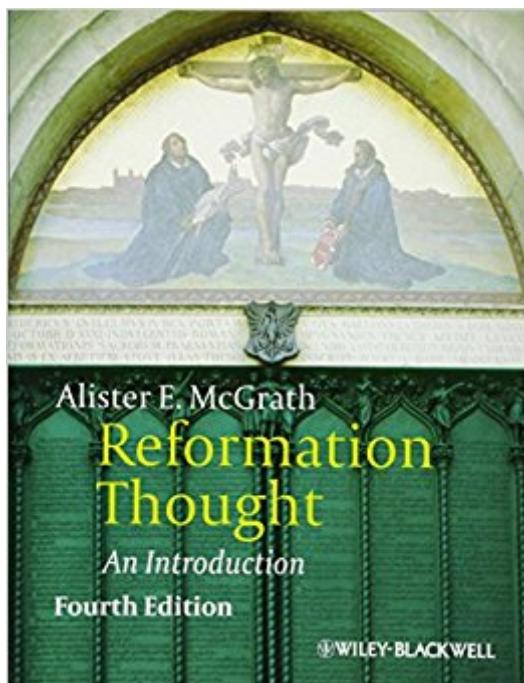


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# Reformation Thought: An Introduction



## Synopsis

Reformation Thought, 4th edition offers an ideal introduction to the central ideas of the European reformations for students of theology and history. Written by the bestselling author and renowned theologian, Alister McGrath, this engaging guide is accessible to students with no prior knowledge of Christian theology. This new edition of a classic text has been updated throughout with the very latest scholarship. Includes greater coverage of the Catholic reformation, the counter-reformation, and the impact of women on the reformation. Explores the core ideas and issues of the reformation in terms that can be easily understood by those new to the field. Student-friendly features include images, updated bibliographies, a glossary, and a chronology of political and historical ideas. This latest edition retains all the features which made the previous editions so popular with readers, while McGrath's revisions have ensured it remains the essential student guide to the subject.

## Book Information

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Description An authoritative exploration of the history of Christian theology from the Patristic period to present-day developments. An ideal introduction to the history, sources & methods, and key figures of Christian thought. An engaging introduction to core topics of Christianity discussing them in relation to the Bible and key theologians. This classic text introduces the central ideas and developments of the European Reformation to readers of history and theology.

“Anyone looking to understand the theological and sociopolitical world of the Protestant Reformation and its present influence would do well to look nowhere else but this latest edition of *Reformation Thought*. (Jacob Sweeney's Blog, 17 May 2012) "[McGrath] is one of the best scholars and teachers of the Reformation ... Teachers will rejoice in this wonderfully useful book." (Teaching History (of a previous edition))

In one of his most recent monographs, Alister E. McGrath explores the profound changes in Christian belief and practice that developed during the Reformation, with a particular focus on framing them in their proper social, economic, political, and technological context. McGrath describes the Reformation using a balanced approach, causing an elegant dance to occur between causes and their resultant effects. His stated purpose in producing yet another book on the Reformation is twofold: to make a complex subject accessible to the non-theology student, and to examine the Reformation by "entering into its worldview" (1). This review will summarize the main ideas of *Reformation Thought*, consider the strengths and weaknesses of McGrath's arguments, and offer an assessment of whether McGrath's work makes a meaningful contribution to the broader field of Christian history. This review will argue that while McGrath's work indeed makes a meaningful contribution, it would have been even better if McGrath had added features that would have allowed the reader to validate his many claims of recent scholarship. McGrath covers the Reformation in fourteen chapters. In the first chapter, he provides an overview of the Reformation. In so doing, he offers the reader a framework they can use to interpret Reformation events in context. He takes care to separate the reformation activities that occurred in Switzerland (e.g., Zwingli) and Germany (Luther). In chapters two through four, he provides an overview of the sociopolitical landscape that led to the Reformation. He starts in the latter Middle Ages (chapter two), and then explores the influence of Humanism and Scholasticism (chapters four and five). He

then describes the reformers in chapter six. Chapters seven through ten are dedicated to the development of Sola Scriptura, and the corresponding doctrinal reforms related to soteriology, the church, sacraments, and predestination. In chapters eleven and twelve, McGrath takes an excursion to examine the interactions among political thinking and the reformers, and examines the lesser-known English Reformation. In the final two chapters (thirteen and fourteen), McGrath borrows terms from geography and describes the diffusion of reformation ideas, and then examines the enduring impact of the Reformation upon history. There is much to commend about McGrath’s thoroughgoing treatment of the Reformation. By committing the first five chapters to matters of framework and causal factors, McGrath met his goal of placing his reader in the 16th century worldview. His explanation of the doctrinal changes that occurred during the Reformation are well-connected to their associated causal factors including society, technology, and politics. This is in contrast with many volumes on the Reformation that seem content to only conduct a perfunctory analysis of the Reformation’s causal factors. While the results of the Reformation are important, McGrath makes the case that understanding the causes are of equal importance. He draws a sharp line between the separate events of Switzerland and Germany. Yet, at the same time, he also makes the point that even though these events began at different places, they produced similar results. To accomplish this task, McGrath begins by explaining the different types of Scholasticism (63). He then deftly traces how the various Scholastic camps influenced each thread of Reformation thinking and doctrinal development. The other strength of McGrath’s approach is how he helps the reader immerse themselves into the peculiar academic language of the Reformation. He carefully explains theological terms in plain language as he introduces them in the text. He also provides helpful explanations of especially confusing ideas. Just one example is how he offers a detailed explanation on how to properly refer to various centuries using Italian terms (36). (For instance, *trecento* refers to the 1300s, or the fourteenth century, which could cause all sorts of confusion for the uninformed reader who assumed *trecento* meant the thirteenth century.) He explains how the milled edge of coins has a surprising parallel to justification and good works (68). He explains how even Luther toyed with the idea of assuming an old Greek spelling of the family name, *Luder*, which could help the confused reader comprehend the underlying subtleties of this alternate spelling of Luther’s name (79). The careful treatment of causes and effects, along with the many helpful asides, provide strong evidence that McGrath accomplished his stated goal to make his work accessible to non-theologians. As is often true, strengths can also be weaknesses. McGrath, at the beginning of his volume, indicated that he would avoid using many endnotes, and in

their place, offer a bibliography at the end of each chapter. While this approach improves readability and accessibility of the book, it also prevents the reader from analyzing the sources chosen by McGrath to make his points. He often cites recent scholarship throughout his monograph, and then structures his logic and conclusions accordingly. For example, McGrath indicates that older works depict the Middle Ages as a time, “in which religion was in decline” (23). An endnote with sources would have been helpful to trace the development of academic thought on the subject, to include which modern works offer a different perspective. He also makes a claim to recent scholarship on the evolution of Luther’s views on Justification (71). Again, knowing which scholarship was used would allow readers to make their own assessment. As it stands, it is easy to wonder what theological commitments McGrath used when selecting sources of recent scholarship. One other improvement that could be made is a figure at the end of each chapter that summarizes the main ideas. This is a small point, but one that would improve the ability of the book to encourage readers who are unfamiliar with the Reformation to not miss important main ideas. Taking graduate level materials on the Reformation to a deeper level of understanding, *Reformation Though* is an excellent source for learning the delicate interactions among theology, politics, technology, and society. The book’s primary value is that it explains the Reformation by immersing the reader in the worldviews of the time. The chapters on background and doctrinal developments produce a solid understanding of the centripetal and centrifugal forces that helped the Reformation unfold. Unfortunately, McGrath’s sparse documentation of his sources could cause some readers to wonder whether McGrath’s theological commitments have inadvertently shaped his presentation of the Reformation. While this has probably not happened to the point of distorting the reliability of the material, the reader has no way to be sure. Overall, the weaknesses of the book do not overcome its strengths. This entertaining, informative, and well-conceived monograph deserves to be read by anyone interested in understanding how the God of history caused His people to rediscover their purpose. Timothy S. WallaceStafford, VALiberty University

Great perspective of the development of Protestants

GREAT book!

Good and informative on the Reformation and the background issues to the movement. I liked the definitions integrated within the text.

A good coverage of the topic and written in an easy-to-follow way. The main personalities and events are all there, so it is a very useful reference book.

To the complex historical era that defined, and still defines, history as we know it. It is worth reading and diving into the subject matter.

Great book on the history of church thought.

Good review of modern exegesis on updating doctrines, procedures, and litany of orthodox, historical, and traditional Christianity relating to the modern church.

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