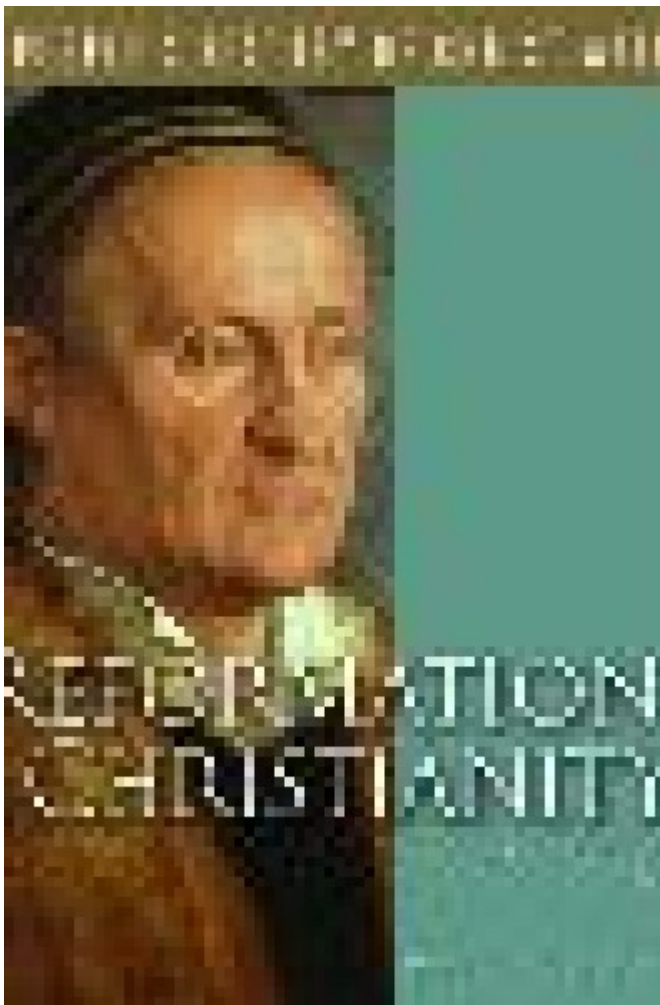


# Reformation Christianity: A People's History of Christianity, Volume 5

reviewed by [David M. Whitford](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## Reformation Christianity: A People's History of Christianity, Vol. 5

Peter Matheson, ed.  
Fortress

"I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together." Every child who has ever spent a sultry summer morning at vacation Bible school has learned that song. It reflects the wisdom that the church is more than buildings or preachers or prayers or doctrines. The church is the people of God. It is this tidbit of insight that led the editors at Augsburg Fortress to assemble a series called *A People's History of Christianity*. Seven volumes long and organized chronologically, the series encompasses a much wider geographical range than many other introductions to Christian history. It also reflects a current debate among historians about the nature and subjects of church history.

Almost a decade ago one of my fellow historians argued that church history had lost its way when it became enamored with social history and that thus there was little to distinguish church history from the secular history of Christianity. He said that church history ought to focus on topics such as church architecture, doctrine and worship. On the other end of the spectrum are the editors of this series. There is little about doctrine or polity in these volumes—save discussions of how these affected "the laity, the ordinary faithful, the people." Denis Janz, the general editor, argues in his preface that the story of these ordinary Christians has not been fully told and that the series investigates this "unexplored territory." Janz is a Reformation historian, so it is no wonder that the Reformation volume is among the strongest in the series, and he could not have selected a better volume editor for the endeavor than Peter Matheson.

An accomplished social historian, former seminary professor and principle emeritus of the Uniting Church Theological College in Australia, Matheson has long had his feet on both sides of the church-history-versus-history-of-Christianity divide, and he took to heart Janz's vision of a history of Christianity as lived by the people of God. He begins the volume with an excellent introduction both to the volume itself and to many of the debates current in Reformation history. Can we speak, for example, of a Reformation, or should we speak of an era of reformations? Matheson argues that the 16th century was a time of Reformations—capitalized and plural. There is a reforming trend that united the Catholic, Protestant and Radical Reformations, so it is appropriate to capitalize the noun, but these movements were very different, with different methods and agendas, thus the plural. Matheson also explains that this book is not the story of Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII.

Matheson's tends to see the Radical Reformers—especially Thomas Müntzer—in a more romantic light than I think appropriate. Müntzer was one of the principal actors in the 1525 Peasants' War and was, I would argue, less a theologian of the people than an opportunist who used the people for his own agenda. On that point specifically, Matheson and some of the contributors would certainly disagree with me. But that, I think, is one of the benefits of this volume. It encourages discussion and even debate in a way that Williston Walker's *History of the Christian Church* never could.

The first part of the book focuses on effects of the Reformation on ordinary people's piety. In the late 1970s, it was argued that the Reformation had failed because the common folk remained as mired in superstition 50 years after 1517 as they had been 50 years before. Eschewing this debate for the most part, Raymond Mentzer, Keith Luria and Margo Todd instead focus on the ways in which the Reformation affected and changed popular piety. Popular piety and life in general were radically different for many people 50 years after Luther, they argue, whether one lived in a city (Mentzer) or a small country village (Luria), and whether one was Lutheran, Catholic, Reformed or Anabaptist. Todd, a noted historian of the British Isles, uses England and Scotland as a test case for the changes wrought.

The second section of the book leads the reader through the cycle of life. The veil between life and death, even now paper thin, tore open more times than one would like to consider in the era before modern hospitals and operating rooms. David Cressy shows us in a thoughtful and insightful chapter that although the insecurities brought on by the mundane and extraordinary event of childbirth were little affected by the Reformation, baptism and childhood were different. Even the naming of children was affected: in Geneva, certain names tainted by "papist" saint worship were forbidden. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, in the chapter on the roles of men and women, notes that over time the ability of midwives to perform emergency baptisms was first proscribed and then later forbidden outright in Calvinist-leaning territories. Wiesner-Hanks is the leading historian of gender and sexuality in the 16th century, and her essay is one of the best in the book. Finally, Peter Marshall examines death, showing why wills written in 1601 look markedly different from those penned a hundred years before.

The final section focuses on how people regularized or concretized their new approaches to the Christian life. In this section, Elsie McKee's chapter on lay theology embodies the series rationale. Theology, McKee reminds us, is not the sole

purchase of the seminary-trained pastor. Lay people too can be profound theologians.

The People's History series and this volume in particular are important additions to the story of Christianity as it is lived out in the world, charting a path through territory that is often known only to professional historians. However, by presenting the story so determinedly from below, the authors ignore many of the major figures and much of the doctrine that shaped people's lives. The editors seem to assume that readers will already be familiar with these, but I wonder whether this is an accurate assumption. The divide between a history of Christianity that looks at the lives of ordinary Christians and a church history that deals with doctrines and major figures is a false dichotomy. The history of the church is both. It is certainly about ordinary people. But it is about ordinary people who are informed by doctrine, theology, worship styles and so on. A history of the Christian church needs both.