

THE REFORMATION: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION. BY PETER MARSHALL. NEW YORK, NY: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009, XII + 153 pp.; ISBN 978-0-19-923131-7 (PBK.); 7.00 USD.*

A small, relatively recent, and well-written book by Peter Marshall belongs to the well-known Oxford series called “Very Short Introductions.” It is an informative and analytical introduction to the history, culture, politics, and theology of the Reformation that took place in sixteenth-century Europe. *The Reformation* is an academic research-based book that is nevertheless very accessible to a wide audience. It is part of the larger company of historical and cultural mini-handbooks such as, *The Middle Ages: A Very Short Introduction* by Miri Rubin (2014) and *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* by Jerry Brotton (2006). The former volume precedes the discussion of the Reformation, and the latter complements and deepens it.

The phenomenon of Reformations is surveyed and analyzed by Peter Marshall, a specialist in the English Reformation and professor of early modern religious history at the University of Warwick. The book must be judged a high-quality work. It is written concisely, but analytically, in fine style and with a particular sense of humor.

The author’s basic thesis is that the majority of colorful and popular images of the Reformation are myths. They include the typically Protestant romanticized and idealized image of the Reformation, the typically Catholic “gloomy” and catastrophe-like portrait of the epoch, and various one-sided secular–sociological, political, economic–reinterpretations of the meaning of the sixteenth-century reforms. All these are but myths, meaning that they are “not lies, but symbolically powerful articulations of sensed realities” (p. 3).

As an alternative, Marshall offers a complex and nuanced reading of the fundamental transformative processes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He presents them not as a unified movement, but—quite rightly—as movements for reform, reformations in plural. Moreover, these individual movements were diverse even within themselves: they sought either personal or corporate renewal in theological or ecclesiastical-political terms. After all, “Reformation was multiple interlocking reformations, and the sum of political, social, and religious interactions in Europe and the wider world over the course of two centuries...” (p. 9). This vision determines the multi-dimensional overview of the topic in Marshall’s book and should be considered its fundamental advantage.

Marshall’s project has the following structure. *Introduction* (pp. 1-9) serves as a set of programmatic statements: here the author formulates his fundamental thesis and outlines current trends in the study of the Reformation. The first chapter provides an overview of its key phases and aspects. It is called “Reformations” and

* The review received on 6.12.2016; approved for publication on 20.12.2016.

is the longest part of the book (pp. 11-41). It describes the first and second waves of evangelical reforms, Catholic initiatives, and the Thirty Years' War and its outcomes for church and state.

The second chapter, "Salvation" (pp. 42-59), examines the theological motives and nuances of the reforming processes. Here the author spells out the doctrines of justification by faith, predestination, the authority of Scripture, the nature and role of the sacraments, and eschatological expectations. He regards them as the key subjects of the discussions, debates, and ecclesiastical decisions of the era. After all, "Reformation was, first and foremost, a protracted argument about the rules and mechanisms of salvation" (p. 42). However, this section draws a somewhat simplified theological picture of the period. The overall background and key points of discussion, as well as its major trends, are depicted correctly, but the author's theological thought lacks depth. It is easy to notice that Marshall is a historian and not a theologian. Therefore the information provided is unquestionably true, but nevertheless the richness and subtlety of theological thinking are wanting.

The third chapter talks about the political side of events (pp. 60-75), while the fourth and the fifth chapters are about their social and cultural aspects (pp. 76-92 and pp. 93-109, respectively). Here attention is drawn to the dynamics of policy-making, social change, and the "culture wars" of the Reformation era. It turns out that on the one hand, the public policy initiatives of the reformers and their patrons were rather ambiguous, although often successful in a sense. On the other hand, it appears that "religion is here an agent of modernization, helping to create more uniform and obedient societies, suffused with a sense of patriotic and pious identification with the Lutheran, Calvinist, or Roman Catholic motherland" (p. 66). Therefore, one cannot deny the role of Protestant and Catholic reforms in the formation of more modern cultural and political units – nations, states, and ideologies. As Marshall subtly notes, "Reformation is central to the story of how politics and religion began to come apart in European society, yet at the same time it witnessed the flowering of a more intense and explicit synthesis between them. ... The Reformation was, in fact, the first great era of ideological politics, and in the 16th and 17th centuries, ideology meant religion" (pp. 60-61).

The sixth section has to do with a quite unique and interesting subject, untypical for descriptions of the historical period in question; namely, the theme of "the other" or "others" (pp. 110-128). Here the term "other" refers primarily to Reformation heretics, and Marshall skillfully shows the ambiguity of the phenomenon of heresy in this era. The very same person who was despised and justly condemned as a "heretic" by one group of people could easily become an innocent victim, a martyr, and a saint for another community. However, the heretics were not the only "outsiders" of that time. This group must have included Muslims and Jews, witches and occultists, as well as "pagans" represented by the inhabitants of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, with whom Europeans were then establishing closer and increasingly diverse contacts. Seen through this lens, "the Reformations were, simultaneously and paradoxically, a channel for intense bigotries and a route to pluralism and social tolerance" (p. 110). In general, this chapter can hardly be called the best because of its fragmentary approach

and somewhat unusual angle. However, its uniqueness is rooted in this very approach. An understanding of the social dynamics of relationships between various conflicting groups of people plays a crucial role in conceiving a realistic portrait of an event or phenomenon.

Finally, the last chapter speaks of the legacy of the Reformation (pp. 129-131). Here Marshall rightly criticizes the theory of Protestant capitalism devised by Weber and rejects the idea that the scientific revolution had any direct connections with the sixteenth-century reforms. At the same time, he discovers the roots of the truly contemporary, modern world in the interplay of theological, religious, political, and social factors of the Reformation era. In fact, the European politics of the following centuries emerged out of the Peace of Westphalia, whereas the religious picture of modern Europe grew out of the confessional processes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the major outcome of these tendencies must be marked out: it was a fundamental fragmentation of Christian society, earlier viewed as the medieval *societas christianorum*, and the gradual radical change of its members' thinking. Marshall concludes: "the principal legacies of the Reformation were the fact of division and the emergence of strategies for coping with that fact" (p. 133). Although some might disagree with the individual theses and assessments that the author makes, his overall conclusions are correct.

The only obvious weakness of the book is the lack of sufficient elaboration of the theological aspects of the Reformation and, consequently, the almost complete absence of any discussion of the non-magisterial, "secondary" reformation movements. The key advantage of this volume is the high-quality presentation of material that is skillfully chosen and examined. The balance between a wider perspective and attention to individual details is held well, and the rich content deserves only compliments. Marshall is truly capable of communicating information well: it is conveyed to the reader concisely, succinctly, thoughtfully, and without populism and stereotypes.

Additionally, the author's wonderful sense of humor is worth mentioning. Marshall constantly uses irony, metaphors, and wordplay. For example, he describes the Reformation as the "chief motor" of religious and political life of 16th- and 17th-century Europe, and says that it has not yet exhausted its energy as the Enlightenment suddenly came (41). Quite ironically, Frederick the Wise described as an "old-fashioned" religious man, who is very proud of his own university and its "superstar professor" dr. Luther (16). Nor can one skip over the well-drawn comparison of the personalities and theologies of Luther and Calvin (p. 25): the former is depicted as "boisterous and inconsistent" and the second as "logical and methodical." As a consequence, "Luther's theology was a scatter-gun; Calvin's a sniper's rifle." Marshall's work is, in fact, characterized by analytic sharpness and colorful descriptions. Yet all of this is founded on established facts and the results of scholarly research. Therefore, this introductory volume must be recommended to all those interested in the Reformation, including both professional researchers and university students and the wider audience.

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