"Botched Execution" or Historical Inevitability: Conceptual Dilemmas in Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*

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And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now.

—T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

I

There are many reasons why Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* has proven to be such a disquieting, and to some readers positively infuriating, intervention within contemporary academia. Lest we prejudge the book's presuppositions and argument, it is best to begin by indexing those reasons in the form of some questions. First off, one will ask what kind of narrative it is that *The Unintended Reformation* means to advance. If it is a story of decline, then does it not paradoxically rest on a distinctly modern and linear progressive conception of historical time? Indeed, the genre of declensionist narrative is a quintessentially modern one that has been variously inflected as an expression of metaphysical pessimism (E. Burke, Schopenhauer), bourgeois self-loathing (Flaubert, T. Mann), pervasive cultural deterioration (Taine, Burckhardt, Nietzsche), or of a pseudo-scientific stadial historiography (Spengler, Toynbee). Now, Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* appears to present us with an argument at once sharply critical of the course of modernity after the Reformation yet premised on modernity's axiomatic view of progressive historical time. As such, the book appears markedly at odds with the eschatological and soteriological framework of Catholicism that most readers have found to animate Gregory's critique of modern culture—an inference, to be sure, that Gregory stubbornly disputes.[1]

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A second cluster of questions might be formulated thus: Does Gregory's declensionist narrative about the emergence of hyperpluralist, economically rapacious, and morally disoriented European and North American societies merely chart an "unintended" or, perhaps, an "inevitable" post-Reformation development? What, in other words, is the model of historical causation underlying Gregory's narrative? And if the development, however "unintended," is as inexorable in its slide toward pervasive economic injustice and moral confusion as Gregory's account makes it out to be, are there still grounds from which to launch a moral critique of the way things have turned out? What causal powers if any remain for human agency in a narrative of modernity that, on Gregory's account, has been one of unremitting and ubiquitous failure, including "the failures of confessional rulers"; "the manifest failure of so many sinful Christians to live up to the church's teachings"; "the Reformation's practical failure"; "the failure of confessional Europe [which in turn] created the conditions for the failure of Western modernity itself"; and add to these that the Kantian project of "reason alone has failed as a means by which to discover or devise the truth about the nature of reality, morality, what human beings should care about, and how they should live"; and if "philosophy has dramatically failed" that is merely an epiphenomenon of the overall "failure of confessional Europe . . . to create moral communities free of religious dissent."[2]

Even a rather strong critic of contemporary liberal-secular social theory and practice (as I take myself to be) will likely wince at Gregory's supposition in this last statement that a righteous moral order specifically requires rulers "to rid their moral communities of moral dissent" (371). Yet my objective in this essay is not to revisit the widely voiced political (and sometimes purely affective) criticisms of the claims and premises found in *The Unintended Reformation*. Rather, I wish to attend to a more basic philosophical contradiction, namely, that Gregory posits a particular moment in historical time as the principal source of all these failures and, in so doing, ties his moral evaluation of the course of modernity to a linear, though notably not a stadial, model of historical time.[3] Throughout *The Unintended Reformation* historical cognition and moral evaluation are persistently entwined, albeit—and there is the rub—without any acknowledgment that within the Catholic tradition moral judgment is ultimately inseparable from an eschatological framework. The result is an engaging and often illuminating narrative of historical decline, punctuated by emphatic local instances of strong moral judgment; yet it is oddly inexplicit about the theological and metaphysical sources and commitments licensing those judgments.

Such a way of proceeding, particularly in a book sharply critical of what are diagnosed as the many troubling entailments of the Reformation, appears fundamentally at odds with the principal strands of Catholic thought that, following the (temporary) eclipse of Aristotelian Thomism, had prevailed in Counter-Reformation Europe. One involves the resurgence of a Christian-Platonist and, with some important modifications, Franciscan narrative of a progressive education into the virtues and into a *visio beatifica*. With its distant sources in Philo and Plotinus, this Platonizing version of Christian eschatology takes shape in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena, is popularized by Bonaventure, then prominently resurfaces in the Cambridge neo-Platonists, and, crossing confessional boundaries, can still be felt strongly in the early writings of Schleiermacher, not coincidentally the pioneer of German Plato scholarship. An influential and, in its practical orientation, distinctly modern offshoot of this framework would appear to be Ignatian theology with its rigorous emphasis on method and discipline. Though per se developed within the Tridentine framework of primary and unconditional Grace (both enabling and cooperative), Ignatian discipline proved acutely susceptible to being appropriated as a (potentially secular) technique for effecting the salvation of autonomous individuals in *this* world. At the very least, the emphatically practical character of Ignatian discipline may eagerly locate its scriptural warrant in a Pelagian (mis)reading of Philippans 2:12 as a call, "not in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, [to] work out . . . your own salvation" [non ut in praesentia mei tantum sed multo magis nunc in absentia mea . . . vestram salutem operamini], and, in time, lose sight of Paul's all-important, interpolated qualifier—"with fear and trembling" [cum metu et tremore]. What ties these disparate strands of Catholic thought together is that, in their own distinctive ways, they all contravene the straightforward narrative of decline that, like other readers, I take *The Unintended Reformation* to be offering.

The other strand of post-Tridentine Catholic thought involves a progressively darker and emphatically otherworldly Augustinianism that may well be a metastasis of pre-Reformation apocalypticism and, after 1500, at times blurs the theological lines separating Protestant and Catholic theology. Thus it is but a small step from Luther's acutely dystopic conception of sinful humans haplessly maneuvering in a fallen world to the inspired darkness of seventeenth-century hyper-Augustinians and Jansenists, such as Arnauld, Nicole, Pascal, and others associated with the School of Port Royal.[4] Particularly the representatives of this latter formation would likely

have been bemused or perplexed by Gregory's zealous tabulation of modernity's countless failures, ready to ask the (to them) obvious question: "as opposed to what?" or "what else did you expect?" Considerations of a similar kind likely prompted Karl Löwith to conclude that "modern history . . . is Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence."[5] It remains to be seen just how much Gregory's language of "failure" is grounded in disappointed hopes for realizing the *eschaton* in this world—a perfectionist worldview that, paradoxically, is also integral to the liberal-secular framework whose internal flaws his narrative means to expose.

First, though, we should consider another of the questions listed above; namely, whether and to what extent a story of decline can ever be told with the desired moral force and urgency and still abide by the methodological and institutional norms of contemporary historiography. To some readers, among them James Simpson in this volume, an unapologetically moralizing argument has *eo ipso* vitiated any claim to academic respectability and discipline-specific credibility. I myself do not take that view but, like Adrian Pabst, prefer to think that we are not confined to the "false divide between a purely secular and an exclusively religious perspective."[6] If indeed *The Unintended Reformation* means to advance a value-argument—which, I maintain, need not be deemed as impermissible an objective as it often is in the academy—then would Gregory have to have been more explicit about how his moral claims relate to his historical narrative? Yet to achieve clarity on that count one must first consider whether an argument about deteriorating human motivations and choices (and about the inchoate social realities they shape) is best advanced in the form of a *historical* narrative or, perhaps, rather as a philosophical or theological argument, albeit one that would have to be continually mindful of the historical complexity and malleability of its sources. In his response to some of his critics, Gregory characterizes his "argument about why modern liberalism is failing" as having to do with liberalism's reliance "on basic moral and anthropological categories that cannot be rationally justified unless one holds some metaphysical view in which human beings are more than the natural sciences say they are."[7] While this view strikes me as right, it does not constitute the kind of claim that can ever be secured by historical analysis but, instead, ought to be developed as a philosophical and/or theological account. Similarly, Gregory's contention "that post-metaphysical reason alone is incapable of providing a basis for the norms necessary for the robust functioning of democratic societies," while a plausible and (to me) persuasive view, clearly cannot be derived from historical analysis.[8] Behind the story about the inchoate trajectory of post-

Reformation modernity, which Gregory unfolds with such urgency, lurk other, more oblique philosophical and theological misgivings that fuel his very telling of that history.

Now, considering how widely Gregory's book has been reviewed and discussed by now, a highly compressed synopsis of Gregory's *historical* account should suffice. In so many words, and armored by nearly a hundred-fifty pages of footnotes mainly devoted to secondary literature, Gregory retraces post-Reformation Europe's descent into denominationalist confusion, confessional strife, and seemingly interminable warfare among Catholic and Protestant rulers intent on exercising jurisdiction of ecclesiastic matters while using often shifting confessional allegiances to justify their political machinations in the first place. Culminating in pan-European and internecine warfare between 1618 and 1648 (or 1660 in England), the deregulation of religious institutions and spiritual life unleashed by the Reformation leaves Europe economically devastated and morally exhausted. Yet whereas most historical narratives see the next two centuries as making steady progress toward a liberal, individualist, and increasingly secular social order, Gregory emphatically rejects the prevailing, triumphalist accounts of the Enlightenment, such as the story of a Spinoza-inspired narrative that Jonathan Israel has been unfolding with much erudition and dogmatic urgency.

For Gregory, the Enlightenment's so-called "gains" pivot on its calamitous decision to stave off further religious conflict by abandoning outright the medieval ideal of a "shared, substantive common good" (377). What takes the place of that ideal is, according to Gregory, an increasingly hollow chiaroscuro of "hyperpluralism" and life forms dominated by endless cycles of mindless production and consumption. In a series of chronologically overlapping chapters, *The Unintended Reformation* traces the manifold political, moral, ecclesiastic, economic, and educational metastases of Europe's turn toward a secular, hedonist, and atomized polity; and the book concludes with a survey of what, to Gregory, is the disjointed and dispiriting profile of Western societies today, in which "public life, especially in the United States, is increasingly riven by angry, uncivil rivals with incompatible views about what is good, true, and right" (378).

Given the sweep and uncompromising thrust of Gregory's account, it does not come as a surprise that *The Unintended Reformation* has drawn sharply critical, at times venomous responses from a wide array of academic critics. Many of these reactions issue from and indeed presuppose the exclusive validity of the very liberal-secular-progressive view of modern history

that *The Unintended Reformation* sets out to challenge. Thus Peter Gordon demurs that "Gregory does not judge the liberal ideal according to its own internal criteria," and for Victoria Kahn the persistent disagreement about questions of value is not "evidence of the failure of the modern moral project" but, specifically in the United States, "a sign of tremendous success." She continues: "The United States is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world, and for the most part we live together peacefully."[9] Now, to take but one counter-example, the approximately ten thousand gun-related deaths reported annually in the United States make the last part of Kahn's statement sound a bit complacent, this being just one of countless unsavory and disturbing facts suggesting that Gregory's liberal critics tend to overindulge in a highly selective view of modernity's "successes."[10] Taking a generally sunny view of the course of modern history, numerous members of the academic establishment have found much fault with Brad Gregory's narrative of modernity caught in a maelstrom of "metaphysical naturalism" (63, 224), "acquire-discard-repeat" consumption (234), and an increasingly confused and deracinated "hyperpluralist" conception of morality (74 ff.). Thus Gregory's narrative of progressive decline has repeatedly been characterized as steeped in question-begging nostalgia for an "institutionalized medieval worldview" supposedly unhinged by the Reformation. Specifically the charge of nostalgia strikes me as having not been altogether successfully refuted in the conclusion to *The Unintended Reformation*.

Still, many of the criticisms leveled against Gregory's account, though not without merit, tend to be greatly weakened by issuing from a worldview no less axiomatic and as often unexamined than the one with which they take exception. As a result, the encounter between Gregory and his critics seems something of a nonevent, the proverbial two ships passing each other in the night. Gregory's narrative of decline—which I maintain is what is being unfolded by *The Unintended Reformation*—is all but incomprehensible to readers just as axiomatically committed to a story of ongoing social, political, and economic improvement and progress. While it is acknowledged that modern history has at times found itself subject to sudden and seemingly inexplicable crises or reversals, much academic inquiry across a number of disciplines has conceived of the past four centuries as a process of steady improvement, animated by prospects of Rousseauvian *perfectibilité*, Smith's providential "invisible hand," or some version of Hegel's "cunning of reason." Vaguely reminiscent of the slogans adopted by American presidential campaigns (by either party) during the past century—e.g., Michael Dukakis's "The best America is yet to come" or Ronald Regan's

"It is morning in America"—the pathos animating the defenders of contemporary, liberal-secular society is one of systemic and inexorable progress licensed less by its supposed (though in fact strangely elusive) internal rationality than by the anticipated fulfillment of its implicit promise. Not much, it seems, has changed since Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and James Steuart seized on the idea of "improvement" as a deliberately vague and causally indeterminate amalgamation of moral, economic, and social advancement. Subsequently augmented by the Reform Bills in Britain, and by parliamentary reforms and the abolition of censorship in Europe (and of slavery in the United States), the overall impression is that of a heavily air-brushed picture of rights and opportunities inexorably expanding and, cumulatively, suggesting the prospect of human-engineered salvation wrought both in and for *this* world.

Now, the self-described "politically homeless Catholic" Brad Gregory is profoundly skeptical of these variously liberal and libertarian models alike.[11] His misgivings appear evenly divided between a critique of left-liberal politics as morally confused by its own unreflected embrace of "pullulating pluralism" (111) and an equally severe indictment of contemporary libertarian, laissez-faire economics having all but replaced human communities centered on spiritual meanings with an agglomeration of individuals mired in idolatrous worship of the "goods life" (chaps. 3 and 5, respectively). Yet it is here that the criticisms of *The Unintended Reformation* show themselves to be conspicuously selective. Thus Gregory's sweeping indictment of the inchoate and mindlessly relativist nature of moral argument in contemporary society tends to beget a panicked defensiveness by those committed to a liberal-secular-progressive standpoint, whereas his more local analyses of corporate mischief wrought in our educational, social, and environmental policies have drawn hardly any criticism at all.

That the world today shows signs of systemic trouble and pervasive abuse, almost all of it driven by profit motives and the modern state's lust for total information and control of its citizenry, few members of the liberal-secular academy would deny.[12] Thus a casual survey of the numerous reactions to *The Unintended Reformation* shows little substantive disagreement with, say, Gregory's grim diagnosis of the long-term entailments of the "early modern Christians' self-colonization by capitalism," even though his book appears to underestimate the equivocal stance of post-Reformation Catholicism vis-à-vis these developments.[13] Broach such topics as the corrosive impact of corporate money on politics; the strong, and by now palpable, correlations among a rapacious global capitalism, the widespread

immiseration of workers in Nike's sweatshops and Foxconn's factories; children around the globe pressed into service as soldiers, sex slaves, or no-pay laborers scavenging mounds of toxic electronic waste in Ghana; a global arms trade vigorously pursued by almost all "developed" nations, etc.—and intense hand-wringing and eloquent professions of moral indignation are sure to ensue, above all from this country's bicoastal academic and journalistic elite. Nor indeed does there appear to be much disagreement about arguably the most pernicious entailment of modern consumer capitalism, present and future—namely, the pervasive, incontestable reality of ecological devastation and a palpable, albeit erratic pattern of global warming that is now actively destabilizing the earth's natural equilibrium and the already precarious moral and affective balance of human communities increasingly prone to wage wars over dwindling natural resources in the decades to come.[14] While such a dystopic vision is a lot to stomach, few academics would contest the empirical facts that give rise to Gregory's sweeping and disconcerting appraisal of our imbalanced and material ecology.

Yet as soon as the argument moves from empirical *récit* to moral evaluation, the suggestion being that modernity's "naturalized acquisitiveness" has displaced models of "the good life" with a naturalistic, unreflective pursuit of the "goods life" (235 ff.), most readers of *The Unintended Reformation* begin to shift uneasily in their seats. There is, so Gregory's critics maintain, something inherently unbecoming and coercive about switching from historical analysis to moral evaluation. From what to most readers seems an unabashedly theological and normative point of view, Gregory develops a vivid and disturbing narrative about the abasement of our life-world as "so much raw material awaiting the imprint of human desires" (57) and about modernity as a pervasive ethical and ecological miscarriage. Unsurprisingly, in so doing he has found himself on the receiving end of vituperations by a center-left academic establishment that typically reserves its choicest reprimands for today's conservative/libertarian political and financial elite. Ironically, then, some of the more severe polemics against the *The Unintended Reformation* have ended up confirming one of Gregory's central claims, namely, that "the secular academy is the domain of Weberian facts, not values—except, contradictorily, for the one hegemonic and *supreme* value that no judgments about competing truth claims pertaining to values or morality should or can be made" (81). Indeed, the disagreement between Gregory and his (dogmatically) liberal critics is less about whether "religious truth claims made by billions of people *are* excluded from consideration on their own

terms in nearly all research universities" than whether they *should* be (299, my emphasis).

II

So, where do these considerations leave us, and specifically what alternative approach to reading *The Unintended Reformation* might serve us better? We have found many critiques of Gregory's account of modernity to rest on an axiomatic, meliorist conception of modern history as a story of steady, if uneven, improvement. As long as objections to Gregory's narrative appear to issue from within the very framework that *The Unintended Reformation* means to reappraise, the merits and shortcomings of the book are bound to remain elusive. Yet if Gregory's critics, so intent on defending modernity as being on the right course *in principle* (though rather less so when considered in empirical detail), show themselves to be begging the question on a grand scale, so at times does Gregory. To show how that might be the case we have to return to the uneasy relation between his historical and his moral narrative mentioned at the outset. Instead of asking, as most of his critics do, whether the story unfolded by *The Unintended Reformation* is overly pessimistic and insufficiently appreciative of the putative "gains" made by Western liberal-secular societies, I would suggest that it is not pessimistic enough. This at first blush startling claim, however, is not to be taken as one of degree but, rather, as distinguishing between two levels of moral argumentation. Once we do so, we will find Gregory's dystopic account of post-Reformation modern culture to falter, at least in part, because he has not identified the true sources of his misgivings about post-Reformation culture.

Simply put, those sources are not to be found in contingent historical shifts and circumstances but, rather, in the anthropology of human agents struggling both with the myriad forces bearing down on them and with developing a meaningful and informed perspective on that unsettling reality. It is, of course, altogether common for historiography to scrutinize and evaluate human conduct as it manifests itself in a variety of empirical practices and settings and across a certain spectrum of historical time. Furthermore, anyone narrating such a story will eventually seek to arrive at some value judgment on what has been discovered. Such moral evaluation is an integral feature of narrative, and it is premised on the firm belief that human beings, both individually and as participants in political, cultural, and/or religious communities, are fundamentally endowed with the capacity for morally responsible choice and rational self-governance. This I take to

be the basic framework undergirding much of *The Unintended Reformation*, even as the book does not explore the various sources (Aristotelian, Augustinian, Thomist, et al.) to which this model of human agency can be traced. Gregory means to write a work of history and, understandably, does not feel obligated to write a philosophical metacommentary for that history.

Still, one wishes Gregory had been more forthright about the ways in which his dystopic account of post-Reformation Europe's countless "failures" presupposes a distinctive anthropology that understands human beings as capable of apprehending and in time perfecting their vision of the Good (the Platonist legacy), and as capable of articulating a rich conceptual armature for deliberating, judging, choosing, and acting as rational agents within social, familial, cultural, and political constraints that, to be sure, can only ever be imperfectly grasped (the Aristotelian legacy). We need not here be detained by the fascinating question of how these pre-Christian philosophical movements have been absorbed, entwined, and inflected by Augustinian and scholastic thought. What does matter, however, is to be explicit, as regrettably Gregory often is not, that it makes sense to speak of "failure"—including the many failures of modernity identified on the pages of *The Unintended Reformation*—only if the development at issue was fundamentally a matter of rational deliberation, judgment, choice, and action (rather than sheer naturalistic "behavior") and where the results can thus be conceived as inherently avoidable.

Yet it is here, too, that telling the story to which Gregory is committed in *historiographic* terms becomes most problematic. For his narrative is largely built around a conflict between different institutional models of human existence. *The Unintended Reformation* is mainly a gripping story about competing and conflicting institutional models, emergent and agonistically interacting movements and patterns of economic, cultural, and political organization and practice. What is largely absent from the book are living, breathing, and endlessly perplexed human individuals caught up in the open-ended interpretive drama of sifting a welter of political, economic, cultural, and religious forces in relation to their specific individual and communal goods, norms, and aspirations. "Human life is metaphysics in act," Maurice Blondel observes; and yet, a historical method tends "to lose sight of the essential truth that 'technical and critical history' . . . is not 'real history.'" Where one fails to honor the distinction, "historical facts will be given the role of reality itself."[15] Some such conflation of diversely lived meanings with "facts" methodically and retrospectively distilled at times causes hermeneutic work to be supplanted by actuarial schemes. Thus human agency

in Gregory's metahistorical analysis has by and large been absorbed into large-scale movements, tendencies, and institutional frames. Traversing at precariously high altitude a world filled not only with competing ideals and notions, but also with individuals whose spiritual and intellectual personas typically internalize and are vexed by that very conflict, *The Unintended Reformation* risks losing sight of a simple but crucial fact: that meanings, values, and norms have never been a secure and internally coherent estate of some "institutionalized worldview," only to be abruptly dislodged by a sudden upheaval such as the Reformation. Rather, in the spirit of Hegel and Newman—who on this point show remarkable convergence—meanings, norms, and values remain at every moment of historical time subject to development. An inherently agonistic process, such development of ideas, in Newman's pellucid formulation,

> may be interrupted, retarded, mutilated, distorted, by external violence; it may be enfeebled by the effort of ridding itself of domestic foes; it may be impeded and swayed or even absorbed by counter energetic ideas. . . . But whatever be the risk of corruption from intercourse with the world around, such a risk must be encountered if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited. It is elicited and expanded by trial, and battles into perfection and supremacy.[16]

Newman's is a profound insight into the nature of ideas as something whose perplexing continuities, elusive meanings, and covert integrity only reveal themselves in the course of a transgenerational hermeneutic struggle with their implications. Yet precisely that aspect of interpretive struggle is largely missing from *The Unintended Reformation*, a book that in its title and approach pivots on a decisive break, a rupture not only within history but also of what it means, after 1520, for human individuals and communities to be historically situated. Nowhere is this rupture more apparent (and more problematic) than in Gregory's underlying account of medieval Christianity. His portrait of medieval culture and thought appears worrisomely monolithic, at least in part because it has been mainly distilled from secondary accounts focused on the ecclesiastic structure and the quasi-institutional theological framework wherein medieval Christianity is said to have found its expression. Gregory is far less attentive to how these often abstract contents were realized in extraordinarily complex, regionally diverse, and often competing interpretations and practices (liturgical, sacramental, economic,

and legal). While the existence of pre-Reformation heterodox movements is acknowledged in passing, Gregory tends to treat them as occasional, negligible smudges on an otherwise tidy canvas.[17] Yet their insistence, and the often brutal defensiveness with which the church's *magisterium* responded to them, suggests that there never really was anything like a "settled" sacramental worldview. In fact, Henricians, Waldensians, Franciscan Spiritualists, Joachite Millenarians, Lollards, Hussites, Conciliarists, and many other pre-Reformation heresies were driven, in their various ways, however misguided, by a profound desire to understand more fully the Christianity in whose sacramental and liturgical practices and theological self-understanding they so controversially participated. Without denying that what occurred around 1520 was indeed a watershed in European history, one ought to bear in mind how other, earlier movements had repeatedly tried to shift the balance from normative-institutional to more subject-centered and affect-based forms of religious culture and practice. They just lacked the critical mass, good timing, or effective leadership to trigger the seismic shift eventually wrought by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Bucer, and others.

However novel and disconcerting one may find the proliferation of religious views and spiritual ideas, so intensely felt and argued in mid-seventeenth-century Puritan England, Catholic Christianity itself has, likewise, proven to be an internally complex formation, and that in at least two ways. First, as an attempt to build a viable form of community on something as inscrutable in its implications as the Incarnation, Christ's atonement, and the Resurrection, and as one of the first movements (along with Stoicism) to argue that a just moral order had to be universalizable, Christianity obviously had its work cut out for itself. Viewed less as a body of "settled" theological propositions than as a rich, variegated, and frequently contested array of liturgical and sacramental practices, Catholic theology from late antiquity into the high Middle Ages constitutes less an apologetics of these practices than an ongoing and necessarily imperfect quest for understanding their theological implications and spiritual efficacy. Yet to point out the recurrent and insistent presence of heterodox religious movements prior to 1500 is more than a scholarly quibble, for it fundamentally unsettles Gregory's rather too straight-laced conception of medieval Christianity as an "institutionalized worldview."

The main point here is not one of historical balance and accuracy; Gregory's scholarship, particularly his command of secondary literature is impressive by any standard, and I for one am in no position to call it into question. Yet the *basso continuo* of heretical movements in medieval Europe

not only points to the inherently fractious character of a pre-Reformation social-*cum*-spiritual order. It also lets us glimpse an alternative eschatological model, one fundamentally at odds with the competing linear narratives of unstoppable liberal-secular "progress" or moral-cultural "decline," respectively. This alternative, hyper-Augustinian view holds that there has, in the history of human life, never once been any "settled" worldview, be it sacramental, pagan, or secular. Instead, beginning in the early Patristic era, Christianity understands itself as, above all else, an attempt at grasping the implications of Christ's exemplary, forceful engagement with *this* world. In the context of early and medieval Christian society, Gregory tends to see it much this way, noting with implicit approval how, on Augustine's view, "To wash one's hands of politics and refuse to exercise public power justly and virtuously was in effect to relinquish the 'city of man' to the frightening *libido dominandi*" (136). Rather than withdrawing from the world or, in Gnostic fashion, anathematizing it wholesale, Christian spirituality and theological reflection aims to assist individuals and communities with achieving stability, integrity, and orientation in their daily pursuit of life in a created, finite, and profoundly uncertain *saeculum*. The figural realism of Dante's *Divine Comedy* rests on precisely this understanding, namely, that "it is only in relation to Christ that human doings are history, and only as part of history that human doings become the subject of his poem."[18]

Neither before nor after the Reformation, then, was the secular understood as an alien realm inopportunely and brazenly intruding on some putatively self-contained, "sacramental worldview," thus jeopardizing a supposedly settled outlook on the central "Life Questions." Rather, a disjointed *saeculum* had always been the reality toward which Christian practice and thought is oriented in its struggle to realize within it, as best one could, a just, responsible, and sustainable community.[19] Yet as Gregory proceeds to show in chapter 3, the more the church entangled itself with this world and thus "lengthened its bureaucratic reach and influence, the *less* did it look like the kingdom" (139). With papal and imperial power becoming ever more entwined, jealous of one another, and intent on violently extending their influence, they also come to resemble one another more and more. Karl Löwith calls this the fundamental paradox of "the worldly success of Christianity and . . . its failure to make the world Christian."[20] Unsurprisingly, Dante reserves some of his fiercest opprobrium for Boniface VIII, Nicholas III, and those assisting their vision of an imperial and unapologetically grasping, this-worldly papacy.[21] As with any idea achieving rich institutional expression, Christianity, once it had defeated paganism within its declared

sphere of influence, inevitably found its spiritual tenets shifting and atrophying simply in virtue of the internal dynamism that, as Arnold Gehlen has shown, tends to cause a given institution to undergo a gradual "transformation of purpose [Zwecktransformation]."[22]

What is true of the church as an objective, materially realized institution also holds for its core tenets, themselves subject to perpetual revision and reframing by the institution of theology. John Henry Newman's view of Christianity as an idea whose uneven development over the preceding eighteen hundred years had gradually, though still not conclusively, clarified the implications of its central mysteries thus proposes (rightly, I think) that struggle and contest are integral to—indeed, salutary for—human knowledge, no less in the area of religion than all things finite. Long before, Augustine had similarly developed a forensic account of human psychology that shows this agonistic pattern to be integral to our will and our entire constitution as human beings. In his chapters "Controlling the Churches" and "Subjectivizing Morality," Gregory intimates how, well before the Reformation, the work of the church and that of theology had been in a state of ferment. Yet rather against the grain of a rich body of evidence to the contrary, he insists that only "the doctrinal disagreements introduced [*sic*!] by the Reformation radically altered the nature of the long-standing jurisdictional conflicts between ecclesiastical and secular rulers" (146).

However one may appraise the change wrought after 1530, one surely has to recognize that it was *prima facie* the church's steadily greater material and doctrinal entanglement with secular rulers which caused Luther's searing indictment of the papal and ecclesial corruption to fall on such receptive ears. To claim that, after 1520, "[s]truggles over the public exercise of power *within* the framework of the faith's teachings, practices, and institutions became public struggles over what the faith *was*" (147) is to obscure the fact that those very pre-Reformation struggles, however discreetly waged, reflect tensions ultimately going back to Christ's mission on earth and thus are properly constitutive of Christianity. It only makes sense to speak of Christianity as "an institutionalized worldview in the Middle Ages" (133) if one recognizes that the very nature of faith (and the telos of human aspirations seemingly licensed by such faith) remains inevitably in flux and is often conflicted, confused, and at odds with surrounding views and forces. Institutions, the church included, are conceived so as to contain this welter of impulses, meanings, and ambitions but, *qua* institutions, will inevitably find their mission to drift in unintended and unpredictable directions and the valence of their central claims and objectives to be in constant flux.

III

In urging these arguments, I am trying to put some distance between myself and what to date has been the prevailing response to Gregory's *historical* narrative: namely, that it offers a highly biased, unduly pessimistic, and morally censorious view of Western, liberal-secular society today; to which his critics typically add that things, in fact, *have* been getting demonstrably better. If anything, I find that position even more problematic than the overarching, contrary claims made by *The Unintended Reformation* to which it objects. Instead, I would suggest that at times Gregory's view of modernity as an unintended miscarriage rests on a confused understanding of human agency. On the one hand, Gregory's persistent rhetoric of "failure" invests human individuals and communities with a capacity for sustained moral perspicacity and righteous action that, in fact, they have never displayed in any appreciable numbers and for any significant span of historical time. And yet, the alternative to this view is not some firmly naturalistic or reductionist line of argument, such as would dispute from the outset human beings' alleged capacity for rational deliberation, judgment, and choice as epiphenomena of drives, instincts, and interests. Rather, it would be the view so emphatically set forth in Pascal's *Pensées* of humans actually choosing, indeed incessantly so, and yet, in the event, mostly choosing and acting wrongly and ultimately against their own true flourishing.

More about that in a moment; first, though, it helps to state the conceptual paradox causing Gregory's historical and moral narrative, respectively, to be curiously misaligned: that if "metaphysical naturalism" is true, then Gregory's *moral* appraisal of modern culture is literally groundless and irrelevant. For seen within a reductionist ontology, it matters little whether post-Reformation developments were intended or unintended. Indeed, Gregory's concluding remark that "our present world would be different only if the past had not been what it was, because the past made the present what it is" (381) strays precariously close to such a (profoundly un-Christian) determinist ontology. To be sure, such an explanatory framework all but compels us to appraise post-Reformation modernity more or less in the ways Gregory views it. Yet what insight we might derive from such a narrative would no longer amount to a *bona fide* "conclusion," let alone "our" considered interpretation of events. Rather, it would constitute the point of termination for a tangled narrative inexorably hurtling toward the dystopic present where historians such as Brad S. Gregory take it upon themselves to draw up the dismal balance sheet. In his remarkable 1903 treatise, *History and Dogma*,

Maurice Blondel states the crucial point thus: "the natural continuity of history does not prove that history itself can provide an explanation of it. The more one tries to tie up the facts in their determinism as though everything followed inevitably, the more patent the inadequacy of the explanations."[23]

At the same time, another part of Gregory's narrative remains firmly opposed to determinism of any kind and to the naturalist and reductionist models of human agency that it presupposes. This part of Gregory's narrative instead emphasizes the rich and complex picture of human beings at once acting *in* history and, simultaneously, engaging in the hermeneutic drama of developing a rational perspective *on* history. As finite, self-making, and self-interpreting beings, human agents at all times operate on two plateaus simultaneously: they engage in the pursuit of concrete, finite, and contingent objectives or aims; and they perform countless (and by no means necessarily "explicit") acts of hermeneutic scrutiny so as to gauge how their contingent objectives comport with moral and spiritual "hyper-goods" (Charles Taylor's term of art) without which their discrete practices and pursuits would lack all rational coordination and intelligibility. It is impossible to be a *historical* actor without concurrently struggling to interpret and judge the import of that history. As John Henry Newman puts it so well, "[I]t is the characteristic of our minds to be ever engaged in passing judgment on the things which come before us. No sooner do we apprehend than we judge; we allow nothing to stand by itself: we compare, contrast, abstract, generalize, connect, adjust, classify." Simultaneously, and just as importantly, we find that "the judgments thus made . . . become aspects in our minds of the things which meet us."[24]

Like Gregory, I would credit even the most hardened subjectivist or constructivist with holding *some* conception of value relative to which she will appraise, judge, and (ultimately) choose to act in the world. Yet precisely this fundamental anthropology of agents perpetually reflecting, evaluating, choosing, and acting is sharply at odds with the declensionist and seemingly inexorable story of modernity unfolded in the central chapters of *The Unintended Reformation*.[25] A fierce critic of the modern liberal idea of unrestricted, "private judgment," Newman considers the scope and authority of individual acts of (moral) judgment heavily circumscribed; for even as the hermeneutic nature of human judgment colors and (re)shapes the things with which it busies itself, it is also embedded in an unceasing stream of human exchange, much of which is framed by the internal (and notably fluid) logic of interpretive communities and their objective, quasi-institutional expression (churches, schools, universities, councils, parlia-

ments, etc.). For Gregory, the medieval church was the supreme framework ensuring that the finite pursuits and fallible judgments of human beings could be rationally and meaningfully appraised and reconciled. His account (in chapter 4) of the disintegration of that framework and its eventual displacement by "mutually exclusive moral communities" (204–5) no longer revolving around "*caritas* but obedience" (209) strikes me as the richest and most compelling chapter in *The Unintended Reformation*.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that these insurmountable constraints not only pertain to what medieval and early modern Christians could legitimately hope to achieve within their cultural, political, and economic life-world. They also place firm limits on the intelligibility of the Christian ecclesial and theological framework itself. By insisting that our moral and spiritual practices can never realize the *eschaton* in *this* world, the church fathers and their scholastic descendants had wisely foresworn the seemingly ineradicable myth of human-engineered salvation and perfection, one that has migrated from Prometheus via the Pelagians to seventeenth-century Pietists and eighteenth-century social-contract theorists, Deists, and Unitarians, nineteenth-century followers of Comte, Marx, Lassalle, and Durkheim, all the way to the procedural optimism of Rawls and Habermas. And it is here that Gregory's notion of "a unified Christian worldview" proves deeply problematic. Like all human intellectual endeavors, that of theological inquiry during the first twelve-hundred years of the Christian era had unfolded as an intensely agonistic and often contradictory enterprise. Tensions within theological reasoning, to say nothing of the sharp contradictions between ecclesiastic dogma and social practice, between divine *logos* and contingent acts of human reasoning did not stop at the door of the medieval church. Gregory, of course, knows as much, which is why in his narrative the rise of Nominalism and Voluntarism constitutes a significant rupture whose lasting and deleterious consequences I have recently attempted to trace myself.[26]

Yet Gregory is mistaken, I fear, in attributing that break to Duns Scotus by claiming that, "in predicating being of God and creatures univocally, Scotus [had] brought both within the same conceptual framework" and so ushered in "the eventual domestication of God's transcendence" (37–38).[27] Rather more persuasive than this philologically and hermeneutically cavalier line of argument pioneered by John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock is the reading offered by Louis Dupré and Charles Taylor, who locate this unfortunate turn in Western intellectual history in Ockham's strangely legalistic preoccupation with the enigma of a divine *potentia*

absoluta, which on his account no longer appears to stand in any stable and intelligible relation to the *potentia ordinata* of the world that we humans find ourselves inhabiting.[28] Even as it constitutes an important pivot in scholastic thought, Ockham's problematic disaggregation of divine power from divine reason has forbears of its own. While foreshadowing the at times Manichean overtones of Luther's Reformation theology that was to take shape two centuries later, Ockham's argument can also be understood as reviving an extreme apophaticism so controversially set forth in the writings of Origen.

My point here is not to propose an alternative to the theological master narrative obliquely subtending Gregory's historiographic project. Rather, I would suggest that in framing his account of the medieval church and supposedly "settled" theological foundations—in time abruptly upended by the Reformation—Gregory supposes human reasoning, theological and otherwise, to be susceptible to a level of clarity, integrity, and conclusiveness that, in fact, it never has had nor ever will have. The myriad ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions constantly impinging on the practice (and also threatening to corrupt the institutions) of theological and philosophical reasoning did not simply erupt somewhere around 1520. Rather, they are an inescapable feature of *any* community. While the confusion and tension intrinsic to finite, self-interpreting, and imperfectly reasoning human beings may be more conspicuous in certain historical constellations than others, it is an anthropological constant.

Pascal, whose hyper-Augustinian anthropology bears recalling in this context, laconically remarks how "we are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us. . . . The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so."[29] In Pascal's hyper-Augustinian view of nature (human and otherwise) as fallen and corrupt, it simply "is not in man's nature always to go in one direction; it has its ups and downs" (no. 27). Consequently, philosophical meditation ought to begin with us acknowledging that substantive answers to what Gregory calls the Life Questions can, in fact, never be produced: "Man's condition [is one of] inconstancy, boredom, anxiety" (no. 24), and "he is equally incapable of knowing and of desiring not to know" (no. 75). What's more, the supposition that such answers to these questions are within our reach, let alone that they had once been found but subsequently (due to historical contingency or "a botching of moral execution" [366]) had slipped from our grasp, only reaffirms our penchant for epistemological hubris and moral self-deception.

As Pascal so uncompromisingly insists, redemption is not achieved by rational consensus or methodological sophistication any more than by some ecclesiastically sanctioned or prescribed dedication to a life of humility and virtue. The latter, of course, is preferable, yet whether it has been pursued in good faith is never for us to say: "Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace. Nothing shows him the truth, everything deceives him" (no. 45).

Here, then, the question broached at the outset returns, namely, whether what truly animates the story Gregory means to tell could ever be rendered as *historiography*. Striking an unmistakably Pascalian note, Karl Löwith, for one, contends that "the problem of history as a whole is unanswerable within its own perspective. . . . There never has been and never will be an immanent solution of the problem of history, for man's historical experience is one of steady failure. Christianity, too, as a historical *world* religion, is a complete failure. The world is still as it was in the time of Alaric; only our means of oppression and destruction (as well as of reconstruction) are considerably improved and are adorned with hypocrisy."[30] To anyone viewing history (and not just post-Reformation history) from this hyper-Augustinian view, Brad Gregory's appraisal of our present as a vast canvas displaying myriad self-destructive assumptions and practices will cease to be an "unintended" byproduct of some particular juncture, such as the Reformation. For that claim can only be sustained if one systematically glosses over the continual upheavals bedeviling ecclesiastic and political communities during the preceding millennium, to say nothing of pagan cultures that, precisely because they viewed the cosmos as rationally ordered, had few if any illusions about something called historical "development" but understood finite time as inherently and endlessly circular.

More plausibly, then, the history of Western civilization over the past five centuries or so might be read as simultaneously "freely chosen," "unintended," and "inevitable." For, to quote Löwith once more, "[I]n that agitated sea which we call 'history,' it makes little difference whether man feels himself in the hands of God's inscrutable will or in the hands of chance and fate."[31] Ultimately, there is no ontology from which to appraise what happened against the backdrop of some other, worthier history that might have been if it had not been for the contingent upheaval of the Reformation. For that other history—which, for Gregory's moral critique even to be possible would have had to be "a perpetual possibility"—has its place "[o]nly in a world of speculation" (in Eliot's phrasing in "Burnt Norton"). This is not to say, however, that moral evaluation and a form of critique grounded in nor-

mative and substantive conceptions of the Good are a luxury human beings (and academics in particular) cannot afford. Forever suspended, as Pascal contends, between "the dual danger . . . of pride and despair," human agents today, no less than five hundred or a thousand years ago, find their misgivings about the state of the world rooted in ideas of justice and goodness at once unattainable and yet impossible to disavow. Like the impenetrable gate in Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz* or Eliot's door "[i]nto the rose-garden," that alternative course with its intimation of a *parousia* achieved in this world has been so alluring to human imagination because, as Pascal puts it, "we are always planning to be happy" but, in the end, can never make our way through that all-revealing, ultimate opening. With typical concision, Pascal puts his finger on the central dialectic here by remarking that "if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea either of truth or bliss" (no. 131).

And so we return to what may well be the central paradox of the historiographic project of *The Unintended Reformation* and, perhaps, also the source of many conflicting claims previously advanced about the book. Gregory's conception of *empirical* history is not just linear and declensionist, but it posits the entire sequence of post-Reformation history as both unintended and inevitable. And yet, even as "[a]ll time is unredeemable" for the historian Gregory (to quote "Burnt Norton" once more), his declensionist narrative is also comprised of and fueled by countless acts of moral evaluation. Indeed, how could it not be, considering that the principal objective of all human narrative is not to comply with some desiccated protocol of formal correctness but, rather, to advance our quest for an intelligible existence by constructing stories at once meaningful, significant, and compelling. All telling presupposes a moment of "certitude" prior to and of greater epistemological significance, than the methodological protocol whereby it gradually conforms to accepted notions of "certainty." Yet in premising his narrative almost entirely on consideration of secondary sources, Gregory largely deprives us of witnessing how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political and religious communities and some of the more influential voices shaping their self-understanding were likewise engaged in acts of moral scrutiny, caught in interpretive dilemmas, and wrestling with seemingly intractable questions of finite moral obligation, free agency, and eschatology. Only now and then do short snippets of primary text enter Gregory's narrative, and when they do they appear shorn of all ambiguity, vacillation, and contradiction. It is one thing to acknowledge, as Gregory regularly does, such hermeneutic complexity at the level of critical metacommentary, and quite

another to actually stage *in concreto* the conflict of interpretations and the sheer fluidity of meanings and judgments concerning what Gregory calls the Life Questions.

As a result of limiting itself by and large to telling rather than showing, *The Unintended Reformation* conveys an excessively air-brushed narrative so reassured about its own, unswerving orientation and conclusiveness as to make references to the centrality of Grace—both enabling and cooperative—seem almost a theological formalism or afterthought. Told with such verve and straightforwardness, Gregory's story is indeed very much the product of modern, highly "disciplined" historiographic practice. For all its earnest, forceful, and often incisive attempts at a thoroughgoing moral critique of modern, hyperpluralist society, Gregory's book operates within a worrisomely *notional*, abstract conception of Christianity and faith. With its prose so untroubled by doubt or indeed the obligation to attend to inner tensions and doubt potentially complicating the thought of modernity's many intellectual progenitors (Luther, Calvin, Baxter, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and numerous others), *The Unintended Reformation* ultimately reveals something of a Pelagian framework. Unwavering, linear, and declensionist in temperament, the book's story and argument appear fueled by the defeat—acutely vexing to Gregory—of an aspiration notably absent from the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, or Pascal, yet altogether central to modern liberalism: to mobilize the work of human inquiry for the sake of realizing the *eschaton* in *this* world. Hence Gregory's sharp moral indictment of post-Reformation religious, economic, and social practices and relations frames the disastrous excesses and pervasive confusions of modern life as the result of a contingent, albeit decisive historical caesura—the Reformation—an event by no means inevitable but, once underway, seemingly implacable in spooling off its dismal entailments.

At the same time, Gregory would surely agree that a coherent theology presupposes a robust account of human agency, one in which sin and "failure," however ubiquitous, arise at all times from choice and, hence, must be understood as inherently avoidable. Rather against the grain of his implacable metanarrative, Gregory in a telling moment views the unhappy passage to modernity as the result of a contingent "botching of moral execution" (366). Yet for *The Unintended Reformation* to amount to the compelling narrative that Gregory means for it to be, the countless "failures" of post-Reformation history would have to be understood as simultaneously "unintended," freely chosen, as well as inevitable. Such a conception of history, no longer a "development" or "progression" but one prolonged, human-

engineered, and all-encompassing miscarriage, can certainly be accommodated by the hyper-Augustinian and Pascalian strand of Christian theology mentioned above. On this count, history is essentially a prolonged *interregnum*, a vast kaleidoscope of intense, ubiquitous, and unremitting disorientation. Taken to its logical conclusion, however, such a stance rests on an ontology whose insights and goods can *a fortiori* never be derived from historical analysis, not even *ex negativo* as *The Unintended Reformation* attempts to do by chronicling modernity's countless and supposedly "contingent" failures. To quote Löwith one more time:

> [A] Christian philosophy of history is an artificial compound. In so far as it is really Christian, it is no philosophy but an understanding of historical action and suffering in the light of the cross (without any particular reference to peoples and world-historical individuals), and, in so far as it is a philosophy, it is not Christian. The perplexing situation is that the attempt at a philosophy of history depends on the Hebrew-Christian tradition, while this very tradition obstructs the attempt to "work out" the working of God.[32]

Yet this does not mean (and Löwith arguably does not take it to mean) that empirical life and its historiographic summation are wholly separate from, even less incommensurable with, strong evaluative claims. For the hermeneutic struggle with arriving at meaningful and significant interpretations of our lived existence is itself an integral part of it; and as such life presupposes, and in turn is continually modified by, historical awareness grounded in a strong evaluative stance or "view" (as Newman calls it). Hence Gregory is fundamentally right to reject the self-authorizing, modern "supersessionist conceptions of history . . . and the conventional historical periodization" that tends to reinforce them. Yet the alternative to modern historiography's *ex post facto* reliance on "usable pasts" cannot be a quasi-inverse model of inexorable continuity according to which "the actual past made the real present in which we are living" (386). Rather, one would have to begin by acknowledging that what makes for a "historically contingent process" is not circumstances and coincidences giving rise to so many "failures" but, instead, the sheer fact that the human agents pursuing their lives and goals within history are constitutively incapable of conceiving, let alone implementing, their rational, coherent, and responsible goals. A critique of post-Reformation modernity such as Gregory has offered us is, and indeed must

be, necessarily grounded in moral and spiritual intuitions and certitudes for which empirical research and historical analysis per se can never produce an adequate and compelling warrant.

Notes

1 See especially Gregory's remarks in "*The Unintended Reformation*: Genre, Methods, and Assumptions," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Jan. 21, 2014, at http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/01/21/genre-method-and-assumptions/.

2 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), respectively 376, 368, 370, 375, 379, 380, 371. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

3 Peter Gordon considers it a positive feature of Gregory's narrative that, in arguing how "much of 'the modern age' flows from the Reformation," it helps us "avoid . . . stadial nomenclature altogether, especially since it only abets a supersessionist logic according to which each stage of history completes and overcomes the one that preceded it." Peter E. Gordon, "*The Unintended Reformation*: Has Modernity Failed?," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Sept. 12, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/12/has-modernity-failed/.

4 In speaking of a "hyper-Augustinian" strand of post-Tridentine theology, it ought to be stressed that this development involves something of a departure from, at times even a distortion of, Augustine's own theology. Thus Pascal's *Pensées* frame Grace as ontologically separate from finite human existence and wholly beyond the reach of human intellectual or intuitive awareness. Inevitably, such a position loses sight of the pivotal, mediating, and salvific role of Christ, who thus is framed as a metaphysical and theological exception rather than as a compelling, embodied presence. In an age of philosophical and theological rationalism—which *ex negativo* also shapes the neo-Thomism of Fonseca and Suarez—it cannot surprise that a thinker as theoretically inclined as Pascal should have embraced a precariously abstract and notional concept of Grace and, thus, treat Real Presence as a theological proposition rather than as a meaning properly achieved only in communal, liturgical form and practice.

5 Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 202.

6 Adrian Pabst, "*The Unintended Reformation*: Secular Supersessionism and Alternative Modernity," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Sept. 24, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/24/secular-supercessionism-and-alternative-modernity/.

7 Brad S. Gregory, "*The Unintended Reformation*: Contents and Discontents of (Post) modernity," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Feb. 27, 2014, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/02/27/contents-and-discontents-of-postmodernity/.

8 Ibid. In "Has Modernity Failed?," Peter Gordon rightly queries, "What philosophical or historical arguments could convince us that this ideal [medieval Christianity] was special? And why should we not continue to believe that our own modern ideals only need to be realized with greater fidelity?" Likewise, Ian Hunter sees Gregory "precommitted to the historical centrality of the Catholic and Protestant Churches," arguing that Gregory's portrayal and solution to the problem of modern cultural pluralism is thus wholly internal to his own confessional-intellectual position; "*The Unintended Reformation*: The Return of Sacred History," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Sept. 10, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/10/the-return-of-sacred-history/.

9 Gordon, "Has Modernity Failed?"; Victoria Kahn, "*The Unintended Reformation*: Get over It," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Sept. 16, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/16/get-over-it/.

10 Gun statistics as reported by the *FBI Uniform Crime Report* (Expanded Homicide Data Table 8) for the 2011 calendar year, at *FBI Bureau of Investigation*, https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_8_murder_victims_by_weapon_2010-2014.xls. Other forms of violence routinely countenanced include the widespread abuse of migrant workers, work-place injuries, violence against women (including pervasive and persistently under-reported and under-prosecuted rape on college campuses), ecological violence driven by unrestrained profit motives and abetted by a legal system favoring wealth and minimal constraints on the idea of private property. With Gregory, I would maintain that the moral disorder to which these and similar statistics speak, particularly in the United States, may be traced to this country's hedonistic understanding and seemingly unlimited assertion of individual claim rights, and its underlying view of individual entitlement as answerable only to legal action and pursued in almost complete indifference to any conception of a common good. This scenario appears as a direct result of a constitutionally enshrined secularism whose "subjectivization of the good within a formal ethics of rights" (*Unintended Reformation* 229) reflects a reluctance and ultimately an incapacity to articulate a normative conception of a good and just life. Modern Liberalism's minimalist approach to moral reflection not only disaggregates right from good, but in so doing hastens the shift from virtue ethics to a consequentialist model of social relations; remedial (legal) action has effectively shorn civic reason of all normative (a priori) constraints and, also, of all generosity.

11 Gregory, "Contents and Discontents of (Post)modernity."

12 For a truly prescient and masterful analysis of these tendencies, see Nicholas Boyle's 1988 "Understanding Thatcherism." For Boyle, Thatcherism inaugurates a new set of civic and administrative practices and should not be confused with garden-variety reactionary politics. It "has no theory of the public, social world as a medium in which people exist and which shapes their lives; it has no theory of the constitution, of institutions, or of social, as distinct from economic, behavior. The organs of central government are simply instruments for putting into practice 'our ideas,' and otherwise there exist only consumers." In so "reducing the social fabric to the marketplace" and abandoning older, bona fide conservative notions of organic community (farewell

Edmund Burke), Thatcherism left "British society . . . at once polarized and homogenized." Moreover, by hollowing out all intermediate, local, and regional practices and institutions, Thatcherism "in social and political (though not of course economic) terms . . . rather resembles the socialism it abhors." Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000), 17–22.

13 Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 243. As Adrian Pabst has pointed out, Gregory fails to note that by tacitly accepting the idea of a "morally neutral" market and its "promotion of individual freedom at the expense of fraternal solidarity," Catholicism created the impression of being "entirely compatible with secular liberalism and capitalism"; "*The Unintended Reformation*: Secular Supercessionism and Alternative Modernity," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Sept. 24, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/24/secular-supercessionism-and-alternative-modernity/.

14 See David Collings, *Stolen Future, Broken Present: The Human Significance of Climate Change* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

15 *History and Dogma*, in Maurice Blondel, *The "Letter on Apologetics" and "History and Dogma,"* trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1965), 237, 239–40.

16 John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39–40.

17 Peter Gordon, in "Has Modernity Failed?," demurs at Gregory's "highly stylized portrait of medieval Christian life," just as Pabst, in "Secular Supercessionism and Alternative Modernity," remarks how "there was no 'unified, comprehensive worldview' in the Middle Ages."

18 Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, 290; this reading of Dante as ushering in a "figural realism" rather than abiding within an older, strictly allegorical mode, was famously pioneered by Erich Auerbach's 1929 monograph on Dante, still one of the finest books on the subject. See Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

19 This I take to be the point made by Pabst, "Secular Supercessionism and Alternative Modernity," who demurs at Gregory's "false divide between a purely secular and an exclusively religious perspective." One may, of course, ask whether extreme forms of monastic seclusion would still comport with the claim made here, but these forms in any event are not central to Gregory's account of a "sacramental worldview."

20 Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 202.

21 In particular, Pope Nicholas III is depicted stuck upside down in a hole, flames licking at his heels as "utterly untroubled by moral scruples," and Dante serenely puns on Nicholas's family name Orsini (*orsa*, "bear") and his rapacious ways of filling his purse (*borsa*): "e veramente fui figliuol de l'orsa / cupido sì per avanzar li orsatti, / che sù l'avere e qui mi misi in borsa" [But in truth I was a son of the she-bear / and so avid was I to advance my cubs / I filled my purse as now I fill this hole]. *Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2000), XIX, 70–72. The comment on Nicholas's lack of scruples is from Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante* (New York: Liveright, 2014), 45.

22 On the disaggregation of subjective "motive" from institutionally prescribed "objective" [Trennung von Motiv und Zweck] and the progressive and intrinsic "lawfulness" [Eigengesetzlichkeit] of institutions as they identify and alter their express goals, see Arnold Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur: Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2004), 66–73.

23 Blondel, *History and Dogma*, 254.

24 Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, 33.

25 Gregory, to be sure, has on several occasions rejected characterizations of *The Unintended Reformation* as a story of decline. Still, critics have pressed the point and, it would seem, with good justification. Juxtaposing Gregory's account to the story unfolded by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, Guido Vanheeswijck sees Gregory, rather than Taylor, offering a "supersessionist history" according to which "we have to return to the rejected—not refuted—metaphysical assumptions of old"; "*The Unintended Reformation*: Beyond Supersessionist Stories," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, Oct. 24, 2013, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/10/24/beyond-supersessionist-stories/.

26 See Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowldge* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 160–213; and Louis K. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 93-144.

27 Richard Cross, "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Antonianum* 76, no. 1 (2001): 7–41. David Aers in the introduction to this volume raises pointed and detailed questions about the (un)reliability of Gregory's reading of Scotus. Indeed, responding to similar criticisms by Paul Grendler, Brad Gregory has elsewhere acknowledged that his account of Scotus "is based entirely on secondary sources"; Nelson H. Minnich et al., "Forum Essay" review of *The Unintended Reformation*, *Catholic Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (2012): 503–16, at 513. Here as elsewhere in his book, Gregory's confidence in metacritical and metahistorical analysis, almost entirely free of close hermeneutic scrutiny of primary texts, strikes me as misplaced.

28 See Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 167–89; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 90–102; and Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 160–82.

29 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. and ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1995), no. 47. Further citations are given in the text following the numbering in Krailsheimer's edition.

30 Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 191.

31 Ibid., 199. Löwith continues by pointing to Augustine's distinction between two types of fatalism: "the one believing in horoscopes and based on astrology, the other based on the recognition of a supreme power. Only the first, he says, is incompatible with the Christian belief; the latter may well agree with it, though the word *fatum* is an unfortunate expression for what is really meant: *sententiam teneat, linguam corrigat*."

32 Ibid., 196.