NEW FOCUS

Reformation by Diarmaid MacCulloch

George M. Ella | Added: Oct 16, 2006 | Category: Reviews

Penguin adorns the covers of their new 832 paged paper-back on the Reformation by Diarmaid MacCulloch with 22 eulogistic blurbs announcing it as wonderful, sardonic, monumental, dazzling, breathtaking, magisterial, eloquent, a triumph, astonishing, masterly, blockbusting, superb, a milestone, a masterpiece of learning, and 'in its field it is the best book ever written'. Who could resist buying such a book to be on top of Reformation research? It has gained the Wolfson Prize for History, for apparently providing everything "from politics to witchcraft, from liturgy to sex". It has won the British Academy Book Award because 'Its great strength, though the greatest source of difficulty for the modern reader, is that it takes theology seriously as an independent explanatory variable, and not simply as the theological expression of changes in economic and political facts.' This statement is a true 'source of difficulty' for this reviewer as the world-changing nature of the Reformation in spreading the good news of salvation to sinful man is only dealt with occasionally and the little theology aired is certainly not 'taken seriously' but often explained away by secular motivated events, sometimes in corny humour and vulgar language. In an obvious effort to stoop down to what he thinks is his readers' level, MacCulloch has wrapped his book in sordidness, starting with a crude story about buttocks and finishing with two morally and theologically questionable essays on 'Love and Sex'. He allots more space to sodomy than all the great Reformed Confessions combined.

MacCulloch's major theme is that the Reformation divided Europe, into 'Catholic' which he sees as 'The Old Church' and 'Protestant' which he describes as the religion which caused two hundred years of war. He has obvious difficulties in criticizing his Old Church, but none in drawing parallels between Biblical Christianity and the Jew-hating Nazis. Reformers such as Bullinger and Coverdale clearly showed that MacCulloch's Old Church was a post-Christian novelty but the author is not pleading for tolerance of our Reformers' views but for tolerance of his own form of political, social and religious 'correctness', an alternative 'Reformation'.

In the first chapter, 'The Old Church', MacCulloch seeks first to attract the reader's interest with a cheeky below-the-belt story. Becoming serious, he describes the mass, purgatory and papacy as the two(!) pillars of popery. These pillars were cracked by European politics and the heightened papacy. MacCulloch depicts this period on a pan-European level which is essential to a right understanding of the Reformation in the English-

speaking world. However, the author is most erratic and anachronistic in his use of place names where indigenous, Latin and English alternatives are possible. For politically correct reasons, he insists on calling the UK and Eire most inappropriately ‘The Atlantic Isles’.

By the time of the Reformation, MacCulloch sees Roman Catholicism as a European-wide priestly trade union, often in opposition to the secular nobility and the republican tendencies of Switzerland. It was the time of the Church versus Commonwealth. This conflict made for very shaky boundaries across which the Turks came to extinguish the churches. MacCulloch sees this threat as helping to bring the Reformation into being but claims it was the ‘Catholic’ Iberians who combated the Turkish threat the best and thus exported the Latin Church to many other parts of the World. Indeed, MacCulloch deals with such Roman Catholic nations and their counter-reformation actions far more than some protestant nations such as Reformed Holland. During this period, writing and books became more important as means of communication and education and, MacCulloch says, "Printing turned out to be good for Protestantism, for a religion of the book needs books." Thus books became a major promoter of the Reformation and the common people were no longer dependent on the interpretations of the grand papist trade union for their thinking. With books came humanism which also severed many ties with Rome.

In ‘New Heaven: New Earth’, MacCulloch deals with the clash between humanism and the Augustine legacy. Augustine is depicted as following in Paul’s footsteps with his doctrine of the forgiveness of sin to be found in Christ. In the midst of describing political intrigues, MacCulloch at first appears to side with Augustine against Pelagius who refused to accept the corruptness of sinful man. Then he argues that Augustine became too bleak and extreme in his emphasis on God’s sovereign grace and ‘terrible logic’ which, according to MacCulloch reflected Plato rather than Paul. It was Augustine’s pessimistic views, he argues, which led to the Reformation and a departure from optimistic humanism and the Old Church.

After a non-serious excurse on Freud, MacCulloch refers to the ‘many elements of luck’ which helped establish Luther’s position. Though he mentions Luther’s discovery of justification by faith, he rejects the traditional chronology and Luther’s own testimony as back-projections based on hindsight, even throwing doubt on the nailing up of the 95 theses! MacCulloch then tells banal tales of Luther’s toilet troubles to re-catch his readers’ attention. This is followed by a positive account of Luther’s growth in grace and rise in faith. MacCulloch, however, argues that Luther loathed Aristotle. What Luther rejected was Rome’s interpretation of Aristotle’s metaphysics but he saw Aristotle as a true scientist believing with the Wittenberg professors that Bible exegesis and secular education could best be explained through Aristotelian didactics and rhetoric.

When outlining the clashes between Wittenberg and Zürich on the Lord’s Supper, MacCulloch merely mentions Zwingli who served the Reformation

for nine years, whereas Bullinger, who beat Zwingli by a couple of years in pioneering the Reformed doctrine of the Supper, is dismissed in an aside on hymn-singing. However, Bullinger was active in Zürich church affairs for 53 years until his death in 1575 and bore the brunt of Luther's attacks. In MacCulloch's bibliography of the Zürich Reformation, there is nothing on Bullinger. Neither does MacCulloch when dealing with the Peasants' War and the suppression of the Reformation in Germany by Emperor Charles, mention that it was mostly Bullinger's spiritual oversight and diplomacy that kept the country population contented and the Emperor at bay in Switzerland

In 'The Birth of Protestantism', MacCulloch generalises on the tattered and torn nature of the early Reformation, thinking obviously of the political upheavals of the time. He thus fails to see that the Swiss-German Reformed churches enjoyed a relatively peaceful Reformation because they did not look to the aristocracy for their faith but to their preachers who referred all reforms to their people first. MacCulloch now at last pays tribute to Bullinger, seeing him as the man who steered Zürich back to stability after Zwingli's death in the Kappel War, though he overlooks the fact that Bullinger was now a mature Reformer with over 80 pioneering reforming books to his credit. Nevertheless, he honours Bullinger's post-1531 efforts to set up a pan-European Church, his enormous correspondence, his teaching on the Lord's Supper and above all his work on the Covenant.

MacCulloch's description of the Reformation in Strasburg is fair but superficial. He gives Martin Bucer due praise especially concerning his work in winning over hundreds of Anabaptists back to Orthodoxy after peaceful debates. Yet his remarks and lack of references to Bucer's works suggest that MacCulloch is unaware of the tremendous strides taken lately in deciphering (thanks to Reinhold Friedrich), translating and printing Bucer. MacCulloch is unsure of the events at Geneva. He shows rightly how Calvin drew his models from Bucer (but he also drew them from Melanchthon, Zwingli and Bullinger) and how his ministry failed to change the Genevans. Calvin's success in forming Geneva to suit his taste bore fruit first in 1559 after the original Genevans had mostly been driven out. Calvin died in 1564, so his Genevan 'reign' was brief indeed. McCulloch also emphasises that the strong opposition to Calvin between 1536 and 1559 was from the Genevan church itself and not from Rome. MacCulloch airs the modern notion that Calvin was less than a Calvinist, especially on predestination and election. He is probably thinking of Eva-Maria Faber's thesis that Calvin taught a conditional election on the pattern of Israel's fall and future restitution. The simple solution here is that Calvin was not consistent in his teaching. MacCulloch's depiction of Calvin versus Servetus suggests that he is not familiar with the available sources. He describes Calvin's consensus on the Lord's Supper with Bullinger against Beza's more Lutheran opposition, but fails to state that Calvin toed the Beza line immediately on returning to Geneva. In his section on the Protestant alternative to Calvin, MacCulloch is excellent in depicting the work of Laski, Bucer, Martyr and the Swiss and English Reformers but

fails to see that Calvin's Calvinism grew out of the godly teaching of these men who were one with him in almost everything except his one-off interpretation of predestination in his Institutes, Book III, Chapter XXIII: 7 and his rather popish views of church discipline, and pre-Eucharist confessions.

Part II deals with the strength of the Counter-Reformation and weakness of the church-killing 'confessionalism' of the Protestant churches and the nigh defeat of the French Reformation in the Bartholomew massacre of 1572. Lutheranism became basically two religions with the Philippists on one side and the Gnesio (Real)-Lutherans on the other. Fanatical Gnesios like Westphal and Brenz became more popish than the pope and quite as inquisitorial. MacCulloch speaks well of James I (VI) of England and Scotland, arguing that after the death of John Knox whom MacCulloch calls an 'anglicized and comparatively moderate Calvinist', the Reformation got under way in Scotland. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells us that it was the Englishman's love for compromise which marred the English Reformation but McCulloch says that compromise made the Scottish Reformation. He claims that an 'outcrop' of Scottish Protestantism was Freemasonry.

Turning to England, MacCulloch gets muddled defining Presbyterianism, Puritanism, Anglicanism and the Genevan church order and mistakenly sees Thomas Cartwright, a would-be Anglican bishop, as the first advocate of Presbyterianism. MacCulloch confuses Presbyterianism with Separatism which it certainly (at least not in the examples McCulloch gives) was not. His supposedly Presbyterian-Puritan leader was William Perkins, another Anglican! MacCulloch's remark that Perkins' English publications sold more at that time than Calvin's is rather meaningless as Calvin was still little known in England. In his theology, especially his views on the Covenant, Perkins was certainly a strict Bullingerite as were Ursinus and Olevianus, Perkins' other mentors.

Returning to England, MacCulloch sees the Elizabethan Settlement as almost ushering in a golden age but does not really explain why. He shows that Archbishop Law strove to turn the Reformed churches Arminian-wards but also outlines Law's fierce anti-papist stand which is usually quite ignored. This reviewer's opinion is that Law's church policies were very much like Cromwell's but he was an Episcopalian and that was condemnation enough in those days.

Sadly, MacCulloch's ending is spoilt by two chapters of old wives' tales and bedroom secrets which are as relevant to the Reformation as Nelson's lost eye was to Napoleon's defeat at Trafalgar. Happily for England, Nelson turned a blind eye and got on with his job. MacCulloch departs from his calling as a Reformation historian and forces his and our eyes on his 'modern' views of permissive sodomy, tarring even great Christian men with his dirty brush.

In his conclusion, entitled ‘Outcomes’, MacCulloch speaks of the faith of pious Roman Catholics faced with the Protestants ‘dungeon, fire, and sword" and the alleged Victorian wish that England would return to the papacy. He then makes a passionate plea for tolerance concerning ‘sexual challenges’ though he has to resort to revolting language to do so; excusing himself by saying Luther used such language. He also tells us that Luther inspired the Nazi’s to burn the Jews and complains about the ‘anti-Semitism’ of God’s Word.

The author provides us with a select, superficial, lumped-up compendium of European events and gossipy tales. His footnotes and bibliography show next to no reliance on original sources. Anyone could easily have downloaded his material from light internet encyclopedias which are informing and entertaining without overtaxing the reader. MacCulloch’s demand for tolerance is reflexive but not reciprocal. Though his book is about ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’, it is void of correct historical analysis and gives no feasible theological reasons for their differences. Commonplace things are highlighted yet the spiritual struggles leading to the Reformation and its Confessions are ignored or mentioned merely in passing. Penguin Books need to consult their dictionaries and honestly revise their twenty-odd hyperbolical blurbs and give the book a fitting title. Rid of the junk and made more accurate and up-to-date, the book might have a limited use.

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