

The Reformation and the Modern World

Davenant Hall Core Foundations

Trinity Term 2022

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Course Description

Once upon a time, Protestants liked to take credit for the glories of the modern world: freedom, prosperity, civilization. As attitudes on modernity have soured, many have been quick to turn the narrative around and blame Protestantism for the licentiousness, greed, and exploitation that we see around us. Influential books by Catholic scholars have told a tale of a Reformation that disenchanting the cosmos, banished beauty and sacraments, and opened the door for rampant individualism. What is the true story? This course will offer students a fuller perspective on why the Reformation was necessary, what aspects of Christendom it did and did not seek to change, and the lasting legacy it left, both good and ill, for the world we live in today.

The course will be divided into two main sections. Part I, comprising Weeks 2-7, will focus chiefly on the Reformation itself, its protest against Rome, and the debate over seminal doctrines—with particular emphasis on developments often seen as having harmful unintended consequences in the modern world. Part II, comprising Weeks 8-10 weeks, will look more closely at certain downstream effects of the Reformation that are generally (though not unambiguously) recognized as positive achievements of modernity. The key texts for this course will be the Davenant Institute's anthology, *Reformation Theology*, Paul Avis's *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, and Alister McGrath's history of Protestantism and the modern world, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, supplemented with other excerpts.

Course Format

The format of the course will blend short lectures and guided discussion of the assigned texts. The subject matter of this course was controversial at the time, and is still controversial now, and we intend to tackle it accordingly. For each class, one student will be required to present a critique of Protestant teaching in that week's reading from the imagined standpoint of a Catholic opponent, and another student will be required to mount a defense. These "debates" will serve as a jumping off point for more general discussion; thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Readings will be chiefly taken from primary sources (supplemented by Avis's very able overview in Weeks 5 & 6 where the material is too extensive to be captured by any one primary source), but McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* will serve as a background narrative both of the Reformation period and its legacy down to the present day. McGrath also offers a useful foil at

points as a common interpretation of the meaning of Protestantism that we will seek to challenge at points. Total readings will comprise 75-100 pp./wk. in general.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate (but not for dissemination outside of class). Additional student participation and instructor interaction will take place on our Discord channel.

Course Objectives:

Objectives for this course include: (1) to understand the conditions of the late medieval church that made the Reformation necessary (from a Protestant point of view at least); (2) to understand key doctrines of the Protestant reformers that reshaped the European church and society, and be able to defend the cogency of these doctrines; (3) to understand Roman Catholic pushback on these doctrines both then and now, and the ways in which some of these doctrines generated new questions and developments unforeseen at the time; (4) to understand key ways in which the transformations wrought by the Reformation laid the groundwork for significant changes in politics, religion, and society over the following centuries; and (5) to evaluate the blessings and unforeseen challenges that the Reformation has bequeathed to us in the modern world.

Course Requirements:

Participation (20%): Attentive and sustained participation in class is the primary requirement. For-credit students may have one excused absence.

Reading Responses (30%): All students are requested and for-credit students are *required* to complete the assigned readings each week, which average around 100 pages per week. Beginning Week 2, for-credit students will submit a Reading Response each week critically engaging with the readings. Each week they will alternate between writing a critique of the Protestant teaching appearing in that week's reading, or a defense of it. Students will also sign up to take turns presenting these responses in class each week to stimulate discussion. These assignments will be discussed more fully in the Week 1 class.

Term Paper (50%): For-credit students are required to submit a 3,000-5,000 word term paper by 6/30. Papers will combine limited secondary source research with attentive primary source engagement and thoughtful analysis. Each paper should choose a key doctrinal or societal change of the Protestant Reformation, unpack some of its downstream developments or implications over the succeeding 500 years, and critically evaluate these developments.

Course Texts

To purchase:

Avis, P.D.L. *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, reprint (Wipf and Stock, 2002).

Littlejohn, Bradford with Jonathan Roberts, eds., *Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources with Introductions* (Davenant Press, 2017).

McGrath, Alister. *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (HarperOne, 2007).

Excerpts provided digitally

[Althusius, Johannes. *Politica*. \(Liberty Fund, 1995\).](#)

Gregory, Brad S. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Reformation Secularized Society* (Belknap Press, 2012).

Littlejohn, Bradford. "The Real Presence and the Presence of Reality." (2017) [The Real Presence and the Presence of Reality | Mere Orthodoxy](#)

[Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. 2 vols. \(Liberty Fund\).](#)

[Vattel, Emer. *The Law of Nations* \(Liberty Fund, 2008\).](#)

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Key Topic	McGrath Reading	Primary Reading
1	4/11-16	Introduction: The Reformation and Modernity Narratives		<i>Reformation Theology</i> , chs. 13 (pp. 245-71) Gregory, <i>Unintended Reformation</i> , ch. 1 Littlejohn, "Real Presence"
2	4/18-23	The Need for Reformation	Chapter 1 (pp. 17-36)	<i>Reformation Theology</i> , chs. 1-3, 6-7 (pp. 11-46, 95-129)
3	4/25-30	The Genesis of the Reformation	Chapters 2-3 (pp. 37-82)	<i>Reformation Theology</i> , chs. 8-9 (pp. 130-180)
4	5/2-7	The Reformation of Authority	Chapter 4 (pp. 83-104)	<i>Reformation Theology</i> , chs. 28-29 (pp. 634-708)

5	5/9-14	The Reformation of Grace	Chapter 5 (pp. 105-26)	<i>Reformation Theology</i> , chs. 11, 18, 21 (pp. 195-234, 389-400, 443-70)
6	5/16-21	The Reformation of the Church	Chapter 6 (pp. 127-150)	Avis, chs. 1-6
7	5/22-28	The Reformation of the State	Chapter 7 (pp. 151-72)	Avis, chs. 7-10
8	5/29-6/4	Downstream Effects I: Resistance and Revolution	Chapter 8 (pp. 173-96)	Althusius, <i>Politica</i> , chs. XVIII, XXXVIII (pp. 92-119, 191-200)
9	6/6-11	Downstream Effects II: The Rise of Nations	Chapter 11 (pp. 277-310)	Vattel, <i>Law of Nations</i> , pp. 1-12, 169-85 Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i> , 2:385-400
10	6/13-18	Downstream Effects III: Religious Freedom	Chapters 12 (pp. 311-350)	Althusius, <i>Politica</i> , ch. XXVIII (pp. 159-74) Vattel, <i>Law of Nations</i> , pp. 155-69 Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i> , 2:375-85