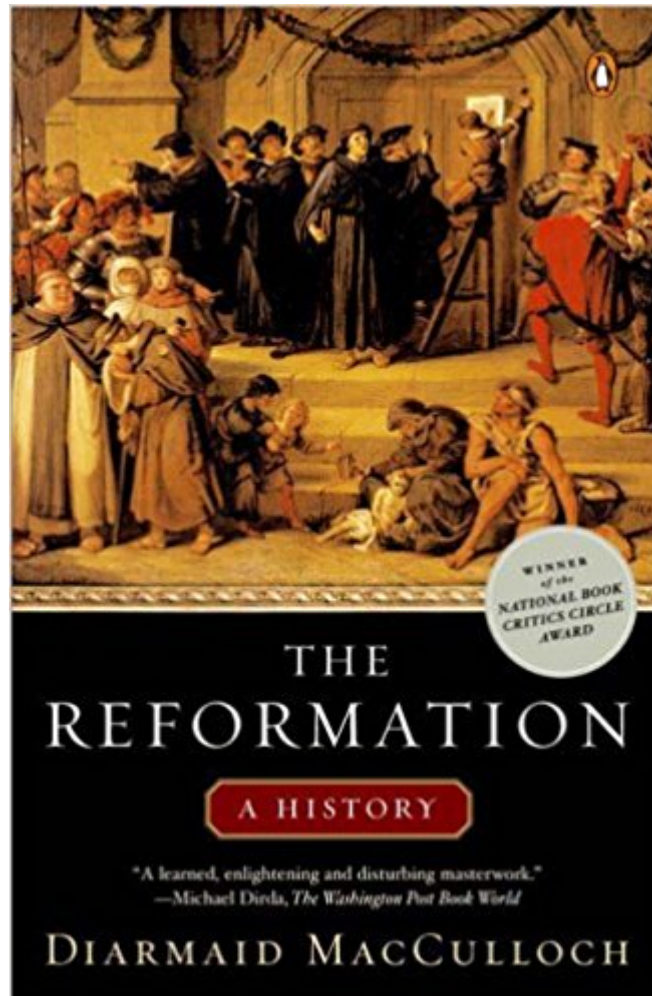


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The Reformation: A History



Synopsis

The National Book Critics Circle Award-winning history of the Reformation from the New York Times bestselling author of *Christianity and Silence*. At a time when men and women were prepared to kill and be killed for their faith, the Protestant Reformation tore the Western world apart. Acclaimed as the definitive account of these epochal events, Diarmaid MacCulloch's award-winning history brilliantly re-creates the religious battles of priests, monarchs, scholars, and politicians from the zealous Martin Luther and his Ninety-Five Theses to the polemical John Calvin to the radical Ignatius Loyola, from the tortured Thomas Cranmer to the ambitious Philip II. Drawing together the many strands of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and ranging widely across Europe and the New World, MacCulloch reveals as never before how these dramatic upheavals affected everyday lives, overturning ideas of love, sex, death, and the supernatural, and shaping the modern age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While I have had a long-term love of history, my understanding of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries has always been sketchy and superficial. It went something like this: (1) the Catholic Church allowed people to buy their way into heaven (via indulgences); (2) this made Martin Luther mad so he challenged the church by nailing his position on the door of the church (and he also wanted to get married) and so did John Calvin; (3) Henry VIII wanted a divorce but the pope wouldn't let him (which made him mad); (4) therefore,

lots of Protestant churches came into being; and (5) the Puritans were part of one of them and they discovered America. The truth of these statements was murky and the causal relationship between them was harder for me to understand than the theory of relativity. I have a feeling I'm not alone. I knew it was all important, but trying to put it all together was beyond my ability. Well, now none of us need to do it alone, because Professor MacCulloch has written a history of the Reformation that is encyclopedic in scope and brilliant in its execution. He fills in the gaps and clears up the many misconceptions. This is not an easy book to read. But while MacCulloch doesn't make it easy, he avoids the jargon of the professional historian. That said, this is not a casual beach read--it demands a careful and thoughtful reading. And the rewards are great. For the first time, I have a real clue why the reform movement took off in so many ways and in so many places. I have a far better idea of the relationships between and among men like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer and so many more.

In many ways, Diarmaid MacCulloch's account is a useful, thorough guide to the Reformation, which starts in the aftermath of the Hussite controversy, the end of the Babylonian captivity, the rise of Humanism and the reconquest of Spain, and which ends with the Glorious Revolution, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and with the beginning of the Enlightenment. MacCulloch is careful to remind the reader to take seriously the religious passions of the period and avoid the enormous condescension of the secular present. For here was a period where both Catholics and Protestants emphasized the absolute need for faith in Jesus as well as the need for moral behavior and increased discipline. In the battle of faith over works, Protestants emphasized the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans, while Catholics emphasized the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle of James. Whereas Catholics only had the Eucharist once a year, the Scottish Calvinists emphasized a more rational devotion, such that parishioners could now expect to take it twice. Instead of obeying the Pope, Protestants emphasized their new ecclesiastical hierarchies. For these differences people were slaughtered from Drogheda to Magdeburg. MacCulloch's main virtue is thoroughness. This is a history of the Reformation that covers almost all of Western Christianity. Not merely do Britain, France, the Netherlands and what is now Germany all play their parts, but we also get special sections on the surprisingly cosmopolitan culture of late 16th century Poland, the Protestant redoubt that was then Transylvania, as well as accounts of the Counter-Reformation in Italy and Spain.

Academics don't need a review of this book and might not need to read it. However, if you are a

student of history, particularly American History, you should read this. If you understand that we are a political/social experiment to test the ideas of the Reformation, this book will show you where this "City on a hill" came from. It will make many Americans aware of how and why separation of church and state is so central to our system. It will give you some food for thinking about what has happened in the past 300 years. Do you know what a Protestant is? A Roman Catholic? An Anabaptist? Do you have any idea how important Jewish thought was to the Reformation? How did Reformation era thinking inform our political philosophy? Which version of the 10 Commandments is at issue in some schools and government offices? Did you even know that there are at least two "official" versions? This book shows how a million doubts and questions were addressed by some great and courageous thinkers and how the debates changed the world. In a very direct way, ordinary Europeans began to trust thinking outside the box (Church) during the Reformation. The imperative to put ideas into action was part of the revolution in thinking and drove many communities to gather themselves to remake their societies. Many of them came here. Did you ever wonder why so many religious communities came to colonize North America and were so careful not to allow us to become a Theocracy? This book manages to show a huge variety of the different trains of thought, all of which are different, all of which fall under the definition of Reformation. I've studied the history of thoughts and communities MacCulloch characterizes so well here.

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