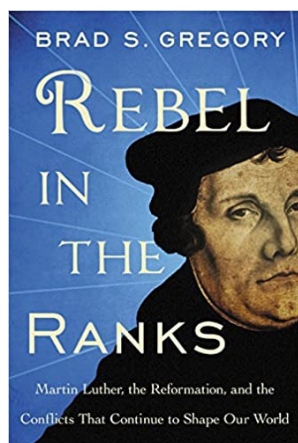


Brad S. GREGORY. *Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019. 304 pp., hardbound. ISBN: 978-0062471178.

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That the Reformation ended the Middle Ages and prepared the way to Modernity is a thesis defended by Brad S. Gregory, Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. In his book *Rebel in the Ranks*, Gregory maintains that the Reformation had the long-term effect of gradually and unintentionally transforming Europe from a world permeated by Christianity to one in which religion would be separated from public life. Drawing upon the sources utilized in his previously published, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass., USA: Harvard University Press, 2012), Gregory provides an in-depth portrait of Martin Luther, his life and teaching.

In September, 1517 Luther published a one-page broadsheet entitled, “A Disputation against Scholastic Theology.” Within it he condemned theologians who make use of “wretched” Aristotle. “No one can become a theologian,” Luther wrote, “unless he becomes one without Aristotle, Indeed the whole of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.”

Luther was not alone in objecting to scholastic theology. Prior to Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam, usually celebrated as a Renaissance humanist, in his *Praise of Folly* (1511), mocked scholastic theologians for their arcane jargon.

Publication of Luther’s “Ninety-five Theses” shortly thereafter turned Luther into a public figure. Because it concerned matters in which only theologians would likely be interested, his shortly-earlier disputation against scholastic theology a few weeks before had not brought him much notice. The “Ninety-Five Theses,” however, addressed popular devotions and practices related to the Church’s teaching.

At the time he published his famous *Theses* Luther had assumed, rather than rejected, papal authority. He recognized that indulgences are legitimate, purgatory is real, and intercessory prayer is efficacious. Luther's main target at the time was the careless dispensation of indulgences by reckless preachers. It was when he addressed issues related to human sinfulness, (namely, God's forgiveness, and the ideal Christian life) that a distinctive, Lutheran theology started to emerge.

Human beings, Luther argued, need to be made aware of their complete inability to assist in their own salvation. Salvation is a gratuitous gift of God. This claim contradicted traditional Catholic teaching and could not be ignored by the papacy.

The first papal reaction was to handle Luther quietly within his own religious order. At the prompting of Pope Leo X, the head of the Augustinian Order made inquiries to determine whether Luther was preaching "novelties." Under questioning, Luther wanted to know why any of his teaching is considered wrong, Gregory comments: "Except for his continuing disdain for scholastic theology, Luther's teaching remained traditional in its reliance on canon law, the church fathers, and scripture."

Nevertheless, Pope Leo gave Luther sixty days to appear in Rome for questioning. The Elector, Frederic III of Saxony, prevented Luther from going. Gregory notes that this was the first instance of political protection accorded Luther, and suggests that, without that protection, Luther's subsequent rise to fame would not have occurred.

When Luther failed to appear in Rome, Pope Leo sent Thomas de Vio, (better known as Cajetan), a distinguished interpreter of Thomas Aquinas, to investigate. Cajetan did not find Luther to be a heretic, but he did find his ideas about faith to be "weird."

Luther insisted that no one can be justified except by faith. Without faith all other things are acts of presumption and desperation. In debate Luther holds firm: "I do not want to be compelled to affirm something contrary to my conscience, for I believe without the slightest doubt that this is the meaning of Scripture." Luther insisted, "Scripture's authority supersedes papal authority. The pope is not above but under the Word of God. The repository of God's revelation is Scripture alone. All other authorities — popes, councils, church fathers, theologians — are subordinate to it."

It was agreed that Luther's thesis would be publicly debated before relevant theological faculties of Erfurt and Paris. At a meeting in June 1519, two-hundred scholars were in attendance, including some rowdy students.

In the course of 1518, Luther had written forty-five different tracts and over eighty editions of his works appeared in the same year. In the following year that number doubled. In his work entitled "The Papacy at Rome: A treatise on Good Works," Luther charges that popes, bishops, and priests, are princes of the devil's army. Satan himself has conquered the papacy and installed the Anti-Christ on the Papal Throne. Rome responds with the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, condemning forty-nine propositions attributed to Luther, including the affirmation of the priesthood of all believers.

In a treatise, "To the Christian Nobility," Luther exhorts German political leaders to take up twenty-seven measures to reform the Church. Many of these imperatives

concerned ending the procedures by which money is extracted by Rome. Other of his directives advocated rejection of the practices and teachings characteristic of medieval Christianity such as pilgrimages understood as works of devotion. Friaries should not be endowed. A clergy should be free to marry.

The list goes on: "Saint's Days" should be turned into working days. The Church's fasting regulations and dietary restrictions should be left to individual discretion. Pilgrimage chapels should be destroyed. Canonization of saints should cease, canon law should be abolished, university teaching of Aristotle's ideas about nature and ethics should cease.

Clear to Rome was that the implementation of these changes would alter Christian life beyond recognition, which was exactly Luther's point." Luther had trouble getting the papal bull posted. Disruptions accompanied the publicly-posted, *Exsurge Domine*. Yet, Luther claimed he did not reject the established Church in principle; he rejected it because he maintained that papal authority contradicts his understanding of God's Word. Christians needed liberation from a despotic church. The papal court was more corrupt than Babylon or Sodom.

On the issue of faith, Luther's position may be summarized as follows. No one can live up to God's standards. Salvation is something God gives to you freely at birth. The rest depends on faith. Liberated by faith from the impossibility of meeting God's standards for salvation, you no longer need to be worried about it. God has already bestowed it upon you. You are thus free to focus upon your neighbor and his needs. Indeed, you are bound to do so as an expression of your faith.

By 1520, in his tract, "The Freedom of Christianity," Luther was no longer pursuing reform within an existing Church; he was calling for a revolution in the name of God's Word. The result: In 1521, Luther was finally declared a heretic.

Brad Gregory finds the Reformation to be a paradox, a religious revolution that led to the secularization of society. The individualism and liberalism that flowed from Luther's teaching led to a conception of society in which you can believe whatever you want, live however you wish within the laws of the state, and so can everyone else.

The first unintended consequence of the Reformation was the proliferation of many rival versions of Protestantism. Disagreement about Christian doctrine mattered because religion informed politics, law, economics, education, family life, morality, and the culture at large. Most civic leaders believed that unity of belief is a condition of successful government. Thus, from the perspective of the state, religion had to be redefined and its scope narrowed. In 1581, under the influence of René Descartes, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes, Holland outlawed Catholic worship altogether. In Amsterdam, believing Catholics could practice their faith behind closed doors, subject to payment of a fee.

In 1614, the Dutch began colonizing what became the British colonies between New England and the Chesapeake Bay. Nine of the new colonies established churches, but only in Virginia did the Church of England become the established church. Absent religious restraints, many Puritans, abandoned the position of their predecessors and participated in the Atlantic slave trade.

Today, Erasmus of Rotterdam (mentioned above) is known as more than a “Renaissance humanist”: a “Christian humanist,” combining Christian thought with the classical tradition. A Catholic priest, he earned a doctorate in theology at the University of Turin and, for a time, taught at the University of Leuven. He is known for his important Latin and Greek translations of the New Testament. Erasmus, published numerous editions and translations of patristic writings (among them Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, and Origen).

An excellent description of his humanism is to be found in an essay by Erika Rummel (Emeritus Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University, and currently Adjunct Professor, University of Toronto). In an essay published in 2017 under the title, “Desiderius Erasmus,” she provides an interesting contrast between the thought of Luther and Erasmus.

Probably before Luther, Erasmus had acknowledged that the Church was in need of reform. Early on, his support of Luther soon faded. At issue for Erasmus was an individual’s capacity for self-improvement.

For Erasmus, education is the key to self-improvement. The thrust of his educational program was promotion of *docta pietas*, “learned piety,” or what he termed “the philosophy of Christ.” As a biblical scholar, Erasmus naturally supported the humanist call for *ad fontes*, a return to the texts themselves in their original languages. Therefore, he promoted the study of Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

Unlike Luther, Erasmus did not believe in the literal interpretation of Sacred Scripture. He held instead that consensus, tradition, commonly accepted creeds, and universal synods, are to be consulted when adjudicating ambiguous biblical passages. “Erasmus,” Erik Rummel says, “rarely ventured into doctrinal questions, preferring simple faith and devotion over dialectics and scholastic disputation.”

In fact, he lampooned scholastic theologians. “Fortified with definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and propositions, both implicit and explicit, they quibble about concepts, relations, instants, formalities, quiddities and ecceties. Such is the erudition and complexity they all display that I fancy the Apostles would need the help of another Holy Spirit to join issue on these topics.”

In 1524, Erasmus published *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe*, a politely worded disquisition addressed to Luther on the subject of free will. Rummel comments, “It showed their fundamental disagreement on crucial theological issues. Although Erasmus had been in sympathy [with Luther] for a time, he was not prepared to challenge the authority of the church and never promoted schism.”

*Jude P. Dougherty*

*Dean Emeritus of the School of Philosophy*

*The Catholic University of America*

*Washington, D.C., USA*

*e-mail: smithws@cua.edu*

*ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3646-6964>*