'Christendom Destroyed': European upheaval in 16th and 17th centuries

Mark Greengrass writes an informed and engaging account of the disintegration of Christendom’s universalism

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By Glenn Altschuler

“God Almighty has a quarrel lately with all mankind, and given reins to the ill spirit to compass the whole earth,” James Howell, a Welsh clergyman, proclaimed in 1645; “for within these twelve years the strangest revolutions and horridest things have happened, not only in Europe but all the world over, that have befallen mankind, I dare boldly say, since Adam fell ...”

The upheaval, according to Mark Greengrass, an emeritus professor of early modern history at the University of Sheffield, shook the foundation of Christendom, and the cultural, social, and political institutions and habits of thought which sustained it.

In “Christendom Destroyed: Europe, 1517-1648,” a volume in the Penguin History of Europe series, he provides an immensely well-informed, informative and engaging account of the disintegration of “Christendom’s universalism” (the myth the Middle Ages had created about itself).

Emphasizing that the destruction of Christendom did not mean the collapse of Christianity, Mr. Greengrass claims that by the middle of the 17th century, Europe became a “Paradise lost,” less a project than “a geographical projection,” on which dynastic states, perennially at war with one another, sometimes in the name of Catholicism or Protestantism, could be represented.

Impressive in its scope, Mr. Greengrass’ book examines a wide array of “dissolvers” of Christendom, including the changing demography of Europe; popular uprisings; Martin Luther’s challenge to the Roman Catholic Church; the role of money in giving states the resources to engage in conflict with one another; the transformation of chivalry into a make-believe code of aristocratic behavior; the challenge of Islam; and unsuccessful efforts to convert the natives of North and South America to Christianity.
With the emergence of print culture, and the proliferation of atlases, dictionaries, bibliographies, encyclopedias, and religious and political pamphlets, Mr. Greengrass points out, knowledge became a public commodity and not a church commodity.

John Calvin’s advice that human beings adopt “a learned ignorance” on matters in which God had chosen not share His knowledge, was increasingly ignored.

Naturalists wondered how Noah’s Ark could accommodate all existing species. And Copernicus and Galileo maintained that the earth went around the sun. As citizens “knew” more and more, and faith became separated from reason, “facts” became what experiments could prove.

Mr. Greengrass also provides ample documentation of political fragmentation throughout Europe — and its corrosive impact on Christendom. Elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, Charles V thought of himself as a second Charlemagne, who would renew the church, reform the empire, and gather the sheep into one fold. But, Mr. Greengrass writes, “the sheepfold became a battlefield, with Charles’ pronouncements viewed as a smokescreen for the imperialistic ambitions of the Habsburgs.”

Meanwhile, popes were less and less able to enlist military and political help to control — and extend — their temporal interests. Party to struggles on the Italian peninsula and elsewhere, and unable to count on the support of Protestant princes, popes kept trying to rally Christians around a Crusade.

The more they persisted, Mr. Greengrass suggests, the more they advertised their incapacity to lead Christendom. And the more cynical Europe’s dynastic leaders became toward cardinals and popes. Louis XII, for example, ridiculed Pope Julius as the son of a peasant, who ought to be beaten into obedience.

During this period, Mr. Greengrass demonstrates, the responsibilities and powers of states grew. The costs of military establishments and wars (which were fought with increasing frequency and ferocity) exploded.

Rulers depended on entrepreneurs, contractors, judges, financiers, mercenaries and taxpayers. Some of them concluded that religion politicized their subjects. Others advocated using “the pretext of religion” in public pronouncements, implying that inter-state hostilities was “not so much a matter of religion, but rather of saving the public state wherein religion is also comprehended.”

Mr. Greengrass knows that “Christendom,” as he has defined, never existed. And that it was “a reflexive construction that felt easily threatened.” He makes a persuasive case, however, that even as the beliefs and practices associated with it continued, and churches intensified their enforcement of orthodoxies, Christendom’s credibility diminished as it became the object of competing claims to represent the social and political order.
By 1648, it seems clear that “Europe” could be defined only as a geographic landmass, with scores of states, each of which had a sense of its own moral superiority. The Bohemian philosopher Jan Komenský (Comenius), who spent much of his adult life in exile, then, was surely not alone in concluding that wisdom and true unity existed only within individual souls possessed of God’s grace.

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