

Andrew Atherstone
The Reformation: Faith and Flames
(Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011), 192 pages

In recent years there have been a number of books about the Reformation—surely, someone might ask, do we really need another? Well, whether or not there are enough studies of those momentous events, I leave for others to decide, but we do need this one! It is comprehensive and thorough, covering the period's major aspects, like the German Reformation or the rise of the Anabaptists, and the era's major theological issues, from both the Catholic and Protestant vantage-points. The author, who serves as Tutor in History and Doctrine at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, also highlights details sometimes not treated in works on the Reformation, like the evangelical transformation of religious life in Scandinavia (p.95). Atherstone is an excellent writer with a firm grasp of the cultural and social history of the period, though he recognizes that the key issues motivating men and women of this era were theological (p.7). Overall he is extremely fair in his historical analysis, though his own evangelical convictions do seem to peek through at certain points. For example, his chapter on the English religious scene during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I is entitled “King Josiah and Queen Jezebel.” Granted he is using biblical comparisons made by their contemporaries, but his take on Mary is quite different from the apologetic offered for her and her religious policies by Eamon Duffy in his *Fires of Faith: Catholic England Under Mary Tudor* (Yale University Press, 2009). A final plus for the book is that it is sumptuously illustrated with prints and portraits from the sixteenth century, contemporary photographs of places where key events took place, as well as maps for the geographically-challenged, which many seem to be today!

I came away from reading Atherstone’s work with two major thoughts. First, the Reformation was a sanguinary era. It is shocking how much blood was shed by both sides in the name of Christ—though any child of the twentieth century, that most violent of eras, has to be careful about leveling such a critique. Second, I was reminded of how theologically confused were the early Anabaptists. While many of them were undoubtedly right to protest the use of force to compel belief (it is noteworthy that not all the first Anabaptists were pacifists), a leading Anabaptist theologian like Balthasar Hübmaier, who died well as a Christian martyr, seems to have been unclear about salvation by faith alone (p.77, 79).

In sum, I highly recommend this book as a great introduction to the Reformation, and, in this reviewer’s opinion, it would also serve well as a good textbook for a course on this highly significant event in Christian history.