‘Sub specie aeternitatis’? On writing an objective history of the early modern Reformations[[1]](#footnote-1)

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I

As Peter Marshall has taught us, it can sometimes take centuries even for clichés to gain traction. Such was the case with Luther’s *Thesenanschlag* – or posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. According to Marshall, it was only in 1817, on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Reformation, that Martin Luther’s *Thesenanschlag* ‘and the subsequent flowering of the pictorial, historical and fictional imagination of the nineteenth century, that Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses becomes the defining template for an enduring conception of the Reformation’.[[2]](#footnote-2) A heady cocktail of ‘progressivism, nationalism and anticlericalism all combined to ‘invent’ the *Thesenanschlag*, and with it the Reformation as a whole, as an emancipatory moment in the onward march of the human spirit.’

For the Cuban-born historian, Carlo Eire, 500 years have evidently supplied enough perspective for him to have written an account of the several Reformations of the early modern period: Lutheran, Reformed, Swiss, Radical, Calvinist and Catholic which surpasses in breadth of coverage and balance of interpretation even the very fine one provided not so long ago by his near contemporary Diarmaid MacCulloch.[[3]](#footnote-3) On reflection, it might have been anticipated that the author not only of monograph studies of both Calvinist and Catholic ‘lived religion’ but also of a well-received history of eternity is perhaps uniquely qualified to do so.[[4]](#footnote-4) Readers of the latter might remember that in the first chapter Eire sets out his *credo,* which I think is worthquoting in full since it informs every page of *Reformations*:

I am a historian, and my own peculiar obsession has always been the intersection of intellectual and social history. One of the chief assumptions I have tried to challenge in all my work is the conceit that ideas matter very little or not at all in human history, that mentalities or collective thoughts and beliefs are mere symptoms, perhaps even involuntary reflexes or passive epiphenomena, flotsam and jetsam, meaningless effluvia in the septic tank of class conflict, bobbing on the surface of a swirling gurge of natural, economic and political forces. Right up front, at the very start, the reader should know that I reject any history that overlooks the dynamic relation that often exists between beliefs and behavior. As I see it, a material determinism that excludes ideas is as wrongheaded as that type of intellectual history that traces ideas from mind to mind over the centuries and assigns causality to disembodied thoughts. I speak from experience. Having lived under a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist totalitarian regime that saw class struggle as the sole determining factor in all of history and sought to eradicate all ‘intellectuals’, and having lost some of my family to its dungeons and firing squads simply because they dared to challenge dialectical materialism in public, I am especially sensitive to the dangers of reductionism, and especially of the material determinism that some historians accept unquestioningly. More specifically, all of my work has focused on the way in which realms beyond those experienced by the senses have been imagined and how these imaginings relate to social, cultural and political realities and to people’s behavior.[[5]](#footnote-5)

By way of a coda to this, I was personal witness to the way in which Eire’s identities as witness to and writer of history can sometimes converge in a dramatically explicit fashion. He began his plenary lecture at the Sixteenth Century Studies conference at Fort Worth, Texas in October 2011 by repeatedly striking the lectern with the downturned palm of his hand while intoning again and again a single word: ‘Bang!’ Given the lecture’s title: ‘Contending with Idols: Reformations, Revolutions, Miracles and the Disenchantment of History’ what came next is perhaps less surprising. For Eire was not describing the sound of destruction carried out by sixteenth-century Swiss iconoclasts but that to be heard in the Havana of his childhood as statues of the saints and the Virgin were being knocked down by supporters of the Cuban Revolution that had taken place in January 1959; an event which, two years later, led to Eire being airlifted out of Cuba as one of the 11,000 unaccompanied children taken to Miami as part of Operation Peter Pan (1960-62) that had been masterminded by Father Bryan O. Walsh of the Catholic Welfare bureau.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Such vivid evocations of the concrete and the particular abound in *Reformations*. Again and again in Eire’s *Reformations* one finds a refreshing – often bracing – insistence on how the particular way things turned out was more often than not accidental even if the broad shape of future developments had their clear roots in previous trends and tendencies. This aliveness to the ‘thisness’ of things (Duns Scotus’s *haecceitas*) makes him wary of indulging in such historiographical truffle-hunting as that for the origins of ‘modernity’ or any similarly Quixotic quests. As has been recently observed: ‘Eire is not a historiographically driven researcher, and he takes on subjects that are idiocyncratic and neglected’.[[7]](#footnote-7) This focus on the particular can be seen in the vivid emphasis Eire places on the personalities of his protagonists: whether it be Luther’s bone-headed stubborness and ‘prophetic bluster’ (158) which gave the former Saxon monk the courage to face down his opponents; Calvin’s steely, cold resolve and relentless work ethic, which ‘kept several notaries busy at his deathbed’ (288) or Carlo Borromeo’s apparent calmness when (literally) under fire; which happened to him twice within the space of a few months in 1569 as the cardinal-archbishop of Milan’s attempts to turn his city into a ‘Catholic Geneva’ began to bite and disgruntled clerics sought to protect their vested interests, which in this case were those of the collegiate church of La Scala and of the religious order of the Humiliati (369).

Eire is also insistent on the limits of our ability to explain religious belief. By this, I don’t mean that he reneges on the historian’s duty to understand what s/he is describing, but rather, that he is fully alive to the dangers of explaining away religious belief by reference to some kind of ulterior motive; whether it be economic, social or political.[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, we are under an obligation to take the beliefs and practices of those we are studying with the utmost seriousness, (‘to redefine religion was to redefine the world’ viii) while being alive simultaneously to the capacity of those we study to appropriate and adapt the ideas they encountered according to the circumstances they found themselves in as well as to how they made them work to their advantage. This makes Eire suspicious of abstractions and ever alive to the efforts of individuals as they sought to overcome specific (and often overwhelming) challenges. Many of these were related to the reluctance not only of so many lay men and women in the Old World as well as of indigeneous peoples in the New and the east Indies, but also of appreciable numbers of both the secular and regular clergy, to embrace a more intense and demanding religious life. Eire’s comment: ‘Ultimately, the renewal set in motion by Trent owed much to the decrees, *but it owed much more to the work of specific individuals and to their zeal and devotion*…’ (440, emphasis added) is typical of this approach. Elsewhere he refers to the ‘aggregate impact of so many different [Catholic] efforts at reform’ (442).

Another *ostinato* theme to Eire’s book is the ‘essential dialectic’ which he sees as being characteristic of his early modern subjects, in which ‘self’ defined itself against the ‘other’; or ‘us’ against ‘them’ (391). Such an emphasis on boundary making and marking – both here on earth and between heaven and earth - steers him away from the tendency of Wolfgang Reinhard, Heinz Schilling and their pupils to emphasis top-down confessionalisation as the engine which drove all the Reformations in this period; which Eire sees as unhelpfully monocausal and as blurring important distinctions between Protestant and Catholics. Two such were distinctions of course the subjects of Eire’s first two monographs: the first of which was dedicated to Protestant iconoclasm and the second to the Catholic belief in Purgatory and the consequent need for masses paid for by the living for the benefit of the dead. Unless one takes such fundamental differences into account, argues Eire, it is impossible to understand the violence that the Reformations unleashed: from beatings, homicide, even fratricide and riots to fully blown religious war which witnessed scenes of the murder of civilians on a scale not seen again until the genocidal massacres of the twentieth century.

II

Turning from context to text, in his preface to the reader Eire makes it clear from the very beginning that he views religion as ‘a key feature of the age’ – or as he puts it particularly well slightly later on: ‘as a means of communication’ (20) through which members of communities spoke to and recognised each other. He also views the ‘disparate movements [which are the subject of his book] as interlocking Reformations’ (xi). To these ‘two cental defining features of the book’ he adds the important clarification that: ‘it never assumes that religion is some isolated dimension of human experience… the focus is always on interaction, on the constant two-way exchange through which religion is shaped by the environment and that the environment is shaped by religion’ (xi-xii). Behind this lies Eire’s career-long interest in the connection between ideas and spirituality – what has come to be known as ‘lived religion’. Here theology matters too – but this is theology as ‘verb’ not as ‘noun’, i.e. theology not as abstract argument but as a direct prompt to action: from prayer and self-examination to communal devotion and even sectarian violence. Eire also declares that ‘the book is not written for a learned audience’ (xii), that ‘it is a narrative for beginners and non-specialists’ and ‘seeks to make the reader thirst for more, principally through narrative’ (ibid). Notwithstanding Eire’s engaging prose style, which rarely flags, together with the abundant illustrations and the incredibly reasonable price given the volume’s size, I rather think Eire overestimates the stamina of (not only) the general reader; even my final year undergraduate students would only be able digest it were I carefully to distribute readings across several months. However, it should also be noted that the subtitle of the work is: *The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*. As such is stands firmly in the venerable North American tradition of survey volumes of religious history that in actual fact offer readers also a general history of the period in question. In this respect, *Reformations* might be seen as an honourable successor of (and in part belated sequel to) *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: an intellectual and religious history of late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (1980) written by Eire’s doctoral advisor, Steven Ozment.

Indeed, looking through the voluminous seventy-two page bibliography to *Reformations* – which is arranged by chapter and within each of these by theme – I found myself thinking I was in actual fact reading an undergraduate course outline, whose distant origins quite possibly lay in a similar course once taught by Ozment on which Eire had cut his teeth as a tyro teaching assistant. Indeed, I think that any students who took Ozment’s course corresponding to *Age of Reform* getting on for forty years ago would be able to orientate themselves without too much difficulty when negotiating *Reformations*. This is not to deny that Eire’s text synthesises with considerable skill what must be two whole generations of subsequent scholarship, but the overall architecture of the two books is remarkably similar. Although the sheer size of *Reformations* enables Eire to devote more space to each element as well as being able to give proper weight to the non-European Catholic missions, while *Age of Reform* is focused overwhelmingly just on the German-speaking lands, both books are careful to frame the Protestant and Catholic Reformations not only in terms of late medieval religious and more broadly intellectual developments but also in relation to the Swiss (Zwinglian), Calvinist, Scottish and the Radical Reformations.

Eire divides his book into four parts; whose variable length more than hints at the author’s interests and priorities. Part One (‘On the Edge’) provides a 130-page account of late medieval religious and intellectual developments. The author makes much of the fact that he includes in this section not only an account of dissent and disillusion with the Church but also an analysis of the forerunners of the Catholic Reformation. This is so that he can give due weight to the bottom-up pressure for reform that pre-dated the advent of Luther, uncoordinated as it was – from Savonarola’s ‘short-lived and shallow… reform by coercion and intimidation’ – (118, where I detected the ghost of Fidel Castro in Eire’s account of the Ferrarese firebrand) and the ‘multitasking reformer’ Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros to the cautious diplomat and fellow cardinal Gasparo Contarini and the ‘Apostle of Andalusia’ St John of Ávila. However, in reality this turns out to be merely a rhetorical strategy in order to point up just what a shock that ‘rare, invasive plant species’ Luther was to the ‘biosphere’ of late medieval and early modern society (to borrow one of Eire’s favourite metaphors). As Eire puts it, after Luther, the nature of Catholic Reform had to change its character fundamentally to deal with a phenomenon that had caught Catholics by surprise.

Naturally, the former Saxon monk occupies pride of place in the 234-page part two named simply: ‘Protestants’; where ‘Luther: from student to monk’; ‘Luther: from rebel to heretic’; and ‘Luther: the reactionary’ takes up three of the seven chapters. These are followed by a chapter each on the Swiss (‘Zwinglian’), Radical, Calvinist, English and Scottish Reformations, which taken together constitute almost a self-contained book in themselves; one which, furthermore, has a lucid and eloquent account of Catholicism under Elizabeth, whose pacy and well-written narrative benefits from its inclusion in such a comparative context.

Part three, entitled ‘Catholics’, offers an appreciably shorter account (154-page) of the Counter-Reformation, whose novelty lies essentially in the relative attention paid to the overseas missions (about a third at just under sixty pages). Eire’s account of Trent, whose ‘message’ and priorities he describes crisply as: ‘Worship uniformly, instruct thoroughly, police intensely’ (385), is both conventional enough and perhaps rather too sanguine about the significance of the new diocesan seminaries, which in fact took centuries rather than even decades to roll out throughout even the Italian peninsula. However, at least he does acknowledge that: ‘to issue decrees is one thing, to enforce them is quite another’ (382) and that the most important changes were brought about *locally* (though he misses the opportunity to make the link between the ‘theory’ of the Decrees and Canons of Trent and the practical ‘how to’ manual issued under the authority of Carlo Borromeo in the form of the *Acta ecclesiae mediolanensis*, 1582). At the same time, though, Eire recognises that since Spain’s New World dependencies were also affected - (indeed, Philip II of Spain was one of the first rulers to promulgate the Council decrees throughout his empire, though of course hedged around with exclusions so as to protect the royal prerogative where it related to ecclesiastical appointments, the famous *patronato real*) - this made ‘the Tridentine reforms the first truly global initiative in global history’ (384). Though again here, Eire could have followed through by reference to the work of that Borromeo of the Americas, Toribio de Mogrovejo, Archibshop of Lima, whose Third Council of Lima (1582-83) has been referred to by historians as: ‘the Trent of the Americas’.

Although throughout this part of the book Eire mostly achieves a delicate balance between discussion of reform in relation to the particular and the universal, or as he puts it: ‘Reform in head and limbs carried out by the limbs themselves thanks to a healthier head’, he does miss out on the opportunity of developing further this theme in his otherwise excellent discussion of the reform of liturgy and the cult of saints after Trent. This would have enabled him to engage properly with the reciprocal relationship between these two vectors of reform. The first of these saw the gradual imposition of the Roman Rite, beginning with the issue of the revised Roman Breviary in 1568 with its slimmed down calendar of saints’ feasts and expurgated second nocturn matins hagiographical readings. This had the effect of particularising the universal in that it regularised local liturgies, specifically forbidding those which could not prove 200 years of continuous use. Meanwhile, the equally gradual reform of canonization procedure, the considerable medieval basis for which Eire underplays, (ignoring the work of André Vauchez), mistakenly attaches a single date (1588) to the refurbished process that was actually achieved over several decades; beginning in 1603 with the foundation of the Congregation of the Blessed (*Beati*) and concluding with the issue of the papal brief, *Coelestis Ierusalem cives* of 1634. This universalised the particular by formalising the status of the blessed (*beatus/a*) for the first time. These were not unoffical cults, as Eire states, but those which were recognised as non-universal, being limited to a single order, church, diocese, region, or even country, although within each of these locations the person venerated enjoyed the same status as did an officially canonised saint.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Eire is on much surer ground in his discussion of the miraculous, attitudes to which he considers as *the* defining feature of reformed Catholicism; since they proclaimed and asserted the immanence of the Divine over and against Luther and Calvin’s ‘inscrutable and transcendent God’ (403). This is part and parcel of what Eire calls later on ‘the creation of a reactionary climate of hypersacralisation’ (754). More prominent here than even the intercession of the saints were miracles associated with the Eucharist. The latter’s role as symbol in the Religious wars which swept Europe with increasing ferocity from the 1560s through to the 1640s gave such cults a massive boost. Philip II of Spain’s *Sagrada Forma* (Sacred Host of Gorkum) a Host that had miraculously bled when trampled upon by a Dutch Calvinist soldier and which was venerated by him at his palace-monastery of Escorial outside Madrid, is only one of the most famous.

Similarly, Eire is spot on in his discussion of the Spanish, Portuguese and Roman Inquisitions. As he points out, it is wrong to speak of ‘*the* Inquisition, for it was not a single institution, but rather a scattered and assymetrical assemblage of tribunals’ (386) whose symbolic value was in fact greater than its actual power. However, as Eire himself concedes, symbolic value should never be underestimated; a truism that can be be seen from the flowering of confraternities during the century and a half after the closure of Trent, during which, notwithstanding efforts by both bishops and the pope to exercise greater clerical control, they became both more numerous and more popular.

Eire’s discussion of the crucial contribution made by regular clergy to the Catholic reformation is particularly well judged. This is because he does not start with the new religious orders whose foundation has been used since the 19th century to trace the revival of the Rome in the face of the Protestant threat. Instead, he begins with the oldest monastic order in Western Christendom: the Benedictines, and so makes space for the significance of the Cassinense congregation to the earliest stirrings of reform of the religious orders in the early modern Catholic church. He then deals with the Franciscans, who in their various branches remained the most numerous religious order throughout the early modern period. These included not only the Capuchins, who emerged in the 1520s and survived the defection of their first third vicar general, Bernardino Ochino who fled in 1543 to become a Calvinist pastor, but also the Cistercians, whose early modern history is rather less well known. As well as the Feuillants, a hyper austere group who secured their identity as a separate congregation in 1589, there were such striking individuals as the the 17th-century nobleman, Armand-Jean de Bouthillier di Rancé, who after a life spent in luxury at the court of Louis XIII, retired to the Abbey of La Trappe and formed the nucleus of a congregation that became known in the 18th century as Cistercians of the Strict Observance or Trappists.

Amongst the new religious orders, we encounter several more – including the female orders of Ursulines and Visitandines, before we finally get to the Jesuits, who have become so closely identified as the ‘shock troops’ of the Counter Reformation that it is difficult to view them afresh: as a small group of priests uncertain of their destination, led by a former soldier who had only abandoned his military vocation because a cannon ball had left him with a limp and who had not gone to university until he was in his thirties, having already been investigated more than once by the Spanish Inquistion: Ignatius of Loyola. Once Eire has reached the Jesuits, the stage is set for a comprehensive tour d’horizon across the four known continents. A particular strength of his narrative is that it balances awareness of the negative impact on indigenous peoples of such missions with the esteem in which contemporaries in the Old World held the missionaries. This was almost wholly the result of Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, which for so long has been associated almost exclusively with the Protestant cause. For it was the reports of missionary derring do – the Jesuit *Relations* – which gripped readers and listeners in Western Europe and made such figures as the Apostle of India and Japan, Francis Xavier a household name as well as an inspiration for younger Jesuits, literally thousands of whom wrote letters to the Father General seeking to serve (and die) in the Indies: the famous *Litterae Indipetae*. Such literature constituted but one tributary, albeit an important one, of the huge river of literature that flooded into the Old World and ultimately caused not only its immediate audiences to recalibrate what it meant to be a Christian. This was because the insight that what ‘they’ – the indigenous extra-European peoples – now are, we once were – was accompanied by the realisation that, in reality, there were still many inhabitants of the backwaters of the Old World whose religious practice was in fact closer to that of the New World idolators than was comfortable. This led to the employment, as early as the 1550s, of the term ‘Other Indies’ to describe these places of benighted semi-pagans. Eire refers to this process as a ‘backwash’, though I prefer to describe it as ‘the feedback factor’ in order to emphasise the reciprocity of influence that was taking place and argue for the final outcome: which was that the overseas missions led ultimately to the conversion of the Old World by the New (a process that is still continuing).[[10]](#footnote-10)

However, ultimately Eire’s conclusion here is not too dissimilar from my own. He takes two works of art to show how the Asian missions were understood by Catholics at large. The first is a statue of St Francis Xavier on the Charles Bridge in Prague, in an early 20th-century replica of the 1711 original, which shows the Basque Jesuit bearing a cross baptising a group of Indian and Japanese pagans sitting at his feet, who are themselves supported by a quartet of figures – one Chinese, one Tartar, one Indian and one Moor, who bear the burden as a collective Atlas. The second is a wooden effigy of St Francis Xavier, whose actual corpse still lies half way across the world in Goa on the west coast of India, which 18th-century Jesuit missionaries installed in their mission church of San Xavier del Bac, founded in 1692 in the Sonoran desert, that is now located just nine miles south of Tuscon, Arizona.

The final part of the book, at 220 pages, is almost a book in itself and is dedicated to the consequences of the Reformations viewed comparatively. It begins by backtracking chonologically in order to provide a comprehensive survey of the Religious Wars starting with the Battle of Kappel of 1531 which, according to Eire, was ‘one of the earliest armed conflicts in which Protestants and Catholics killed and maimed each other in the name of religion’ (527) and cost Ulrich Zwingli his life, and ends, not with the Treaty of Westphalia – the usual *terminus ad quem* for those who study the wars of religion in the early modern period - but with James II’s defeat by the forces of William and Mary at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The next chapter – ‘the Age of Orthodoxy’ is a comparative account of the ways in which the various confessions dealt with religious dissent. It is perhaps unsurprising that pride of place is given to the Jansenist controversy that reopened the debate over the precise relation between human will and divine grace, which had been originally framed by Luther himself. This is followed by a chapter dedicated to ‘The Confessional Age’ which, once again by means of comparison, sheds new light on the relative efficacy of social discipline on its various subjects, observing, perhaps surprisingly to those of us who have focused on Roman Catholicism, that: ‘Catholics were far less uniform than Protestants in their approach to social discipline’ (610). However, his overall conclusion to this chapter is of relevance to his wider argument and so is worth citing in full:

Despite all its obvious connections to early modern state building, social disciplining was much more than an attempt by elites to force subalterns into submission. Ultimately, with Catholics, as much as with Protestants, no campaign for moral improvement to orthodoxy could ever succeed without the willing participation of the lay folk…. the ‘Christianisation’ of early modern Europe was very much a lay affair, a process of change that took place as much from the bottom up as from the top down (616).

 The next two chapters are devoted more purely to the intellectual consequences of the Reformations – specifically, the extent to which they might be said to contribute to the birth of reason and doubt. The first focuses on the attitudes to Witchcraft, which enables Eire to revisit the mechanisms by means of which the various reformed Churches coped with heresy and confirm the existing historiography that argues for the relative ‘tolerance’ of Catholicism, with its sceptical inquisitions which contrasted with the Protestants, whose belief in a transcendent God did not prevent, indeed seemed to intensify, the Witchcraze, thereby demonstrating that ‘Protestantism did not make a clean break with the medieval past’ (658). The following chapter, on ‘The Age of Reasonable Doubt’ plays fast and loose with chronology in order to be able to include, for example, the reception of the Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius, (in which he uncritically accepts Stephen Greenblatt’s seriously problematic interpretation) to explore such themes as atheism, the art of dissembling and the emergence of religious toleration. Speaking personally, for all their manifest qualities I found this pair of chapters essentially out of place owing to the degree to which they seemed to knock the argument of course and indulge that anachronistic hobby horse of so many intellectual historians from Hugh Trevor Roper and Alfred Rupert Hall to Quentin Skinner and David Wootton – that is the truffle-hunting for the origins of modernity which Eire had so brilliantly dissected and debunked at the outset.

 The final two chapters largely bring the volume back on course: ‘The Age of Outcomes’ seeks to provide a balance sheet of the impact of the Reformations on those who lived ‘in the world’. Eire concludes that there was ‘a narrowing of the gap between the ideal and the real. That reshaping and narrowing was not uniform, but that it did have one salient effect: the religious fragmentationof Europe’ (717) which ultimately led to ‘the adoption of common frames of reference outside the realm of religion’ (718). The next chapter, ‘The Spirit of the Age’ tries to draw up some kind of balance sheet, by examining whether or not the Reformations increased fervour or lessened it? Eire answers by saying this is a question *mal posée –* ‘quantification offers no definitive proof of devotion or of success’ (719) before taking the reader through a certainly learned, but rather meandering consideration of baroque mysticism and artistic excess, which comprehended, for Eire, also a new, extended focus on Hell which was shared by both Protestant and Catholic writers.

 So it was almost with relief that I approached the Epilogue where Eire begins, promisingly enough, by posing the question: ‘How best can one sum up the legacy of the Reformations without falling into a trap as ignominious as Hell’s?’ (744) – this ‘trap’ presumably being that of anachronistic assumptions about the emergence of modernity. Eire proposes that we borrow from the history of science, specifically the work of Thomas Kuhn, to argue that we should view the changes brought about by the Reformations in terms of a paradigm shift: ‘that is, as a change in conceptual world view – a change that is inseperable from thought as it is from the material factors that led it’ (ibid). However, still borrowing from Kuhn, he almost immediately shifts focus onto the Protestant reformation, or rather Protestant *Revolution*. In what follows, Eire uses the term ‘desacralisation’ in order to get around the critique of Bob Scribner and successive scholars who have argued for what one might call, following Max Weber’s famous account of the preconditions necessary for the emergence of Capitalism: the ‘un-disenchantment’ of the World. Central to Eire’s notion of ‘desacralisation’ is the fact that it is a process which ‘refers strictly to paradigm shifts within the Christian religion itself’ (748). Viewed in terms of ‘theological and spiritual boundary marking from within the Christian community itself’ (ibid), Eire emphasises that it was the Protestants themselves rather than ‘external factors of any kind’ who were responsible ‘as aggressive agents of the process of desacralisation’. The Catholics, by contrast, could only respond to such changes within the Protestant world view reactively: by means of ‘hypersacralisation’ (754) Eire ends the book, rather lamely, in terms which recall the argument put forward recently by Brad Gregory in his controversial account of Christianity as the unwitting midwife of secularisation: *The Unintended Reformation* (2012):

The fragmentation of Christendom was the most immediate and long-lasting effect of the Reformation. This splintering, and the plurality of churches and worldviews created by it, changed Western Civilisation radically, creating spaces large and small into which all other pre-existing secularising forces could flow (756).

After such a splendidly and rumbustiously argued account, which lacks neither courage nor intellectual panache, I felt somewhat let down by Eire’s refusal to take the opportunity of his exhaustively and geographically wide-ranging narrative to move beyond such a Eurocentric *telos*. Although it is invidious, in what is already an overlong book, to ask for coverage of more themes, I was surprised by Eire’s failure to engage more fully with the role played by that pre-eminent agent of Roman Catholic universalism: the papacy. Instead, we just get it invoked – metaphorically and decoratively – in the brief preludes to each part of the book, in which Eire traces the building of the new St Peters at 1450, 1510, 1564 and 1626. However, if he had stopped to consider ways in which not only *Roman* Catholics thought with or about Rome in all four corners of the inhabited globe, he would have left the reader not only with what is undoubtedly, for all its limitations, the most even-handed treatment of the Age of European Reformations available.

1. What follows is a review of Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: the early modern world, 1450-1650*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 893. ISBN 978-0-300-11192-7. £25. In order to avoid an unnecessary number of footnotes, page references to the work are given in parenthesis in the main body of text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See P. Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the invention of the Reformation*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming. The quotation is taken from the text Marshall delivered at the workshop: ‘Remembering the Reformation,’ University of York, 21-22 October 2016. I am grateful to Professor Marshall for permission to reproduce it here. All quotations come from this unpaginated source. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. D. MacCulloch, *The Reformation: a history*, (London, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *War against the Idols: the reformation of worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, (Cambridge, 1989); *From Madrid to Purgatory: the art and craft of dying in sixteenth-century Spain,* (Cambridge, 1995); *A very brief history of eternity,* (Princeton, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eire, *A very brief history of eternity*, 16-17. For a moving account of the author’s Cuban childhood see his prize-winning memoir: *Waiting for snow in Havana: confessions of a Cuban boyhood*, (New York, 2003) and the sequel: *Learning to die in Miami: confessions of a refugee boy* (New York, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.pedropan.org/category/history> (last accessed 30 January 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Introduction’ to Emily Michelson, Scott K. Taylor & Mary Noll Venables eds., *A Linking of Heaven and Earth: studies in religious and cultural history in honour of Carlos M. N. Eire*, (Farnham/Burlington VT, 2012), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In (not only) this respect, Eire is close to Brad Gregory’s unapologetically apologetical approach to the writing and interpretation of Christian history as reflected in the latter’s robustly argued: *The Unintended Reformation: how a religious revolution secularised society*, (Cambridge MA/London, 2012). Cfr. B. Gregory, J. Coffey & A. Chapman eds., *Seeing things their way: intellectual history and the return of religion*, (Notre Dame, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a fuller explanation of the changes in canonization procedure for the period see: S. Ditchfield, ‘Tridentine worship and the Cult of saints’ in R. Po-chia Hsia ed., The *Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. VI. Reform and Expansion, 1500-1660*, (Cambridge, 2007), 201-24. It should also be noted that it was Roberto Bellarmino, not as Eire has it (402) Carlo Borromeo, who questioned the wisdom of Heribert Rosweyde’s plan for what became the *Acta sanctorum* on the grounds that such a comprehensive collection of saints’ lives would just provide ammunition for Protestant controversialists to use against the Catholic Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An argument which I have outlined in my chapter ‘Catholic Refomation and Renewal’ in P. Marshall ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, (Oxford, 2015), 152-85 and which I will be developing more fully in my forthcoming survey: *Papacy and Peoples: the making of Roman Catholicism as a world religion, 1500-1700*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)