

Simpson, James.

Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism.

Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 444. ISBN 978-0-674-98713-5 (hardcover) US\$35.

James Simpson, well known for his brilliant contribution to the scholarship of the late Middle Ages, has contributed a distinct and suggestive study of the English Reformation, showing once more how deep scholarship and reading can yield something unexpected and significant not just to scholars but to members of the wider community. So what is surprising? The English Reformation began with “illiberalism,” intolerance, literalism, predestination, and the like, and gave the underpinnings, even if transmogrified, of liberalism, freedom of conscience, free will, religious freedom, political constitutional frameworks, and more. Simpson finds the illiberal roots of liberalism in this permanent revolution and so makes more intricate our understanding of the Reformation and what followed to our day. Protestants transformed their own tradition to go from the illiberal to the liberal.

But even the nuanced scholar and stylist, Simpson shows that the Reformation had illiberal and liberal aspects. One of the best elements of this book is the way it crafts an argument, lucidly but never simplistically, to give a fuller picture than we had before of the oxymoronic aspect of the subtitle. So I began this review with the apparently paradoxical shift from the illiberal to the liberal but will follow Simpson into a much more complex and fascinating account of the waning of the Middle Ages to the Glorious Revolution.

Simpson came to this book in a Milton seminar in which the question of freedom with a precondition arose (ix). This comment on Milton, who for Simpson is a mixture of liberal and illiberal, prompts this study, whose answers are “that Protestantism is a powerfully and necessarily self-conflicted tradition, precisely because its anti-formalism repudiates tradition” (xi). Simpson continues: “In flight from nothing so energetically as from prior forms of itself, Protestantism is best described as an anti-tradition tradition of permanent revolution, forever targeting earlier and/or competing versions of itself (rather than Catholicism) precisely as the source of most lethal threat” (xi). Simpson sees a kinesis within Protestantism, which explains how 1688 was so different from 1517, and argues that evangelism forged the liberalism of 1688 and of today, and he maintains that this early modern evangelism also made illiberal,