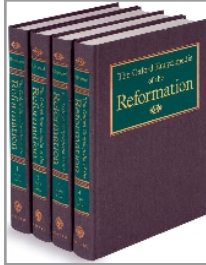


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The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation

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Discoveries In the New World.

The European discovery of new lands and new peoples in the Americas challenged the visions of world history and of the salvation of the infidel accepted by both Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. The results were a revival of apocalyptic history with the New World at its center, a wide debate about the possibility of the salvation of non-Christian peoples, and the creation of new missionary strategies to effect their conversion, often under the impact of the evangelical success of the Catholic Reformation both in Europe and in America. Catholic and Protestant reformers reached similar conclusions about the New World's place in providential history but diverged sharply in their assessment of the possibility of the natives' salvation, and hence the effort which should be put into their evangelization.

The discovery of America and the Reformation have been linked in history since at least the end of the sixteenth century. For example, the Franciscan apocalyptic historian Gerónimo de Mendieta, in his *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* (1596), drew a parallel between the careers of Martin Luther and of the conquistador Hernán Cortés: at the same time that Luther destroyed the foundations of the Roman church in Europe, Cortés conquered new lands and opened the way for the conversion of new souls across the Atlantic. The comparison of Luther and Cortés was a commonplace in Spanish historical thought, and it resembled two strains of reform thought, one earlier, Roman, and Catholic, the other later, English, and Puritan. In the papal court in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the ideal of reform was extended to include a worldwide *renovatio* encompassing the New World discoveries. Just as thinkers like Mendieta saw the New World as a compensation for the losses suffered by the Roman church at the hands of Protestant reformers, so papal reformers saw the new lands of the Americas as compensation for territory lost to the Turks. This would herald an expansion of the bounds of the church beyond anything even the Roman empire had known, as part of a new golden age of Christian peace during which the gospel would go "out to the ends of the earth" (*Ps.* 19:4). By contrast, in English Protestant thought of the seventeenth century (as earlier in French Huguenot thought during the late sixteenth-century Wars of Religion), America was seen as revealed by God

as a refuge for those persecuted by the forces of Counter-Reformation. As the English radical Tom Paine put it in 1776, “the Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America—as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years.” Renewal would not be general, however, but would be confined to those groups of the reformed who made the regenerative errand into the wilderness of America.

Both Catholic and Protestant reformers placed America within the context of apocalyptic history. There was a *translatio religionis*—a westward movement of religion, from its cradle in Israel, as well as a *translatio imperii*, a westward course of empire—that would be fulfilled in the Americas. For the Franciscans in particular, as indeed for Christopher Columbus, the discovery of the New World affirmed the universal claims of the church, the imminence of the last days, and the necessity of evangelization. For English Protestants, the New World became both the battleground for the fight against the forces of the Roman church and the arena in which the final preparatory drama of the last days would be played out.

The role of the salvation of the natives of the New World in these apocalyptic histories was perhaps the major distinction between Roman Catholic and Protestant thought occasioned by the discoveries in America. Though both the Spanish and the English colonial enterprises were authorized by an evangelical intent (the Spanish through the papal bulls confirming their rights in the New World, the English by their royal charters, for example), Protestant missionary activity lagged far behind the Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit missions in the New World. Few of the first generation in the magisterial Reformation were concerned about the peoples of the newfound lands. If they were interested in the question of the salvation of non-Christian peoples at all, their interest was in the Turks and the Jews, not the native peoples of America. The Lutheran insistence on justification by faith alone and scriptural authority “tended to restrict rather than enlarge the scope of salvation,” as George Huntston Williams put it. Only the beliefs of the Radical Reformers, in universal salvation and ecumenism, and the missionary fervor of their lay apostolate, encouraged the evangelization of non-Christians. The later Calvinist emphasis on doctrines of election and the necessity of testimony to conversion, however, further restricted Protestant evangelization in the New World. In contrast to the Catholic missions, the first generations of English Protestants were also constrained by their ministry of the elect, their belief in the necessity of civilization (that is, acculturation and settlement) before Christianization, and their refusal to temper their message to the culture and practices of the native Americans. (“By [Puritan] principles, no Nation can or could ever be converted,” complained an Anglican visitor to New England in 1642.) The apparent success of the Catholic missions in the New World inspired the parallel efforts of Catholic reform and conversion (in Italy, for example) in the sixteenth century. It would take the forces of Protestant reform in the New World until the turn of the eighteenth century to realize that if they were to imitate that success and follow fully the Gospel's exhortations to universal evangelization, they would have to abandon the restrictions imposed by the theology of the magisterial reformers and take up the mission approved by both Catholic and radical Reformations alike. Only then could all the peoples of the Old and New Worlds become potentially a part of salvation history.

See also AMERICA and MISSIONS.

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