

Response to Christopher Ocker's "Reformations that Matter (and Some that Don't)"

By Augustine Thompson, OP

Professor of History, Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology

November 6, 2014

When asked to respond to this lecture, I set myself to rereading two books on the topic. One was Gerhart Ladner's The Idea of Reform (1959), which challenged me deeply as an undergraduate. It reminded me that, from the Fathers until the Middle Ages, reformatio was something that happened to individuals, not religious institutions or systems of belief. In the West, this was conceived of as reformare in melius and happened in the soul. Early modern reformations were something new and different. Rereading Brad Gregory's The Unintended Reformation (2012), with its dismissal of supersessionist narratives, I was reminded that the early modern reformations are still with us. Like Christopher, Brad Gregory emphasizes their unintended, contingent, and paradoxical legacies. Both agree that the famous men of our history classes, be they Catholic, Reformed, or Lutheran, not to mention the Radicals, all pretty much failed in what they intended to accomplish. Let me suggest yet another narrative, which for want of a better title I will call, "Nothing Succeeds like Failure."

Late-Medieval Catholics failed: for all the hothouse piety of the 1400s, the medieval Church failed to produce a community of Christians in melius reformati. This failure left the conviction

that something was wrong, something doctrinal and institutional. The Reformers' answer was to refound belief and practice on the Scriptures alone. That project failed: instead of a clear and certain program of reform, there was violent, bitter, and divisive controversies over what Scripture itself meant. This fostered a growing uncertainty as to whether theological debate could resolve anything.

To avoid the religious contention that could rip nations apart (witness the English Civil War or the Fronde), rulers turned to confessionalism. While making England safe for Anglicans; Scandinavia and parts of Germany safe for Lutherans; Scotland and Switzerland safe for the Reformed, France (mostly) and the Spanish dominions safe for (orthodox) Catholics, it left pretty much everywhere unsafe for almost everyone else. Confessionalism made local religion harmless, because controlled by the state. But it failed, miserably. By the end of the Wars of Religion, Confessional Europe was devastated and exhausted. Religion appeared (and still appears to many today), not the solution, but the problem. So, starting with Descartes, thinkers and theorists proposed that reason could give surer answers to ultimate questions and moral issues. But philosophy seems to have failed: over 300 years of inquiry has produced no consensus on just about any fundamental question. Relativism and indifference, what Gregory calls the "Kingdom of Whatever," seems the current predicament.

So, what to do? First in Holland, then in England, and famously in the United States, it was discovered that privatizing religious and ethical choices could bring peace and prosperity. So long as believers leave each other alone, we can get on with what really matters: shopping. And neo-Liberal theorists assure us that private vices can be public virtues. The Fathers would be horrified. And the Goods Life is probably a formula for ecological ruin, and so yet another failure. But of that I will spare you.

Christopher began with an unfortunate "German" who got caught up in the Guadalajara Inquisition. I have a favorite heretic too, whom I found in Bologna Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio MS B 1856, the Lombard Inquisition Register for 1270 to 1305. I will close with his story. Bompietro di Giovanni was from the parish of San Martino del'Aposa in central Bologna. As a youth of 15 in a family of Cathar sympathizers, he once gave some lunch to the notorious Cathar perfecta, Maria of Vicenza. He got hauled before the tribunal, interrogated, caught in a lie, and sentenced to wear crosses. Instead, he left town for Mantua, where he acquired his profession of purse-making and his wife. Five years later, he returned to Bologna, became a pillar of his parish, and a benefactor of the Carmelite friars. He was known for his almsgiving, which was indiscriminate enough to include occasional Cathar transients. Delated and cited before the inquisitor Guido of Vicenza in Winter 1299, he was found guilty and sentenced to

the stake as relapsus, one of the ten executions in the 35 years of the Register.

So far, nothing terribly remarkable. But on May 12, 1299, when Bompietro's sentence was announced from the Bologna Palazzo Civico, a riot broke out. The protests spread throughout the city. There was angry talk about burning the Holy Office and the Dominican monastery. Fra Guido did not take this lying down. He placed the city under interdict and summoned over 150 men and women suspected of dissent.

Their depositions make interesting reading. None of them had any sympathy for the Cathar perfect burned along with Bompietro: he was an outsider to the city and to its religious world. But our hapless purse-maker was different. He couldn't be a heretic! He went to Mass, more than once a week; he begged confession and communion before his execution. Popular opinion, repeated over and over, was that Bompietro was orthodox, clearly a Catholic because he loved and frequented the sacraments. Biagia di don Bernardo summed up this view: "Those damned friars should have received Bompietro because Christ receives everybody." To the Bolognese street in 1299, orthodoxy was what you did, in public, in church, not some theological concept or doctrinal position, or whom you had lunch with. Inquisitors didn't seem to see it that way.

I suspect my Italians would have found Miguel Redelic's predicament equally outrageous. But his own neighbors seem not to have thought so--at least Christopher didn't mention any riots. Perhaps the Mexican Inquisition was a lot more powerful and pervasive than the medieval Bolognese. I doubt that. Rather, I suspect, Miguel's neighbors had already more or less internalized that "World Historical Luther" as part of their religious mental furniture, much as his Protestant neighbors back in Guben had internalized the Antichrist Pope. Both had become the invisible but present, diabolical other. That someone thousands of miles away, and dead at that, could be perceived by the Guadalajara street as dangerous enough for them to accept, perhaps even support, the practical Catholic Miguel's conviction, shows one of the dramatic ways that the Christian religious scene had changed between 1299 to 1591. At least it does for me.

So, thank you, Christopher, for your stimulating and thought-provoking talk.