates that the Latin—as opposed to the Greek (or Orthodox)—version of the Catholic faith was profoundly riven by differences and hence ripe for reform or at least revival prior to Luther’s fateful actions at Wittenberg in 1517. This portion of the book sets the stage and fleshes

out MacCulloch's insistence on "multiple Reformations" (p. xix), though this is not apparent in the title of his book. *The Reformation* was initially published in England in 2003 under the title *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700*, which is a somewhat better title than the one used in the book's American release.

The complicated network of stories MacCulloch tells are enlightening, challenging, and also depressing since he sets out evidence of moral laxity and sheer depravity often masked by pious platitudes. He describes the endeavors of both individuals and movements seeking at first to recreate (or preserve) an "authentic Catholic Christianity" in Western Europe. His clear account embraces the factional, political, and ecclesiastical as well as the more strictly personal and theological/ideological elements found in "both Protestantism and the religious movements commonly known as Tridentine Catholicism, the Catholic Reformation or Counter-Reformation: the revitalized part of the old Church which remained loyal to the Pope" (p. xix). He sets out the subtle complexities of these events. He also introduces various popes, scholars, churchmen, and important regal figures such as Henry VIII (1491–1547), Philipp of Hesse (1504–1567), and of course, Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli (1484–1531), and John Calvin (1505–1564), who were all leagued with a swarm of quarreling theologians, scholars, and churchmen. Instead of merely psychological or strictly economic explanations, MacCulloch focuses on ideas. The result is a remarkably detailed, complex history that is initially chronological, especially in the first two parts, entitled "A Common Culture" (pp. 3–313) and "Europe Divided: 1570–1619" (pp. 317–545). In the final part, "Patterns of Life" (pp. 549–708), chronology is less prominent.

In addition to recounting the power-seeking and sometimes divisive and demonic side of the Protestant Reformation, MacCulloch illuminates the Catholic response to the rise of

Protestantism and corrects stereotypes. He also effectively demythologizes various reformations that began in the wake of humanism, the Hussite controversy, and the terrifying march of the Ottoman Empire into Europe. Islam was a distant Other even during the Crusades, but now it seemed on the doorstep. Despite the victory on Malta of the Knights of St. John against an enormous Ottoman invasion fleet and powerful army (see p. 54), Latin Europe was terrified by Islam at arms. To some the Turkish threat seemed a curse brought on by ecclesiastical corruption and lack of proper fidelity to God. Others may have seen the Ottoman threat as a sign of the end times and hence were anxious for whatever changes might take place. These sorts of contexts are part of the larger story, just as are movable type, printing presses, and increasing literacy, all of which made direct access to the Bible possible for people other than clergy and especially beyond the control of even the Protestant clergy.

Once the questioning began, the field was open to alternative interpretations. This yielded quarrels over such matters as infant baptism and transubstantiation. The passions and piety of both Catholics and Protestants were such that they were armed and eager to do battle over such issues. Internecine quarreling among Protestants is still the norm, except that supposed heretics are no longer imprisoned or killed. The grim details about these struggles reveal human beings at their worst. The urge to reform or conserve yielded constant examples of human depravity and brutality, such as the cruel 'Thirty Years' War, which ravaged German-speaking lands between 1618 and 1648.

Previous Protestant accounts of the Reformation tended to picture it as a complex and momentous event in the history of Christian piety that returned the corrupt and inept church to the more pristine theology of St. Augustine (354–430). The magisterial reformers were seen as challenging a monolithic

and corrupt Roman Catholicism over such crucial issues as faith and works, the sale of indulgences, the soundness of venerating and praying to Mary and departed saints, the authority and the role of the priests, the understanding of the Eucharist, and the use of the Bible as the primary if not entirely exclusive source in matters of faith. In his wide-ranging, richly layered study, MacCulloch challenges or qualifies older interpretations by arguing, for example, that Catholic Christianity was less centralized until it had to combat Protestants and also that there were many reformations, including the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. He describes, in addition to the Protestant reformers, a host of large and small reform movements in central, northern, and southern Europe. He also examines the role of hereditary privilege and power regarding those caught in the political squabbles in virtually all of these church reform efforts. His is also a compelling account of broad cultural currents forming the background and contour of the massive upheavals that for more than two tumultuous centuries tore Europe apart. The Reformation moved swiftly to what MacCulloch calls the Atlantic Isles (Great Britain or the United Kingdom) and then to America and elsewhere. The results of this initial spread of the Protestant Reformation eventually dwindled and then rapidly declined, especially in Europe, but also increasingly flourished in parts of the world not dominated by some version of Islam.

MacCulloch argues that these events were an outgrowth of movable type and vernacular Bibles and, with the help of less-than-honorably motivated kings and princes, resulted in the survival of something Luther accidentally began and then could not control. The subsequent spread of Protestantism involved political intrigue and intolerance on a massive scale. Fear and hatred were bonded to a lust for persecution of those with differing opinions. When there was a place of refuge like Rhode Island, where Roger Williams was located (see pp. 537–

42 for details), tolerance was embraced as a virtue. The long and depressing story of intolerance in the name of God should be of special interest to Latter-day Saints.

Though raised as an earnest Anglican, MacCulloch is no longer a believer, a fact evident in his rather cynical approach to matters of faith. This shift in his sentiments, he claims, makes him unbiased and thus better able to tell the truth about a history that both fascinates and disgusts him (see his carefully worded statement on p. xxv). From my perspective, he does not sufficiently appreciate that one cannot approach the past without a network of formal and informal prior understandings, assumptions, and preferences. All historians unavoidably tell a story informed and shaped by their own hopes, fears, and biases; there are no neutral historians or neutral histories. MacCulloch's own ideological preferences and passions are hinted at in his excellent introduction (pp. xix–xxv). Replacing MacCulloch's previous Anglican affections is a cynical approach to his subject matter (see p. xxv). Even so, his book is remarkably comprehensive, nicely written, and in some ways encyclopedic.

I highly recommend *The Reformation* to Latter-day Saint and other readers interested, as I think they should be, in the momentous addition to Christianity accidentally begun by Luther in 1517.

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