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## Protestant Ecclesiastical Anarchy and Dogmatic Diversity

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# PROTESTANT ECCLESIASTICAL ANARCHY AND DOGMATIC DIVERSITY

*Louis C. Midgley*

Review of Mark A. Noll. *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 161 pp., with bibliography of further reading, glossary, index. \$11.95 (paperback).

MARK Noll's *Protestantism* is a brief, interesting, and useful account of a religious movement that began with the remonstrance of a contentious German monk who, much like others in the Latin Catholic Church before and after him, called for reform. On 31 October 1517 in the small town of Wittenberg in Saxony, Martin Luther (1483–1546) certainly did not plan on founding a new church. His was merely a “local protest” (p. 10). Among other things, Luther complained about the sale of indulgences, which were believed to ease the pain of those presumably undergoing a necessary postmortem purging. This tiny event eventually led to a radical division of Western (Latin) Christianity into Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church.

In describing what he considers “Protestant and Protestant-like churches” (p. 89), Noll asserts that “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or Mormons) represented an American creation further from traditional Protestant norms” than the Alexander Campbell/Burton Stone movement that eventually yielded the Disciples of Christ and other sects (p. 62). “The Book of Mormon that its prophet, Joseph Smith, promulgated as an extension of biblical revelation became the

foundation of first a new civilization in the western American desert of Utah and then the stimulus for a new church that has spread around the world” (p. 62). First a civilization and only then a church? Could Noll, one wonders, be unaware that the Saints, beginning with Joseph Smith, have never seen their faith as Protestant but rather as a divinely revealed replacement for all flawed Christianities, including those generated by the Protestant Reformation?

Enormous diversity is the dominant theme of this fine, richly illustrated introduction to Protestant religiosity. Noll begins his story with the word “diversity” (p. 2 heading) to explain the current Protestant movement and uses the word often (pp. 115, 125, 133, 136, 139). Diversity takes a strange form when he describes the stunning recent emergence of Christian faiths in sub-Saharan Africa. Noll describes African Christian leaders as deeply involved in “healing and prophetic gifts” (p. 98) that are not limited to the bland “sign-gifts” (p. 91) commonly found in holiness and pentecostal forms of Christian piety. For example, we learn that “while in prison” in Liberia in 1910, William Wadé Harris was “visited by the Angel Gabriel” in what was “later described alternatively as a vision and a palpable revelation” (p. 99). Harris’s fervent preaching, according to Noll, drew thousands who were organized “locally around the twelve apostles he regularly appointed” (p. 99). Harris “tolerated polygamy,” much to the annoyance of missionary-led Catholic and traditional Protestant congregations who benefitted considerably from his evangelism (p. 101).

Noll elsewhere indirectly stresses the theme of diversity (e.g., pp. 5–6, 9, 21, 37–39, 43, 63, 89, 95–102). For example, although the “magisterial reformers”<sup>1</sup> were concerned about salvation right from the beginning, the “ever-present internal

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<sup>1</sup>The term refers to the mainline Protestant reformers such as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin who, in contrast to the “radical reformers,” allied themselves with

conflicts” within the movement generated “an immense range of variations among Protestants in fleshing out this general picture of salvation” (p. 5). Despite this great variety of beliefs and practices, Noll assures his readers, “it is still possible to speak, in admittedly very general terms, about a common Protestant history” (p. 6). Today’s “sheer multiplicity of Protestant and Protestant-like denominations”—more than 38,000, we are told—makes it “challenging to write a coherent history,” Noll concedes (p. 9).

Some of the distinctive terminology generated rather accidentally by Luther’s actions is explained. For example, it was Landgraf Philipp of Hesse (a secular/political figure who adopted Luther’s teachings and organized like-minded German princes) who used the word “protest” in 1529 at an imperial diet in Speyer, Germany (p. 19), thus giving us the labels “Protestant” and “Protestantism.” Luther’s side of the Reformation took the name “evangelical” (p. 19), while John Calvin’s side became known as “reformed.” (Current use of the label “evangelical” has nothing to do with the name of Lutheran churches.)

Noll refers to two dynamic processes—the tendency of Protestants to “change inherited doctrines in accord with intellectual norms from the Enlightenment” (p. 43) and “Protestant disunity” (p. 21)—that fragmented the Protestant world (p. 58). He employs the word “fragmentation” to describe the anarchy of this diverse, ever-shifting movement. The stark dependence of Protestant ecclesiastical authorities on princes, kings, and other civil authorities is also noted. Noll emphasizes that because Protestant leaders tend to be self-selected (p. 7), Protestantism lacks anything approaching a “magisterium” (authorized teaching authority) and for a very long time was intolerant of competing opinion and the common use of the

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secular authority (princes, city councils, magistrates) in pursuit of a reformed Christendom.

sword and fire not only in war but also in beheading and burning heretics at the stake (pp. 1, 3, 33), an ugly side of the Reformation. The profound impact of the acids of modernity on Protestant beliefs and piety is also treated (pp. 65–66, 57, 125). Noll tells the story of the famous Azusa Street revival in 1906 in Los Angeles (pp. 90–91, 133) that, at least in part, led to the dramatic rise of the Pentecostal movement in America and the subsequent stunning growth in that variety of the Protestant movement, especially in the so-called Global South (Southern Hemisphere). The best estimates indicate that some six hundred million people are involved in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement today. Perhaps even more stunning is the emergence of an essentially indigenous Protestant-style faith in China, now numbering somewhere between eighty to one hundred million adherents.

The recent rise of megachurches (congregations entirely independent of denominational supervision) and parachurch organizations receives mention as well as the rather distressing story of the rapid decline of Protestantism in Europe (p. 8), in contrast to the dramatic rise of Protestant-style religiosity in such places as Latin America, Africa, and China.

For those seeking to better understand American Protestant theology, Noll provides a fine account of the emergence of the Fundamentalist response to Protestant liberalism, which had gained a major foothold in the once-dominant mainline denominations (pp. 112–13). He argues that “divisive strife as much as unifying tranquility has marked the 20th-century history of American Protestantism” with “fundamentalists generating publicity” by objecting to Christian teaching modified by fashionable new moral sentiments and “modern learning” (p. 112). Noll unfortunately neglects to explain the 1942 creation of the National Association of Evangelicals and how shortly afterward Billy Graham, with his wealthy friends

and sympathetic followers, marginalized fundamentalism by setting evangelicalism in its place.

Noll correctly maintains that Protestantism is “overlaid with a multitude of doctrinal differences, differing musical forms, differing political attitudes, and huge differences in wealth and kinds of social power” (p. 136). With the Bible providing a shared “point of convergence,” the movement’s “multiple traditions for interpreting that text, multiple authorities proclaiming the text, and multiple contexts in which the text is appropriated create a loose field of experiences and truth claims rather than anything coherent” (p. 136).

*Protestantism* is a fine, broadly instructive book that will benefit many, including Latter-day Saints seeking to better understand a movement that has generated much of the sectarian opposition to their faith.

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