Bruening, Michael, ed. A Reformation Sourcebook: Documents from an Age of Debate

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*A Reformation Sourcebook: Documents from an Age of Debate.*  

In putting together this admirable sourcebook, Michael W. Bruening was guided by his conviction that the Age of the Reformation was ultimately an “Age of Debate.” By organizing primary sources into discrete conflicts and themes, he presents the ideas, personalities, and long-term consequences of sixteenth-century religious reforms. His book will indubitably help students understand not only the arguments of the different reformational movements but also why men and women from all levels of society cared so deeply about ideas that may appear remote or irrelevant to the typical reader today.

Chapters flow roughly chronologically from the late medieval background through the fracturing of Christendom into the early seventeenth century. For students who are unfamiliar with how to read theology or history, Bruening begins with a brief introductory section on “How to Read a Primary Document.” Each chapter contains three or more debates highlighting a particular theme. Bruening’s introductions and “focus questions” will help students quickly enter into the documents and read the texts for the key ideas.

The first chapter establishes the background context with late medieval debates on papal authority, Jan Hus’s reforms, scholasticism and humanism, and lay piety, including a selection from Erasmus’s *Colloquies* and *Paraclesis*. Martin Luther’s ideas take centre stage in the next chapter. Following the 1517 indulgence controversy, Luther’s central theological positions on the priesthood, sacraments, and justification are illustrated by selections from his three 1520 treatises, with writings by Johannes Eck and Henry VIII representing
Catholic counterpoints. Luther and Erasmus’s famous disputation on free will ends the chapter. The following section on the early “radical wing” and the German Peasants’ War of 1525 presents Luther’s responses to Karlstadt’s iconoclastic writings, Thomas Müntzer’s *Sermon before the Princes*, and the German peasants’ Twelve Articles.

The next two chapters introduce the Reformed tradition, beginning with the first Zürich disputation (1523) that set Ulrich Zwingli’s Swiss reforms into motion. Walter Köhler’s reconstruction of the Marburg Colloquy (1529) illustrates Lutheran and Reformed differences on the Eucharist. Zwingli’s refutation of the *Schleitheim Confession of Faith* (1527) introduces students to Swiss Anabaptism. The section on French reform begins with the debate between Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples and the Sorbonne group on translating the Bible into French and follows with “The Affair of the Placards.” Calvin’s thought is introduced without a debate, but Bruening’s focus questions encourage students to compare the reformer’s doctrine on communion with Luther and Zwingli’s. Calvin’s 1539 debate with Jacopo Sadoleto precedes several selections from Geneva’s consistory records. Although the discipline records were not debates, they are rich sources of the effect of the reform of church and society on common men and women.

The sixth chapter turns to English debates, beginning with Thomas More and William Tyndale’s positions on the translation of the English Bible. Bruening uses Thomas Cranmer and Reginald Pole’s debate on the role of Scripture to discuss Henry VIII’s break from Rome. Finally, Puritans’ dissatisfaction with the Elizabethan Settlement is contrasted with Anglican Richard Hooker’s 1594 defense of the need to maintain traditions. For the chapter on the Catholic reformations, Bruening contrasts the Council of Trent’s decrees and canons on Scripture, sacraments, worship, indulgences, and the clergy with John Calvin’s *Antidote to the Council of Trent*, 1547. By comparing Teresa of Ávila’s *The Way of Perfection* (1583) with the trial of Francisca de los Apóstolos (1575–77), Bruening encourages students to consider why one woman’s mysticism was accepted by the church, while another’s was condemned. The chapter concludes back in England with the debate between the Jesuit Edmund Campion and William Charke in the 1580s. While the last debate contrasts two clear positions, one wishes that some of Loyola’s own writings had appeared in this section.

In the sixteenth century, theological differences moved beyond formal disputations to warfare. Bruening uses a variety of sources to show the different
justifications for waging religious war. The eighth chapter covers the Wars of Kappel, Schmalkaldic Wars, and the French Wars of Religion. In addition to declarations of war, the documents include eyewitness accounts of Zwingli’s death and the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre.

The final two sections examine the cultural and social impacts of Reformation ideas by comparing practices rather than formal debates. Chapter 9 contrasts positions on baptisms, fasting, carnival, sports, music, the saints, purgatory, and funerals. The final section examines different attitudes towards social relations between men and women, Christians and Jews, authorities and religious minorities, and slavery. Set in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Iwie Synod’s (1568) debate on slavery will likely be new to many instructors, but it clearly illustrates how religious convictions had practical consequences.

The sources slightly favour Reformed and English traditions, so instructors at institutions affiliated with other confessions may want to supplement with other material. Bruening maintains that “the printed word was central to the period,” but a collection of images could demonstrate another way that the Reformation was argued. Overall, Bruening’s superb collection is sure to spark debate and kindle interest in the Reformation among students, and it would be valuable for teaching the subject at all levels.

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