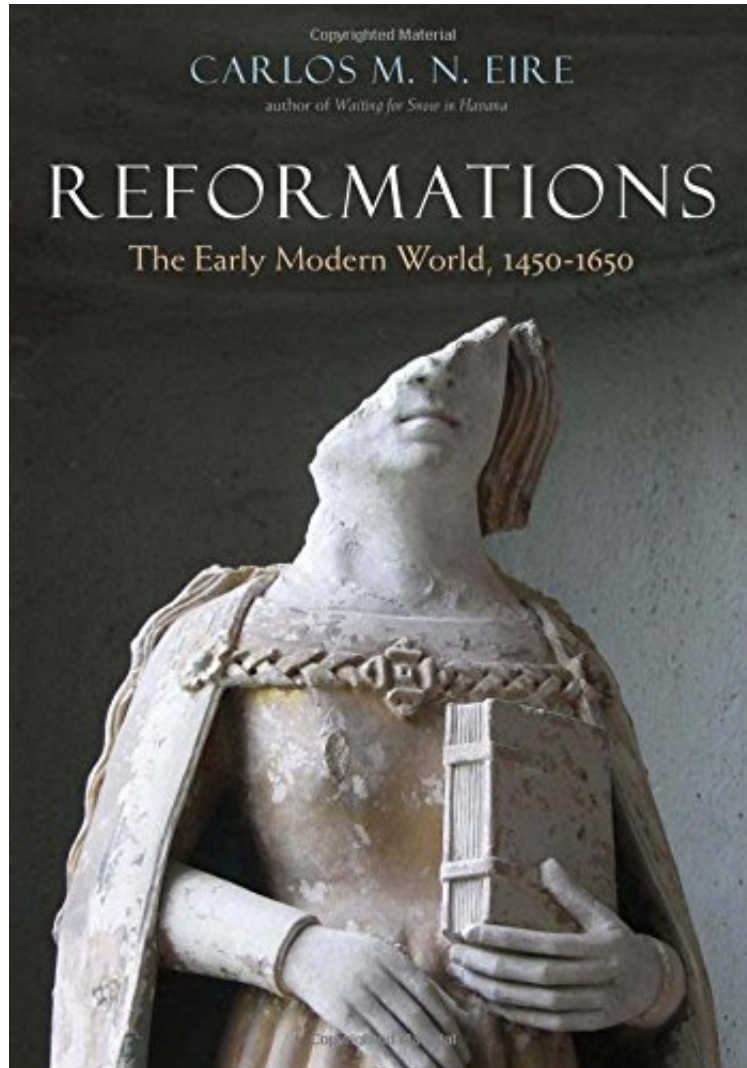


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Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650

Carlos M. N. Eire

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Carlos M. N. Eire : Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650:

115 of 118 people found the following review helpful. A Tale of Two CenturiesBy GDPIn his Preface, Eire writes, "This is a narrative for beginners and nonspecialists" (p. xii). With all due respect for the author, this book is certainly more than that. One of its primary attributes is the integration or synthesis of a remarkable two-hundred-year period of Western Civilization, 1450-1650, into a single narrative that emphasizes the human impulse to analyze and understand, create a sense of personal distinctiveness, assert an identity, and defend our convictions. In the process, both then and now, men and women are vulnerable (in some degree or another) to self-righteousness and stridency.

These impulses and vulnerabilities of the human condition are at the root of both the Renaissance (or Italian Humanism) and the multiple reformations that we often conveniently lump into 'The Reformation' associated with Martin Luther. Both the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation of Eire's story are also grounded in the idea of "looking back" in time and attempting to regain the perceived purity and glory of an earlier era. In the case of the Renaissance it was Ancient Greece, and in the reformations (both Catholic and the several Protestant variants) it was primitive Christianity. A critical step in each was to return to foundational texts and "recover" unvarnished truths. Of course, such attempts at change necessarily create tension with those who have a vested interest in the "varnished" status quo or their own version of the truth. Eire's treatment of Martin Luther is representative of the author's historical sensibility. He writes, "he was as much a product of change as an agent of it" (p. vii) and, "He was but one of many reformers in his generation, some of whom pressed for more radical changes than he was willing to accept" (p. 131). Luther's relationship to other reformers, both preceding and contemporary, is assayed, as are the conditions that permitted Luther to emerge as a Reformation "rock star" (timeliness of Gutenberg's printing press, rising literacy, popular resentment of the Roman Catholic Church's wealth, powerful prose, and a fractured political situation in the Holy Roman Empire that created safe havens for him). In Luther's case, theology successfully met circumstance (just such intersections are at the heart of history). Eire uses the concept of fractals to illustrate the nature of the Protestant Reformation. He elaborates, "the history of the Protestant Reformation can be systematically comprehended only through multiple narratives that parallel each other in time and even mirror each other, but sometimes interlace or branch out" (p. 219). In this telling, history, rightfully, has depth and texture. Consistent with the above, Eire writes of humanism spread among elites throughout Europe by "diffusion" (p. 86), or with regard to the impulse for Catholic reform he writes, "[it] had been simmering throughout the Middle Ages" (p. 128). Descartes, he writes, belonged to an "amorphous movement" (p. 662), while in discussing the Enlightenment (or "enlightenments"?) he likens it to a "rogue wave" (p. 686). Throughout the book we are given the sense that new ideas are seeking receptive minds and when they reach a critical mass, history comes alive. These ideas are expressed through multiple voices, some converging around them, some objecting and holding firm against them, and some just taking a runner. In Eire's prose, history surges and history percolates. His sensibility and tone are impressive. With historical change there are gains and losses (and sometimes cruel disasters - the recounting of wars of religion leaves me thinking of Hans Sachs's monologue, "Wahn! Wahn!" in Wagner's 'Meistersinger'). These gains and losses are the product of our human quest for understanding and the desire for improvement in interaction with our complicated psyches (often leading to unintended consequences), as Eire makes plain. Appreciating 'Reformations' by Eire involves appreciating the very nature of 'history' itself. It is a reminder that 'history' is complex and hinged on circumstance (which holds value for more than "beginners and nonspecialists"). What it may lack in "cutting-edge" primary research, it more than compensates for with an epic scope and a sophisticated historical perspective. An appreciation for the complexity of 'history' should translate into an appreciation for the complexity of our 'present' and may, just may, help us to be more tolerant of others, since too often the consequences of self-righteousness and stridency are so dire. Ultimately, shouldn't changed conduct be one of the primary purposes of 'history'? Now there is one word of caution: this is a long book (about 750 pages of text) and a degree of fortitude is necessary. This is not a breezy read (minor differences over theology can get a bit tedious, even when they could literally mean temporal life-or-death) and I found myself digesting it in smaller bites than I am use to. Nonetheless, this book puts much of what I have read over the years into a more fulsome frame of reference so that, as is often the case, fortitude was rewarded. 35 of 35 people found the following review helpful. magisterial By Avid reader It is only in the last 50 years that historians have begun to write about the age of Reformations without confessional biases. Eire's book is a particularly convincing example of this very fortunate new tradition. That it is a long book has to do in no small part with the fact that Eire begins well before Luther's reformation and goes far beyond the death of its last great initiator, Calvin (1564). This, in my opinion, proves to be an extremely helpful and persuasive decision. In fact I found these chapters (I-VI and XX-XXIV) to be among the most enlightening ones. That Luther had predecessors (e.g. Wycliffe and Hus) might be relatively widely known; but, to choose just two examples, that several Catholic reform movements preceded the Protestant Reformations or that Protestant theology was influenced in major ways by the Neo-Platonism developed by a school of Italian philosophers in Florence 50 years earlier might add new perspectives for most of us. In short, a much more nuanced picture of the immediate pre-Lutheran religion and society emerges and helps to contextualize and clarify the coming events. -- The age of Reformations in the strict sense of the word is handled with great even-handedness (chapters VII-XVII). Here I found it particularly impressive that Eire as a historian does not shy away from succinct and effective descriptions of the actual theological conflicts that shaped the Reformations. Yes, he explains what indulgences actually hoped to achieve, what the different understandings of the Eucharist were (even among Protestants), or why for some reformers the destruction of religious art was so important and why not for others, etc. Technical terms (and they are crucial) are regularly translated at their first occurrence. The two chapters (XVIII-XIX) I would quibble with contain a summary of the Catholic missionary efforts in the New World, Africa and Asia. I guess, even Reformation scholars do not want to be accused today of being Euro-centric, after all the subtitle of the book is "The Early Modern World." But were these missionary journeys, interesting as they are, reform movements? I am not persuaded. -- The

consequences of the Reformations' often hair-splitting theologies, their self-righteous persecutions of all non-conformists, their indiscriminate witch hunts and the bloody wars they ultimately caused are held responsible for a renewal of indifferent, skeptical, rationalistic, and even atheistic traditions on all levels of society. Consequences, even if unintended, do matter, and the irony of these historical developments does not escape Eire.-- Finally, Eire assesses the impact of these Reformations on our own times. Can we even speak of a continuing impact? So far Eire has given Catholic and Protestant Reformations equal billing. But his conclusions make it clear that it was the Protestant Reformations that must be seen as having had the lasting impact. The stricter insistence on the separation of the material from the spiritual, the natural from the supernatural that informs all Protestant theology allowed the world we live in to become an increasingly secular place. The Catholic Reformation interacted and counteracted in various, even impressive ways with this trend but was ultimately unable to stop it. -- While this might not be a book for "beginners," as Eire claims early on, it is rightly conceived as a book for non-specialists. Its erudition is immense, its interpretations are fair, acute, and well substantiated; its style is clear, even elegant and witty at times. End notes are kept to a minimum but supplemented with an extensive list of further readings. Most importantly, one never loses sight of the fact that these issues, however strange they might sound to us today, deeply matter to Eire. He is not one of those historians who approach this turbulent age with the superiority of 20/20 hindsight. Much, he admits, will remain forever unclear and uncertain about all history. Did this particular period of history have to happen as it did? Is it for the better that it happened the way it did? Those who believe that history is a simple upward and onward (progress all the way!) will find little support in Eire's magisterial assessment. "Reformations", a thoughtful, in no way triumphalist account of a watershed moment in early modern history, should become a new benchmark.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. On the 500 Anniversary of the Reformation -By Emmett A. CoyneLike the proverbial mosquito in the nudist colony, I know what to do but dont know where to begin! Eires magnus opus is timely on this occasion of the 500 Anniversary of Luthers piercing of the Body of Christ, leading to a reconfiguring of an image that once held Western society unified. No more. Reformations were key to the permanent decline of religious unity and religion altogether.For me, some books are best read beginning with the last chapter. I wish I had taken my own advice! I recommend a reader to consider this approach that will provide one with an eye for the probing questions Eire raises at the end of Reformations.Would that his penetrating scholarship were available when I was in my formative years, he would have been a probing Socratic companion to critically question historical persons and events in my educational trajectory. I might be a different person in a different place today.With a proclivity for philosophy, theology and history, I found his work a page turner, despite the size of Reformations. And he provided many hitherto unseen pictures that demanded close, intense scrutiny. Also, provided extensive historical context for the religious warfare, layering texture of the complexity of persons and events of the political and religious tensions that fed off each other.While Ive been down this beaten path, revisiting with him, he presents a kind of a kaleidoscope of historical twists and turns of persons and events, providing a refreshing reconfiguring that open to new questions and considerations.Eires offers a challenging, formidable work, demanding an equally formidable response. The result would be a tome as long his. He stimulates countless questions. He doesnt lay on the reader his answers to this complex history as raising open-ended questions.Particularly, I appreciated his raising probing questions of material while presenting it. While reading, questions were begging to be asked, so provocative was the offering, and he read my mind.Most historians seem intent on providing the cold facts of their interpretive research, abstractly letting it up to the reader process. Eire seems to anticipate questions and raises them, as if conscious of an audience present.Often, after unloading his scholarship he seems to end by saying, and so what? Given the limitations of the form, Eire creates an imaginary dialogue with the reader with stimulating, seemingly unresolvable, yet pertinent questions.I was particularly interested in the battle over the sacraments. While reformers were intent on an ad fontes approach to support their rejection of any or all sacraments, it seems to me they missed a deeper concern. Eire posits that a contentious issue for all was the number of sacraments in the Christian scriptures. He doesnt indicate in their return to biblical sources a more paramount concern than the sacraments was Jesus proclamation of the Kingdom of God. How all could stumble over this in their pursuit of seeking to be faithful to the sources of the Christian message in the texts seems incredulous! The essential kerygma, as supported by biblical scholars today, was the proclamation of the Kingdom. Jesus never said, The sacrament are at hand! It seems to me the reformers missed something of greater centrality in the message of Jesus than sacraments as his kerygma.The Orthodoxy version of Christianity was given short shrift. Was it because Orthodoxy is not seen as Western?Curious to me, why wasnt there any significant rebellion or reformation that erupted within Orthodoxy? It seems largely intact from the forces and issues that led to the collapse of Western Christianity. Was it because there were many patriarchs but only one pope? Easier to focus and project onto one than many? Why were Orthodox theologians less questioning, disturbed than Western theologians?How to interpret the small number of reviews here for this stimulating historical tour d force? Has this period become pass? I highly recommend his opus but increasingly difficult to get persons to read even lighter tomes. While Eire underscores the impact of the printing press as a vehicle for the Reformation, the vehicle today is a video camera. With editing, Reformations could be an engaging series for viewers than readers. Something for a Great Courses series?For a work of high quality, I was surprised at the numbers of typos I tripped upon with my casual,

unscrutinizing eye. And this is a product of Yale University Press!

A lively, expansive history of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations and the momentous changes they set in motion. This fast-paced survey of Western civilizations transition from the Middle Ages to modernity brings that tumultuous period vividly to life. Carlos Eire, popular professor and gifted writer, chronicles the two-hundred-year era of the Renaissance and Reformation with particular attention to issues that persist as concerns in the present day. Eire connects the Protestant and Catholic Reformations in new and profound ways, and he demonstrates convincingly that this crucial turning point in history not only affected people long gone, but continues to shape our world and define who we are today. The book focuses on the vast changes that took place in Western civilization between 1450 and 1650, from Gutenberg's printing press and the subsequent revolution in the spread of ideas to the close of the Thirty Years War. Eire devotes equal attention to the various Protestant traditions and churches as well as to Catholicism, skepticism, and secularism, and he takes into account the expansion of European culture and religion into other lands, particularly the Americas and Asia. He also underscores how changes in religion transformed the Western secular world. A book created with students and nonspecialists in mind, *Reformations* is an inspiring, provocative volume for any reader who is curious about the role of ideas and beliefs in history.

It takes an unusually perceptive, judicious, knowledgeable, and yes brave person to write a book this big and sweeping, given all the ink spilled and trees felled and terabytes devoted to the Reformation, and Carlos Eire is all of those. It is beautifully structured, gracefully written, evenhanded in its treatment of Catholic, Protestant, and Radical movements, and most importantly equally at home in the Reformation and the present. Read this and you will understand both worlds better. Craig Harline, Author of *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*