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Milton and the Struggles of England's Long Reformation
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The perspectives of literary scholars and early modern writers can contribute much more to recent debates, dominated by historians, over how to conceptualize and label the English Reformation or Reformations and over how far to conceive the process of Reformation extending. Was the process a single long Reformation or, rather, a process of long and plural Reformations? During the convulsions of the English Revolution, Milton wrote about “the reforming of Reformation itself” and complained about “the slow-moving Reformation which we labour under,” and in 1649 he noted “all the Protestant Reformations that have been since Luther.” Consequently, for Milton the Reformation was a long, incomplete process of religious change that did not end in the sixteenth century and that required much more dramatic reform and rethinking in the midst of the religious and political conflicts of the English Revolution. Milton recognized, as a number of early modern historians have recently stressed, that “the Reformations of the early modern era were more of a process than an event” (to quote Carlos Eire). Milton’s writings thus make their own important contribution to the invention of the Long Reformation. Milton’s conception of England’s Long Reformation, moreover, reminds us that he did not in any sense see himself living in a “post-Reformation” religious world. Rather, Milton expresses a sense that the Reformation is not only a long process and struggle, but that progress in the Long Reformation remains highly uncertain, its victories never completely secured. *Paradise Lost* can itself be seen as battleground in the prolonged struggle over the Reformation— incomplete and precarious.