

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2017

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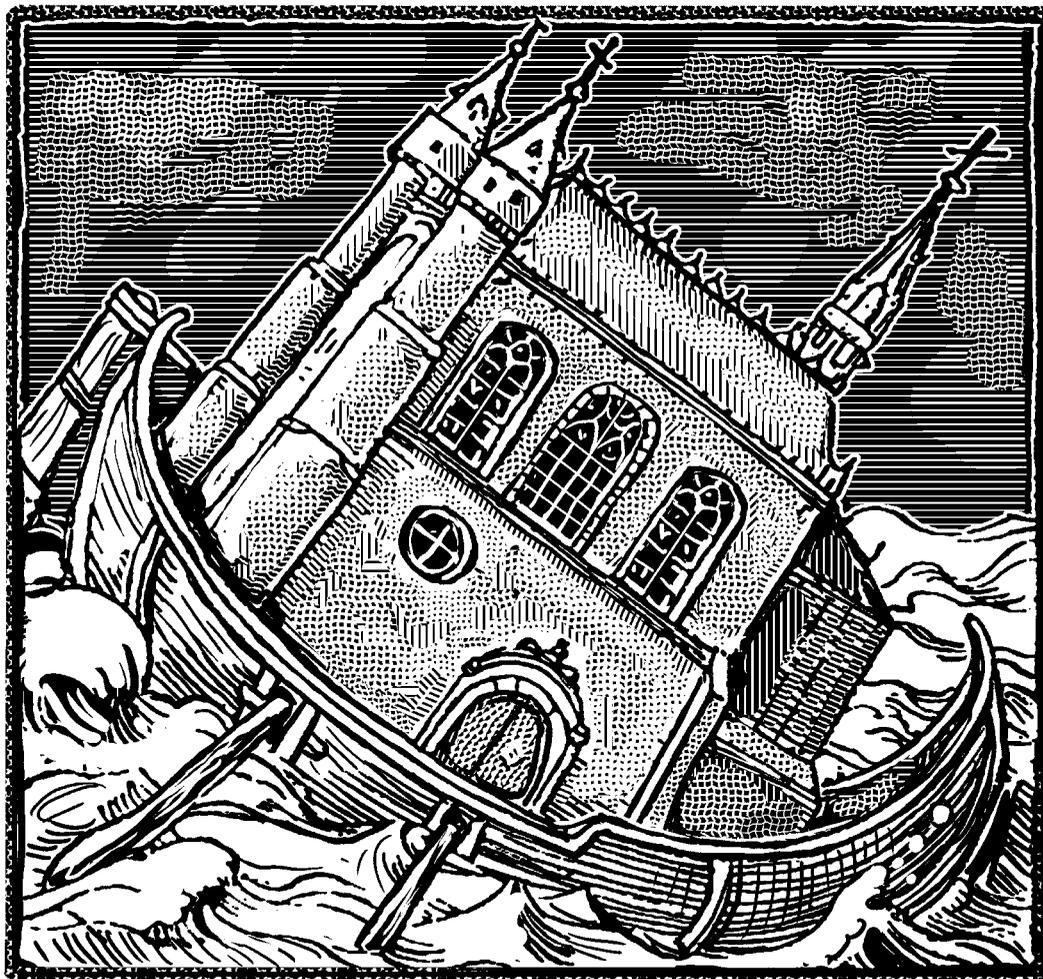
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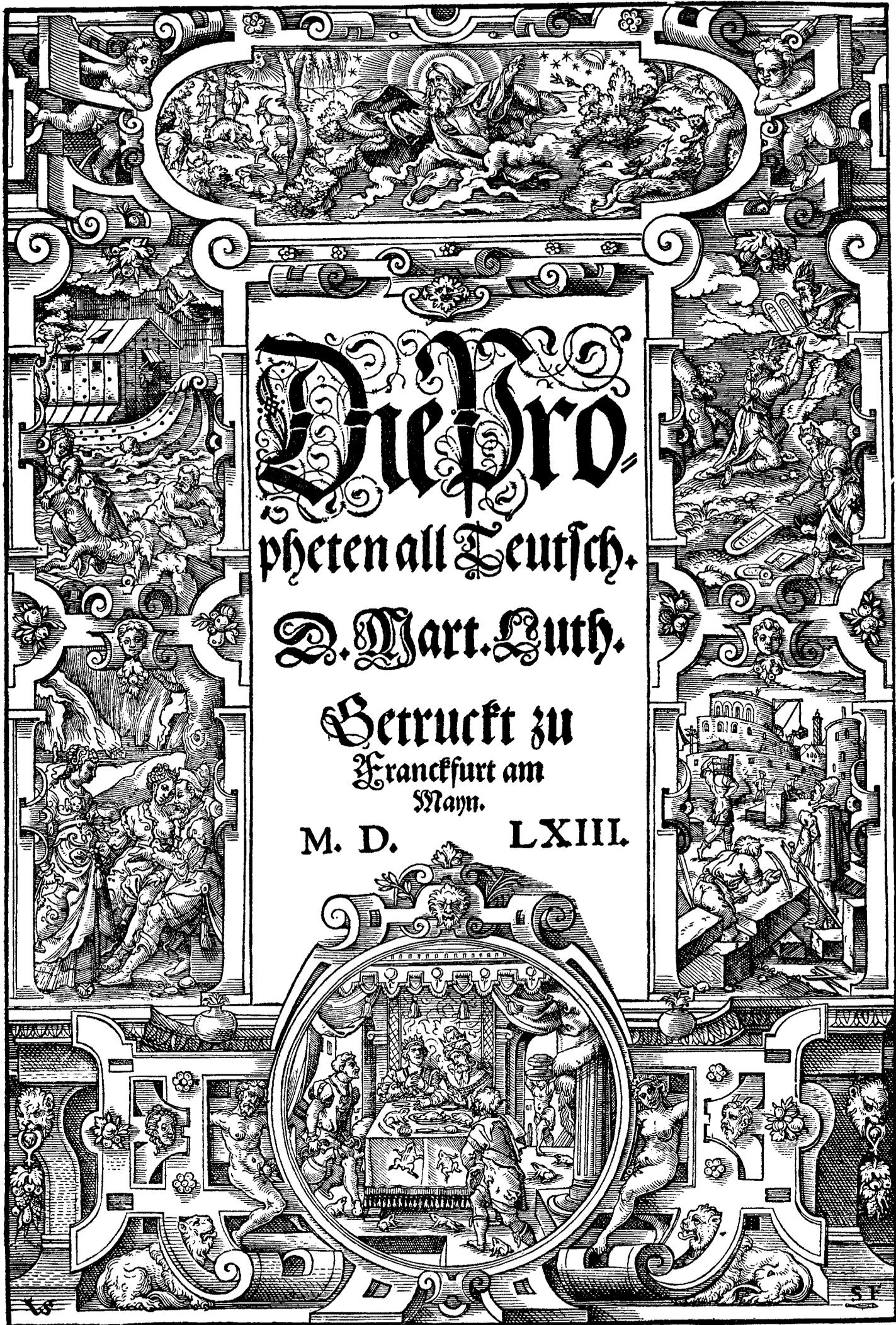
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PRICE: \$6.95

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Title page by Virgil Solis for a Lutheran Bible issued by Sigmund Feyerabend; Frankfurt, 1563 (original size)

REVOLUTION OF THE SAINTS

Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650, by Carlos M.N. Eire.
Yale University Press, 920 pages, \$40

CARLOS EIRE, AMERICA'S LEADING historian of the Reformation, which marked its 500th anniversary in October, has written a masterpiece of historical synthesis. The product of a lifetime's teaching and writing at Yale, his *Reformations*—the plural denoting not one unified turn in Christianity but rather several movements and counter-movements (Lutheran, Reformed, Radical, and Catholic) unfolding over time—surveys two centuries between the collapse of medieval Christendom and the founding of the modern Western world. Avoiding scholarly controversies and unencumbered with scholarly apparatus, the volume condenses the results of recent research into a coherent, well-structured narrative ranging from the Renaissance to the Thirty Years' War, the English Civil War, and beyond. Though a massive doorstop of a book, it is written in clear, often lively prose, with over 200 illustrations, and is addressed to "beginners and non-specialists."

But will anyone in America's universities read it? In a recent address to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni entitled "The Decline and Fall of History," historian Niall Ferguson pointed out that enrollments in history in U.S. colleges were declining rapidly. The number of history majors has fallen by almost a fifth (19%) in the five academic years between 2009-10 and 2014-15, exacerbating a decades-long trend. Even more alarming was the loss of cultural literacy about the history of Western civilization. For while the number of history majors has been declining, the subjects being taught, especially in the largest history departments, have been rapidly multiplying. Some of this diversification, welcome in itself, has come at the expense of subjects that used to be thought of as indispensable to educated citizens. There are many more courses on Buddhist kingship or Korean economic development, many fewer on the American Revolution or Greek democracy. There has also been a structural shift in faculty specializations: many more historians do gender studies (now 10% of history faculties), while the number of specializations in military, diplomatic, intellectual, legal, and constitutional history have been dropping. "American political history," as Ferguson notes, "appears to be flirting with extinction."

THE REFORMATION IS ONE OF THESE subjects that are rapidly disappearing from the American campus. Twenty years ago, to take one key indicator, all of the top dozen graduate programs in history in the U.S. had a specialist in the Reformation. Now only four do, and only two of those specialists are under 60. Seven of the top dozen now have no courses at all in Reformation history, graduate or undergraduate. At Princeton interested students might get permission to take courses in the Reformation at Princeton Theological Seminary, and at Columbia they can learn about the subject in the religion department or at Union Theological Seminary. But the top history departments in general have ceased to regard the Reformation as a subject that needs to be taught in depth, outside of broad survey courses or as unavoidable background for ever-popular courses on witchcraft or European colonialism.

Eire begs to differ with this trend. The importance of the Reformation to our understanding as citizens of Western countries he describes as the "chief overarching assumption behind the entire book."

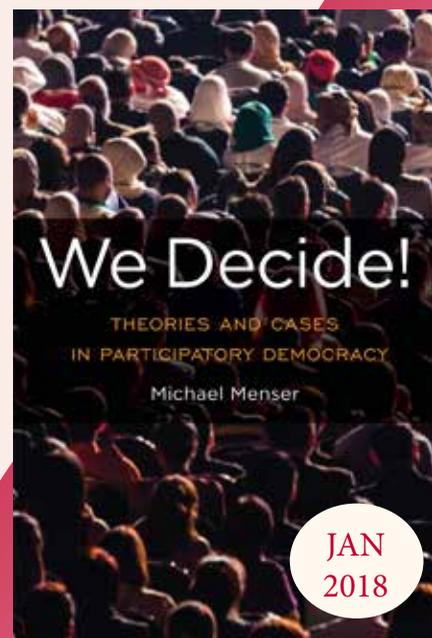
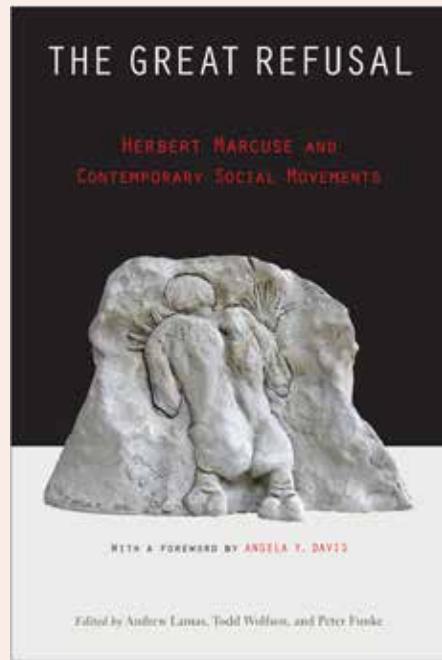
No Westerner can ever hope to know him- or herself, or the world he or she lives in, without first understanding this crucial turning-point in history. And the same goes for any non-Westerner who wants to understand Western civilization.... Given that those who are ignorant of the past can be more easily fooled and controlled in the present by power-hungry ideologues, or by their own worst impulses, this book has been written with a sense of urgency.

Reading Eire's rich, thoughtful overview of the period thus prompts the questions: What are American and foreign students at U.S. universities going to miss about the Western experience if the study of the Reformation is neglected? How might ignorance of the subject lead contemporaries to misunderstand the sources and value of the Western tradition, so often treated with contempt in the modern academy? What mistakes might a

knowledge of the Reformation help the modern world avoid?

WELL, ONE MISTAKE THAT MIGHT be avoided is the popular notion, heard on both left and right, that what modern Islam needs is a Reformation—a movement similar to that which changed the nature of Christianity in the early modern period. Such a proposition for Eire would rest on a gross misunderstanding of what the Reformation was, and what its long-term effects have been. What the Reformation was above all was a revolt against a unified ecclesiastical polity—the medieval Catholic Church headed by the pope—and its most obvious effect was the fragmenting of religious authority. But the situation of Western Christendom at the outbreak of the Reformation bears little resemblance to the already fragmented political landscape of the Islamic world today (and for the last 750 years) and the decentralized nature of its religious authority. Furthermore, as Eire describes in sickening detail, the outbreak of the Reformation in Germany in 1517 led directly to a century and a half of the most appalling Christian-on-Christian violence. Do we need more violence in the Middle East? And would a Reformation bring an end to the theocratic temptation in Islam? Eire's book is not encouraging. Theocracy in the Middle Ages was impossible after the Investiture Controversy of the late 11th century (which divorced the ecclesiastical polity from imperial authority) and the revival of Roman law in the 12th, but it was a common outcome in the cities and lands dominated by Calvinism. What brought about the end of politicized theologies and religious intolerance was not the reformations in Protestant and Catholic countries in the 16th century but their failure in the 17th century. It was only after Europeans were taught by more than a century of religious violence to see religion as a threat to public order rather than as its social glue—as "an explosive rather than an adhesive" in Eire's elegant phrase—that something like tolerance and the privatization of religious belief could take place. If Islam needs to recapitulate any phase of the Western past at all, it needs an Enlightenment, not a Reformation.

PROVOCATIVE READING...



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A GAIN, IF MODERN ACADEMICS AND other progressives knew more about the Reformation they might not be so ready as they seem at present to abandon the Western tradition of mutual toleration and the free competition of ideas. Were they to look in the historical mirror of the Reformation they might even notice that they are playing the part of history's villains, not its heroes. Some of the academy's recent judicial practices in fact bear a striking resemblance to those of the Spanish Inquisition, a tribunal to which Eire devotes careful attention.

[A]n accusation was all it took for one to be placed under suspicion and investigated. Accusations could come from anyone: a relative, or neighbor, or acquaintance, or one of the many lay spies and informants, known as *familiares*, whom the Inquisition scattered everywhere, strategically. Then, if one was arrested, nothing would be revealed concerning the charges, initially, or who had made the accusations, and one would be presumed guilty unless proven otherwise.

After this travesty of justice, in due course would come the *auto-da-fé*, a shaming ritual in which those who had been found guilty would be publicly humiliated and cast forth from the community, their lives ruined.

Eire sees the Inquisition as only one manifestation of the wider urge of Reformation governments and elites to impose ideological discipline on the sinful, wayward masses who refused to cooperate with their righteous superiors. Judicial procedures were important in this endeavor, but even more important was the apparatus of "confessionalization": the use of education, censorship, preaching, loyalty oaths, mandatory church attendance, and unspeakably brutal punishments for heresy. The in-your-face activists in this society were Calvinists and Puritans, eager to wipe out all ungodliness by violent destruction of the symbols of the old religion—iconoclasm—and by public demonstrations against heresy and vice. Protestant accusations of witchcraft and demon possession had much the same function in maintaining ideological discipline as accusations of racism or sexism today. As Cornell historian Brian Tierney once remarked, you don't need to believe in God to have a theocratic form of government.

It was the failure of confessionalization, the eventual reaction against the forcing of consciences, that finally brought Europe to embrace what became the Enlightenment principles of toleration, free speech, and freedom of religion. European governments and

elites were in the end compelled to recognize the limits of their authority, and to acknowledge that one's beliefs are a private concern, not a public one, "that is, a matter of personal conviction rather than something imposed on everyone by established authorities." The historical amnesia of the present carries the risk that such hard-won lessons, taught by centuries of suffering, cruelty, and bloodshed, might have to be learned all over again.

I NDEED, THOSE WHO CONTROL THE HIGH places of our culture today seem disposed to repeat the experiment of the Confessional Age; they seem bent on leveraging their cultural and political power to wipe out ways of thinking with which they disagree. Like John Calvin and his followers they want to delegitimize any ungodly ruler who denies the truth of their faith. And like Protestants after 1517, they seem convinced they are on the side of God and of history. They might want to reflect on the long-term outcomes of a movement that resembles modern progressivism in more than a few ways: in its conviction of its own rightness, its intolerance of dissent, its determination to remake the world in conformity with its own vision of the good.

For as it turned out, Protestantism did not succeed in its aims, and in some respects caused unintended consequences that led to its own decline. Early Protestant successes in Germany and Scandinavia, Holland and England turned out to define the eventual limits of the movement's footprint in Europe. The Holy Roman Empire in southern Germany and Spain; the Italian states; and France—the greater part of Europe—ultimately stopped the march of Protestantism. Even more remarkably, during the centuries of the Reformation it was Catholicism that had by far the greater success in missionizing the world for Christianity. That the number of Catholics in the world today is still vastly greater than the number of Protestants is a measure of the early Protestants' failure to turn their prophetic vision of history into reality. Even the theological successes of Protestantism—the desacralization of nature and human experience of which Carlos Eire writes so well—turned out to be a precondition of the scientific materialism of modern Europe and Progressive America, which has little use for Christianity. The Reformations of the early modern period may briefly have made Europeans into more godly folk—and Eire is not sure even of that—but in the long run they made Europe what it is today, the first society in history to reject religion itself.

James Hankins is professor of history at Harvard University.

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