



# Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World

*Brad S. Gregory*

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When Martin Luther published his *95 Theses* in October 1517, he had no intention of starting a revolution. But very quickly his criticism of indulgences became a rejection of the papacy and the Catholic Church emphasizing the Bible as the sole authority for Christian faith, radicalizing a continent, fracturing the Holy Roman Empire, and dividing Western civilization in ways Luther—a deeply devout professor and spiritually-anxious Augustinian friar—could have never foreseen, nor would he have ever endorsed. From Germany to England, Luther’s ideas inspired spontaneous but sustained uprisings and insurrections against civic and religious leaders alike, pitted Catholics against Protestants, and because the Reformation movement extended far beyond the man who inspired it, Protestants against Protestants. The ensuing disruptions prompted responses that gave shape to the modern world, and the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the Reformation continue to influence the very communities, religions, and beliefs that surround us today.

How Luther inadvertently fractured the Catholic Church and reconfigured Western civilization is at the heart of renowned historian Brad Gregory’s *Rebel in the Ranks*. While recasting the portrait of Luther as a deliberate revolutionary, Gregory describes the cultural, political, and intellectual trends that informed him and helped give rise to the Reformation, which led to conflicting interpretations of the Bible, as well as the rise of competing churches, political conflicts, and social upheavals across Europe. Over the next five hundred years, as Gregory’s account shows, these conflicts eventually contributed to further epochal changes—from the Enlightenment and self-determination to moral relativism, modern capitalism, and consumerism, and in a cruel twist to Luther’s legacy, the freedom of every man and woman to practice no religion at all.

With the scholarship of a world-class historian and the keen eye of a biographer, Gregory offers readers an in-depth portrait of Martin Luther, a reluctant rebel in the ranks, and a detailed examination of the Reformation to explain how the events that transpired five centuries ago still resonate—and influence us—today.

## Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World Details

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## From Reader Review Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World for online ebook

George P. says

October 31, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation. On that date in 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther posted a document calling for academic debate on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, Saxony. The posting of this document — titled, *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, or more popularly *Ninety-five Theses* — inaugurated the process whereby Luther broke with the Roman Catholic Church, the end results of which are still felt today.

The consequences of the Protestant Reformation are the subject of Brad S. Gregory's new book, *Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World*. Luther and other Protestants intended to reform the Church. That was their stated aim. However, it is not that consequence, but three other *unintended* consequences that capture Gregory's attention.

The first was “the proliferation of so many rival versions of Protestantism.” Protestants agree that Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the final authority for Christians in matters of faith and practice. They came to this view as their debates with Roman Catholic theologians about indulgences and other matters raised the question of what authority everyone must acknowledge as the *final* authority in such matters.

The problem was that acknowledging Scripture's final authority did not result in a unified interpretation of Scripture. Instead, Protestants argued amongst themselves: Lutheran versus Zwinglian versus Reformed versus Anabaptist. To this day, while there is one Roman Catholic Church (at least nominally), there is no one Protestant Church — only Protestant churches, who still disagree among themselves, often to the point of breaking communion with one another.

Secondly, Gregory argues, “Just as the reformers never intended to pave the way for any and all interpretations of God's Word, so they never intended to facilitate endless doctrinal controversy or recurrent violence, let alone to divide Christendom itself.” Again, their stated aim was to reform the Church, not to break it. And yet, it broke nonetheless.

Part of the reason for this was that in the 16th and 17th centuries, religion was always “more-than-religion,” as Gregory puts it. He explains what he means by way of a contrast: “Religion today is a distinct area of life — separate from your career, professional relationships, recreational activities, consumer behavior, and so on. None of this was true in the early sixteenth century: religion was neither a matter of choice nor separate from the rest of life.” Because of this, controversies in religion became controversies in society, culture, politics and economics. The Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th century were the most violent expressions of these conflicts, but not the only ones.

These two unintended consequences, in combination, defined the major political problem modernity had to solve. If people cannot agree on how to interpret the Bible, and if their disagreements lead to social conflict and war, what must be done to achieve peace? The answer that began to emerge in the 17th century can be captured in a single word: *secularization*.

Gregory defines a secular society as “one in which religion would be separate from public life, becoming instead a matter of individual preference.” If religion in medieval society was more-than-religion, then religion in modern society had to become less-than-life. It had to become a component, not the whole. This

diminishment of the scope of religion was accompanied by an increase in the scope of personal freedom. Medieval Christendom may have been dominated by a Christian worldview, but in modern society, individuals “can believe whatever they want to believe about morality or purpose and live their lives accordingly.” In short, as Gregory notes, “The Reformation is a paradox: a religious revolution that led to the secularization of society.”

There are benefits to this secularization, of course. Religious freedom — more broadly, freedom of conscience — is the most obvious one. But there are downsides as well. Secularization was meant to bring peace among warring Christian nations, but secular societies have not proven themselves to be necessarily peaceful ones, as the fate of 20th-century Communist nations so tragically attests.

Indeed, secular societies are characterized by what Gregory calls “hyperpluralism.” If it was hard to unite societies divided between Protestants and Catholics (or among Protestants), how easy will it be to unite a society where 51 flavors of religion, non-religion and irreligion are on offer?

“So here we are,” Gregory concludes, “so very free and so very far away from Martin Luther and what he started in a small town in Germany five hundred years ago.”

### **Book Reviewed**

Brad S. Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2017).

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P.P.S. If you found my review helpful, please vote “Yes” on my Amazon.com review page.

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### **BHodges says**

A concise, clear overview of the Reformation from Luther to the present. Makes the same basic arguments from Gregory's *Unintended Reformation*, but speaks chronologically to a broader audience.

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### **Mac McCormick III says**

I was looking for something a bit different to read when I came across *Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World* by Brad S. Gregory. My interests in History generally lie in the areas of the military and diplomacy, but I made a good decision when I bought this book. Gregory describes Martin Luther's religious journey and his part in the Reformation, the history of the Reformation, and how the Reformation and its conflicts changed over time and came to influence and secularize the modern world. Throughout the book, Gregory continues to come back to the same theme, summed up in the first sentence of Chapter Four: "The Reformation is a paradox: a religious revolution that led to the secularization of society."

I have to admit that this book is well outside of my wheelhouse; although it is a History book, it deals with the History of Religion and theology, both of which I haven't read a lot about. All that goes to say that I can't judge this book one way or the other on content or the author's conclusions. What I can say is that I know a

lot more about the Reformation and how it impacted the world today now than I did before I read Rebel in the Ranks.

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### **JJ Meredith says**

Really fascinating history of the Protestant Reformation. Gregory focuses on Luther, then zooms out to all of 16th-17th century Europe, and concludes by tracing the modern-day impact of The Reformation. A lot of detail - with a smidgen of editorializing - that makes this a must-read for anyone interested in the events and impact of Luther's 95 Theses.

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### **John Kaufmann says**

Even though this book ostensibly is about Martin Luther and the Reformation, I categorized it as history rather than religion. The major focus of the book was to show how Luther's foundational principles -- of faith before good works, and that "Scripture stands alone" as the final authority, and not church hierarchy or authority -- eventually led to the secular principles we associate with the Western world today : separation of church and state; individualism, democracy; and the use of reason (philosophy) and science to discern truth.

Of course the book gets into some of the finer doctrinal or theological points differentiating Lutheranism and Protestantism from each other and from Catholicism, but the author keeps it brief and understandable. He also traces the historical development and conflicts that arose between the different variations of Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation, but with an eye toward laying the groundwork for separating the roles of church and state, etc. A large focus was ton how the split from the monolithic religion of the Catholic Church was impossible to contain, and encouraged competing interpretations that led to the conflicts and eventual resolutions we now hold so dear. I found it very interesting and informative.

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### **Robert D. Cornwall says**

October 31, 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses (whether or not on the door of Wittenberg Castle is a matter of debate). That act has been understood to have been the match that lit the Protestant Reformation, though it's doubtful that Luther thought he was doing anything of the kind. An anniversary of this magnitude, of course, requires a flurry of publications dealing with the matter at hand. Many a book on Luther and the Reformation have been published in the past year. One of them is this book by Brad Gregory.

Rebel in the Ranks is part biography, but it is more an exploration of the movement Luther launched, but which quickly took on a life of its own, and has implications for the world to this day. You might call this book -- from Luther to Trump! Only the first chapter, "A Reluctant Rebel" focuses specifically on Luther. Gregory offers a breezy but informative introduction to Luther and his move from "busy and burdened friar" to reformer. We're introduced to the main events that Luther undertook in his effort to challenge the status quo, and the writings that he used to advance his cause. We see a man who pushed the boundaries of the religious world, and then pulled back a bit when he saw how others, like his colleague Andreas von Karlstadt, took the reforms much further than he was comfortable with. Gregory does a nice job laying out the context of his efforts, including the discomfort among many in Germany with things going on in Rome. The issue of the indulgences is rooted in the feeling that funds were being diverted from Germany to build

monuments in Rome. There is also the political dynamics of the Holy Roman Empire, which had come under the leadership of the young Charles V. Gregory notes that Luther may have launched the Reformation, but he never controlled it. By taking his stand on sola scriptura and the Holy Spirit made sure that no one could control it. "The Reformation will be uncoupled from the dramatic odyssey of the deeply religious man and will become the story of a no less dramatic and deeply contested movement."

The chapter on Luther takes up nearly a third of the book, with the remaining three chapters dividing the remainder of the pages. From this introduction to Luther we move in chapter two to the "Fractious Movement." We encounter Karlstadt, Zwingli, the revolutionary nature of the Peasants War, the Anabaptists, some of whom emerged from Luther's work and others from Zwingli, or on their own, but taking a very different tack. We see Luther appear again in conflict with Erasmus over free will, and with Zwingli over the Eucharist. Of course there must be a conversation about Munster.

By the time we move to chapter three, titled "A Troubled Era," Luther has passed from the scene and new forces emerge. There will be developments within Lutheranism as it spread into Scandinavia and people like Philip Melancthon sought to develop further Luther's legacy. We meet with Calvin and the Radical Reformation that emerged after Munster. We can't forget the Catholic Reformation and the wars that broke out in the Holy Roman Empire, France, England, the Laow Countries. As we take this journey we see reform taking multiple forms, with competition everywhere for control. We see an assertive Reformed Christianity taking form and expanding rapidly, often emerging out of Geneva. Again, we cover a lot of ground in a short amount of space. Not everything gets its due, but that's not the point.

Finally, in chapter four Gregory takes us from the seventeenth century to the present. He wants to show us how the Reformation principles morphed into something else, including a drive toward secularization. We begin in Holland where religious differences are tolerated but also controlled, with the pay off being economic growth. That vision would later pass on to England and then to the United States. Freedom is a primary there here, but as Gregory notes, its not without its draw backs.

This is an interesting and thought-provoking read. It is not a biography of Luther, though Luther plays a significant role in the story. The last clause of the subtitle catches the essence of the book and that is the "conflicts that continue to shape our world." If you're looking for a good, brief biography of Luther, I recommend Volker Leppin's Martin Luther: A Late Medieval Life. If you want to take a broader look at things, check out Rebel in the Ranks. I think you'll like it.

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## Steve says

Gregory attributes the birth of Modernism to Luther and the Reformation. The advent of the doctrine of sola scriptura , spawned a theological relativism, the loss of authority and a kind of interpretative anarchy. Gregory fails to note whether the breakdown was already emerging prior to Luther, and how "Christian" the culture of the late medieval period was "on the ground".

As Carl Trueman in his review notes: "narratives like that offered by Gregory, which blame the reformers for the collapse of the church, are typically predicated on a somewhat romantic view of the Middle Ages and a narrow, rather idealist, understanding of historical change."

## Chris Miller says

Brad Gregory has done a magnificent job of explaining the pivotal points in the life, career, and legacy of Martin Luther. His explanations of complex, competing theologies and philosophies is done in a way that explains their importance as well as the relationships with other groups in a way that does not 'dummy down' the information, but renders it understandable to the casual reader. This could be a fine reference book but an index would have helped a great deal. Well done, never-the-less.

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## Steve says

This book starts with an examination of the factors leading to Luther's criticism of the practices of the Catholic Church that started the Reformation and moves forward from there. The Reformation gave rise to a lot of different interpretations of the Word and lots of different Christian churches but it also immediately changed the relationship between religion and government and spawned many wars for "more than religion" throughout Europe. The Reformation and the ideas of religion and freedom of religion that came out of it are evident in the founding documents of the United States. One extremely unintended consequence of the Reformation today that would horrify the highly religious men that started it is the spread of the idea of a freedom to create a new region or not practice any religion at all. I really enjoyed this book's look into the consequences of the Reformation beyond the 1520's to the present day. I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads Giveaways.

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## Austin says

"But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." -Thomas Jefferson

This book is an excellent way to not only learn a quick but concise overview of the life and ideas of Martin Luther, but also to see how truly novel his ideas were and how they transformed the world into the way we know it today.

An excellent point author Brad S. Gregory brings up throughout the book is how religion in the 16th century was, by modern standards, "more-than-religion;" that is, it wasn't just a private activity that individuals engaged in whenever they pleased, but rather was all-encompassing and influenced all facets of life and society, from economics to politics, family and community, etc. It may seem strange and even barbaric to modern readers who learn about wars of religion over seemingly arbitrary conflicts of doctrine - who cares if a soul is saved through works or by God's grace alone? But when not only this life but the next (that is, one's salvation) is on the line, then these doctrinal disputes are very serious indeed.

Another interest point that Gregory brings up is the evolution of "profit over piety," describing the Dutch Republic of the 17th century and the way that religious tolerance allowed merchants from all religions to flourish and prosper in Amsterdam. Instead of preaching about avoiding avarice and vanity, greed and want, philosophers began to talk about leading a good life and working for a bigger piece of the pie, so to speak. Adam Smith, for example, in his "Wealth of Nations" discusses the moral benefit of self-interest for the betterment of society by the "invisible hand."

The success of Amsterdam influenced founding fathers of the United States James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, whose encouragement of religious pluralism resulted not only a freedom of religion, but also a freedom from religion. The result of the Reformation was that anyone could - and did - decide for themselves what the Bible said and meant. This led to the individual deciding what Christian denomination they should join that came closest to their own interpretation of the Bible. This in turn led to people deciding that they didn't need religion in their lives at all; the birth of secularism.

The book ends with a jab at postmodernism and moral relativism, what author Brad S. Gregory sees as a result of the Reformation. If everyone can decide what is right, a relativist would ask, then who can decide what is wrong? What is right for one may be wrong for someone else, and since there is no clear concept of a moral good, then isn't everyone right? The irony the author sees in this liberal theory is that it inevitably leads to such sources as Fox News and Breitbart as being "right;" after all, who's to say they're wrong? Another point the author brings up is the watershed moment in recent American history that every book nowadays seems to discuss; the 2016 election, and the inevitable conclusion of "profit over piety" in the ballot results. While I do not agree with the author on all points, it does make one think about the unintended consequences of the Reformation (and how "horrified" Martin Luther and John Calvin would be at the rise of secularism as a result of their focus on sola scriptura and the correct meaning of the Bible).

A fascinating, concise read that makes you think.

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## **John Martindale says**

When I've summarized, connected the dots and reflected upon the significance of the reformation from other histories, the specific aspects that Gregory focused upon in "Rebel in the Ranks" are what has stood most out to me as most interesting.

Luther set a precedent by rebellion against certain traditions and church authorities based upon the higher authority of scripture. But the huge problem that "scripture alone" brought forth was the proliferation of biblical interpretation of scripture which was completely unacceptable to Luther. For Luther it was more "My interpretation of scripture alone, and if you disagree with anything I teach, you are worthless pig that is possessed by Satan and should be put down without mercy like a rabid dog". The toxic mix of the belief that correct doctrine was essential if one was not to be tortured in hell for all of eternity, combined with solo scriptura, meant by their own reading of scripture they learned the "truth" and would not therefore burn, but everyone else who read the same text slightly differently were most definitely going to hell and taking everyone else convinced of their damnable heresies with them. It was a recipe for a lot of hatred and violence. Indeed scripture alone cannot and never will result in a unity of belief, unless it is combined with political force, a culture of fear or credulous, unthinking conformity of the majority. The only reason Lutherism and Calvinism managed to become so widespread was they gained political support that ruthlessly martyred or exiled those who differed. But after so many years of violence and chaos, and many still desiring to live according to principle of scripture alone, many were gradually faced with the option of making religion more of a private matter and allowing for religious tolerance, or keeping hold of Christendom--the mix of church and state and drowning Europe in blood. All in all, Gregory points out how the reformation, and the "more than religion wars" that followed, not only unintentionally lead to freedom of religion and 1000s up 1000s of new denominations that were all sure they alone had the truth, but it resulted ultimately in a wide-spread embrace of secularism and a wide embrace of consumerism, which would all have been anathema to the reformers. As decisive as religion was, many turned to reason to provide a solid foundation of truth, this too ultimately failed, birthing post-modernism.

One has to wonder if Luther knew what would result from his taking a stand, if he still would done so.

### **Joseph J. says**

I received this book through a Goodreads giveaway. This is not a birth to death comprehensive biography of Martin Luther. Neither is this a brief history of the Reformation to a point in historical time. Rather Brad Gregory uses the impact of Martin Luther amid already growing anti-Catholic sentiment to chart the unforeseen effects of the Reformation. Indeed, the effects of the Reformation, Gregory argues, led to the rise of secularism and robust capitalism and even to the divided aims which we face as a country today. In short Luther, in releasing multitudes from the oppression of the Catholic Church (and its abuses), unwittingly frees people to pursue their own beliefs, including the choice not to believe. The state no longer enforces religion; rather increasingly educated individuals pursue their own beliefs and lifestyles often free of any organized religion. I found most interesting the growing capitalism of Amsterdam in the 16th.-17th. centuries, when wealth was pursued without guilt owing to Biblical teachings. Gregory brings Luther's impact into the writings of our founders and even into politics in the age of Trump. This is a unique look at the Reformation.

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### **Amy Mclellan says**

It was pretty good at providing a rather simplistic overview of the Protestant Reformation. I can't really remember the middle part because it dragged on....Until the end when Gregory ties global warming back to the reformation. I would have stopped reading but I only had two and a half pages to go at that point.

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### **Blake says**

One of the best books I've read this year. The book follows the story of the loss of the Catholic church's monopoly as the arbiter of orthodoxy and morality for society within Christendom, replaced by a Protestant ethos of every man interpreting the Bible and morality himself. This progressively led to conflicts and wars over countless varied interpretations, which ultimately forced nations to adopt more and more liberal policies towards freedoms of conscience and religion, changing and reducing the very nature of religion within society. Along came the enlightenment and with the rise of modern science, the ultimate result at the extreme end was moral relativism and postmodernism. For better or worse, the theory is fascinating and convincing.

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### **Jonny Parshall says**

This is probably the best book I've read on the Reformation, and thankfully, the most objective. The research is put well, though some speculation in the final stretch might be oddly placed.

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