



W. David Myers. *"Sinning Folk": Confession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996. xii + 230 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3081-7.

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Confessionals and Confessionalization

W. David Myers, assistant professor of history at Fordham University, continued the research project which had led to his 1991 Yale University dissertation "Sacramental Confession in Sixteenth-Century Germany" and produced this book. In it, Myers argues that "[p]eeeling away the surface of sacramental confession should permit us to peer inside the process of making modern Catholicism" (p. 4). The area Myers chose to study as part of this "peeling away" was the German-speaking south of the Holy Roman Empire: the Duchy of Bavaria above all, with some discussion of the prince-bishoprics of Passau and Salzburg, and less of the various Habsburg territories of the Alps and the Danube.

Myers bases his study on a variety of printed sources. His bibliography of these sources extends to approximately five pages of titles, a good portion of which were printed in the period 1550-1650. He also utilized a few scattered archival records dealing with Bavaria and Passau. These records are now to be found in the Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv in Munich. The printed sources on which Myers so heavily relies include synodal and conciliar legislation, ritual books, autobiographies, visitation records, handbooks, and editions of various theologians' writings.

Readers of HABSBURG can no doubt appreciate the centrality of Counter Reformation practices and ideas about confession in parts of central Europe if they recall the ubiquitous statues of Saint Jan Nepomuk, whose legend stressed this sacrament, and whose image and veneration played a significant role in unifying the Habsburg lands. W. David Myers has chosen a topic of central im-

portance to understanding the religious changes of the late medieval and early modern periods in this part of the world. In so doing, he inserts himself into an ongoing set of debates centering on penance and the Reformation.

He states clearly that the influential British historian John Bossy's ideas about confession provide him with "a general framework for [his] own thinking" (p. 6, n13).[1] Was one of the causes of the Reformation a moral laxness, an overzealous desire on the part of late medieval clerics willing to absolve too much, as Adolph von Harnack had argued in the nineteenth century? Or, conversely, was this reform a reaction to overly-rigid demands on the consciences of the believers, who turned to Luther's ideas for consolation, as historians such as Thomas N. Tentler and Steven Ozment argued back in the 1970's? [2]

Myers comes down on the side of Lawrence Duggan, arguing against Tentler and Ozment. Myers straightforwardly states: "[c]onfession was too easy, not too hard" (p. 57).[3] The confused and varied practices associated with late medieval penance across Europe, when traced through to their revised manifestations in the seventeenth century, as Myers does in this book, do not result in a guilt-ridden, fearful populace, as Jean Delumeau painted it, but instead in societies of Central European sin-counters, confident in their bookkeeping abilities (p. 199).[4]

This book marks a shift from Bossy and others' emphasis on social groups. Many historians of the Reformation and Counter Reformation in recent decades have looked at confraternities or religious orders, classes,

guilds, rural communes, men and women working with other men and women. Myers instead traces, particularly in his final chapter, the rise of an individualized, personalized Roman Catholicism, where the believer faces his or her conscience (and the cleric) one-on-one in the boxed-off confines of the confessional.

The emphasis on practices instead of practitioners leads to a different image of the central European Counter Reformation. It is one clearly related to the influential ideas of “social discipline” and “confessionalization,” historians’ terms of the 1980s and 1990s used to describe the development of religion-centered political units in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Central Europe. Myers’s Chapter Three is most clearly written in this vein.[5]

The organization of the book is clear. Two sections, “Late-Medieval and Reformation Confession” and “The Counter Reformation and Sacramental Confession,” are each divided into two chapters. After an introductory chapter on late-medieval confessional practices, Myers presents a chapter on the impact of various Protestant ideas on these practices. He then presents a too-brief prologue on the Council of Trent before chapters on baroque piety and the Jesuits and a concluding chapter where he argues, rather mysteriously, that the Counter Reformation’s “[c]hanges in structure finally allowed the sacrament to fulfill on a wide scale the purposes intended for it by medieval theorists” (p. 145).

Before beginning Chapter One, Myers provides a useful Prologue where he defines a number of the theological terms to be used throughout the book. Using standard reference works, he lays out clear meanings for words such as “satisfaction,” “absolution,” “attrition,” and “contrition.” He, of course, must walk on that “slippery slope” of trying to explain particular historical, central European practices while using universalized or generalized terms defined out of context, but in Chapter One he pulls it off through an elegant device: he explains that institutions “frame” practices (p. 27), so his reader must understand that a decree of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, for example, while not determining practice, had some effect upon it. Nonetheless, assertions about “medieval Europe” as a whole (pp. 35-36) underline the cobbled-together nature of the argument about what “the Church” expected when it came to confession. Myers is forced to gather up bits from far and wide, in places like Florence, Nantes, and Uppsala (See, for example, p. 36.). His argument is stronger when he sticks to pointing out how vague things were when it came to late medieval confes-

sion: “[f]or the theology of confession ... that time before the Reformation is best described as an age ... of theological and doctrinal confusion” (p. 26).

The practices Myers asserts were prevalent in late medieval central Europe had temporal and social aspects. Latin rite Christian men and women in central Europe, if they confessed, tended to do so in crowds around Holy Week, Myers explains. Lent was the time to examine one’s conscience, and one often did this examination in a public or semi-public setting, with bustling bunches of friends and neighbors not too far away.

How did the Protestant Reformation change confession? This is the question Myers proposes to answer in Chapter Two. Curiously, he chooses to do this starting with Martin Luther. For the Habsburg territories, at least, if not for Bavaria, some mention of the Hussites and Jan Hus might have been helpful to place confession and its practice in a longer context. Ideas concerning the efficacy of the sacraments and these sacraments’ relationship to the men administering them clearly marked central Europeans’ ideas about the sacraments.

Myers argues that under the influence of Luther’s ideas (often curiously and inexplicably buttressed with references to Jean Calvin, see p. 65, n16), confession often became a ritualized formula taken from a book (p. 69). Luther believed, Myers states, that it was not possible for one to enumerate all of one’s sins, so clerics influenced by his ideas often jettisoned the previous requirement of full confession of specific sins: “[p]rofessing the new faith in Bavaria obviously meant rejecting the specific enumeration of sins” (p. 91). “Lutheran practice quite clearly meant giving up the specific enumeration of sins and the various satisfactions meted out by confessors” (p. 75).

These practices, Myers points out, led to a response. In the inchoate religious world of sixteenth-century central Europe, a world Myers aptly describes as “fluid” (p. 102), members of religious elites sought ways to identify their followers. Who belonged to whom? How could one tell? Particularly as the mid-century passed, markers of religious affiliation were needed, perhaps to protect one’s friends in a massacre. Using the problematic visitation records (for more on this source, see my comments on HABSBERG, Note 6), Myers attempts to trace “Catholic Practice at Mid-Century” (p. 76). The specific enumeration of sins became a confessional marker. Catholics seized on this theological difference, building it into a cornerstone of the new Roman Catholicism that would be taken into Protestant Europe, as well as Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

This marker was the subject of the deliberations of the Council of Trent. It issued a series of canons and decrees on this and related subjects at its fourteenth session, held on the Feast of Saint Catherine in late 1551. Myers devotes a six-and-a-half-page prologue to this council and its theologians' and politicians' views on confession. More space would have been warranted, for a close analysis of that session, the last substantial one held before the ten-year council suspension of 1552-62 which signaled and reflected the breakdown of Latin Christian relations, reveals many of the themes which make the subject of confession a central one to understand the course of the religious controversies in the Holy Roman Empire.

Instead, Myers jumps into a rather undistinguished Chapter Three, where he proposes to examine "... the changes that took place in the ritual, setting, and circumstances of confession during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (p. 115). He looks at various official documents to examine how religious authorities, to whom Myers curiously refers as "the old Church," sought to create a practice of confession which was "identifiably Roman Catholic" (p. 115). Myers falls into the old trap of seeing an anthropomorphized social construct when he begins to discuss how "[t]he Roman Church itself believed [sic] strongly ..." (p. 118). This leads his analysis into rather hazy territory, where the exact mechanisms of social control and standardization are placed into a ready-to-wear church-and-state alliance. It is here that Myers chooses to reach into his tin archival drawer, pulling out a few references to a Bavarian government committee, the *Geistlicher Rat* (pp. 119-20). He then turns to two obscure references to the Hauptstaatsarchiv's *Blech Kasten Archiv* (notes 16 and 18). In order to make these references carry substantial weight in his argument, much more is needed about how authority was exercised in early modern Bavaria. Just which *Herrschaften* are represented in these archives? Were they even located in the Duchy of Bavaria? How did the *Geistlicher Rat* exercise its power? [7] Myers is on firmer ground when analyzing theological pronouncements.

Chapter Four returns Myers to the world of religious practices. Based partly on Jesuits' writings and reports, he traces the increasing frequency of people's participation in communion, arguing that this indicates a related increase in the frequency of confession: "... to receive communion more frequently also meant to confess more frequently" (p. 152). He quotes Saint Peter Canisius on frequent communion, as well as the authors of other contemporary catechisms. These writings show a stress on accounting and prudence in place of fear. If one is to

be a Roman Catholic, one must list one's sins, but precise mechanisms are given as to how this should be done, providing what Myers calls "... a kind of spiritual management" (p. 161).

"The idea was to make confession so regular that, although it was a matter of grave importance, it also became routine," Myers states (p. 179). He details the examination of conscience outlined by an anonymous Capuchin friar in the friar's *Newer Beichtform* of 1635. This book contained an ingenious system of slips and slots to help the penitent examine his or her conscience and keep track of various types of sins. Once the book was marked, it was taken to the priest and used as a sort of script for the confession (pp. 179-81). This last chapter of Myers's work emphasizes, through the discussion of various printed sources, the controlled nature of the introspection necessary for Counter Reformation confession. This controlled nature is reiterated in the title of the conclusion: "Careful, Not Fearful." Confession had changed from its chaotic late medieval manifestations. By the seventeenth century, W. David Myers tells us, it was the personal, organized, and standardized practice one can still see today in Munich's churches. No longer tied to Lent, "penance became an event independent of season" (p. 193). "The discipline of the Church led to the discipline of the self ..." (p. 195), where each person submitting to this discipline of the confessional pronounced his or her allegiance to the new Roman Catholicism which the Reformation had engendered.

In addition to the various points outlined above in the discussions of the various chapters, a few general comments may also be adduced here in reference to W. David Myers's book. First of all, readers of HABSBUERG should be clearly informed that when this work deals with specific geographic contexts, it concentrates first and foremost on ducal Bavaria, despite occasional mentions of the bishoprics of Passau or Salzburg and the Habsburgs' Danubian and Alpine holdings. "Austria" is often almost an afterthought, as on page 117, when Myers writes: "[t]he genius of the Bavarian (and Austrian) Catholic Reformation" or "Wittelsbach (and later Austrian Habsburg) policy ..."

Myers seems to rely heavily on standard textbooks for his contextualization of practices of confession outside Bavaria. While he makes mention of Eder and of Franz Ortner's survey of the religious changes in Salzburg,[8] he also falls back on wider survey textbooks such as those by Erich Zoellner and Hugo Hantsch (p. 70, n36-40). He also seems unsure as to how to characterize

the religious history of the Habsburgs' lands. Is it, as on page 11, an area "that remained basically Catholic ..." or, as on page 70, a place where "[o]nly in the very late sixteenth century, and by force, ... emperors and prelates restore[d] Austrian Roman Catholicism"?

Additionally, there are intriguing hints in Myers's presentation that the conflicts over confession need not simply be placed within the context of that tried-and-true "church"- "state" framework to which historians like to resort. On page 38, he mentions that "[w]e may guess that women constituted the bulk of the people who confessed and communicated more frequently in Germany ..." and on page 84: "[i]t is striking that some of the most frequent confessions took place in women's cloisters ..." What do these hints mean? Was confession particularly female? Why? Recently, women and their confessors have been the subject of some study.^[9] Could insights gained from noticing more often the consistently gendered nature of the confessional have been incorporated more fully into the analysis? To Myers's credit, he does refer at times to the debates concerning probity. Confessionals were to be open so that people could see that nothing untoward was happening inside.

Finally, there is a certain "dollars-and-cents" aspect of the various discussions concerning confession that could stand further analysis and discussion. Discussions over confession were often jurisdictional issues that involved basic questions of who could charge the fees and fines. Myers points out that "... the clergy normally expected some recompense for their sacramental services" (p. 36) and that visitation records recorded complaints against clergy who refused to perform sacraments without receiving a fee (p. 82). The reservation of particular sins to the bishop is also mentioned (p. 41), but more could be made of the issues concerning episcopal jurisdiction. This was a particularly messy issue in the Reformation-era Holy Roman Empire, where bishops were princes and princes wanted to be bishops. It should not be forgotten that at the Fourteenth Session at Trent, where confession and extreme unction were legislated, the reform decrees centered upon the office of the bishop, and particularly the responsibilities of the bishops to supervise the activities of clerics.

The reforming bishop of Passau Urban von Trennbach (1561-1598) appears in the text and in the index as "Urban von Trench" (pp. 121, 230). It would have been helpful to many readers if Latin quotations had been translated into English. The Latin passages on pages 126-27 and page 130 remain untranslated, while

the German passages on pages 154-58 appear with English translations, sometimes in the text and sometimes in the footnotes.

W. David Myers has approached an important topic in the history of early modern Central Europe. There is no doubt that confession deserves a close and detailed study of its changing histories in practice, tied to place and time. Professor Myers's book makes major steps toward a more thorough understanding of how practices developed in central Europe. His book "*Poor, Sinning Folk*", while not the last word on the subject, is certainly part of the conversation.

Notes:

[1]. See particularly Bossy's "The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. 25 (1975); also Bossy's *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[2]. Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1898) VI:250, n4; Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

[3]. Lawrence Duggan, "Fear and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte* 75 (1984) 153-75.

[4]. Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[5]. For a good overview of this literature, which is too numerous to list here, see the two-part historiographic essay, "Arbeiten zur Sozialdisziplinierung in der Fruehen Neuzeit" by Ralf Georg Bogner and Christa Mueller in the journal of Vienna's Institut fuer die Erforschung der Fruehen Neuzeit, *Frueh Neuzeit Info* 7 and 8 (1996).

[6]. Dated March 18, 1996; see gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/0R83421-87687-/Pubs/lijpn/HABS/archives/March%2C%201996.

[7]. For his analysis of the developments in the Habsburgs' lands, Myers has to fall back on Geoffrey Parker's 1970's textbook *Europe in Crisis, 1598-1648* ([London]: Fontana Paperbacks, 1979) and a reference to over 300 pages in Karl Eder's classic about Upper Austria, *Glaubensspaltung und Landstaende in Oesterreich ob der Enns* (Linz: Feichtinger, 1936). See Myers p. 121, n

23.

[8]. Franz Ortner, *Reformation, Katholische Reform und Gegenreformation im Erzstift Salzburg* (Salzburg: Pustet, 1981).

[9]. Jodi Bilinkoff, "Confessors, Penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Avila," 83-100 in Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, eds., *Culture*

and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

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