9-1997

(Review) Poor, Sinning Folk: Confession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany by W. David Myers

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Keywords
confession, penance, Catholic, Germany, Reformation, Council of Trent

Comments
Initially published in *Central European History* 1997, 30(3):431-432.

DOI: 10.1017/S0008938900014527

http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0008938900014527

Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957) might have been in order here. Whatever the artistic value of Seger's miniatures may be, they are a visible representation of the political ideology of a mid-sixteenth-century ecclesiastical principality.

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"Poor, Sinning Folk:" Confession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany. By W. David Myers. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1996. Pp. xii + 230. $35.00. ISBN 0–8014–3232–4.

David Myers has written an important study of confession and penance in Catholic Germany. Myers persuasively challenges a number of long-held assumptions about the theory and practice of confession, both before and after the Reformation, and presents a new interpretation of developments in Tridentine Catholicism. This is an ambitious project, but Myers carries it off successfully and even elegantly.

One of the strengths of this book is that its structure forces the reader to consider confession in the context of late medieval Christianity, the Protestant Reformation, and Tridentine Catholicism. The first part of the book examines the theology and practice of sacramental confession in late medieval Germany, and analyzes the challenge posed by the Protestant Reformation. In the second part of the book Myers turns to a study of the program of religious reform adopted by the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent, focusing on developments in Bavaria and Austria. Myers concludes that Tridentine reformers began a long process that led Catholics to practice individual, private, frequent, and routine confession.

Myers begins Part I with a brief discussion of the theology of penitential confession, as developed over the course of the medieval period. Here he emphasizes the fluidity and uncertainty of church doctrine, which left much room for variety in the practice of confession. He then presents a very effective discussion of penitential practice in late medieval Germany. In this chapter Myers navigates the dense and often combative historiography of confession in this period with a sure hand, clarifying a number of issues. Following the example of such historians as John Bossy and Robert Scribner, Myers examines a variety of sources that reveal popular practice and the physical setting of confession. He convincingly portrays a population which around 1500 considered confession as preparation for the celebration of Easter and thus as an integral part of the liturgical year. The Lutheran critique of traditional penance prompted the Catholic Church to tighten and specify its doctrine, but neither the practice of confession nor the popular understanding of it in Catholic Germany changed dramatically in the later sixteenth century.

With the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church began a major reform of the sacrament of penance. The decrees of the council and the reform program it set in motion included an important reform of confession. The council worked to clarify a number of theological ambiguities, but more importantly for German Catholics, church reformers sought to change the practice of confession. Myers shows how the Tridentine Church encouraged more frequent confession and sought to enforce and protect its privacy, especially through the use of the confessional box. Perhaps most important of all, frequent, private confession gave devout believers a regular and routine opportunity for examination of their consciences, personal prayer, and self-improvement. Confession was to be undertaken seriously, no longer only during the rush of Lent, and should ideally help the penitent develop self-discipline and, ultimately, achieve a less sinful lifestyle.

Myers analyzes a large amount of proscriptive literature from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Germany. His sources lead him to argue, against Jean Delumeau in *Sin and Fear*, that confession in Tridentine Catholicism was not primarily designed to frighten the faithful. Instead, he maintains that confession allowed Catholics "to manage sin and guilt effectively, and this goes to the heart of the Catholic Reformation as a widespread pastoral reform" (p. 298). Myers thus gives a more positive view of the efforts of Catholic reformers, emphasizing the attempt to change belief and behavior through effective and persuasive ideas and techniques, rather than focusing, as do many historians, on the disciplinary and punitive aspects of church reform.

Part II of this book is based primarily on proscriptive sources such as church ordinances, confessional manuals, and devotional literature. Myers has less direct evidence of practice in this part of the book, but also recognizes that traditional confession, particularly outside the cities, changed very slowly. He points out, for example, that frequent confession only slowly took hold, and that Bavarian peasants confessed at most five times a year in the eighteenth century (p. 188). Confessional boxes were not universally available before that time (p. 186). Furthermore, there was apparently considerable variety in local practice, even within Bavaria and Austria.

Myers emphasizes the broad trend toward frequent, routine, private, and secret confession in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One might argue, however, that the diversity of confessional practice and the slow pace of change in the practice of confession are equally important. It seems probable that the vast majority of German Catholics continued to consider confession primarily as a prerequisite for participation in the "great community celebration of Easter" until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. Conversely, models of confessional practice may not have reached the masses until the nineteenth century. What was the practice of confession in the interim, in the 200 years after the Council of Trent? "Traditional" and "Tridentine" practices certainly clashed, but they also coexisted, even in the same church. A parish priest in the late seventeenth century probably had to deal with a spectrum of confessional prac-

tices among his parishioners, from the vast majority who crowded the church for their Lenten confession, to the especially devout who confessed weekly.

Two points are important. The period during which the new ideals of confession slowly gained adherents was a long one. Myers's study challenges historians to study religious practice in the early modern period in its own right, not just as a transition from medieval to modern. Secondly, Myers's study of confession, like most studies of sacramental practice in early modern Catholicism, highlights one of the great strengths of the Catholic Church, that is, its ability to integrate new devotional practices without rejecting traditional ones. I would go a step further and argue that this adaptability was a particular strength of the *German* Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Myers, however, is less interested in the peculiarities of German Catholicism than in the broad changes in European Catholicism illuminated by his German examples.

"*Poor, Sinning Folk*" is essential reading for scholars of early modern religion. Myers brings clarity to a topic that has spawned considerable debate, but less careful analysis. Myers's willingness to examine changes in confessional practice across several centuries and his clear grasp of the issues that concern historians of the Reformation and historians of early modern Catholicism is particularly admirable. One can only hope that more historians will follow his example and examine central aspects of religious life in such detail.

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Bauern zwischen Bauernkrieg und Dreissigjährigem Krieg. By André Holenstein. Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte, vol. 38. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996. Pp. xiii + 156. $29.80. ISBN 3–486–55714–9.

The *Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte* approaches the halfway point. By now, readers of this journal should be familiar with the format and usefulness of the series. When completed, it will mark a striking advance over the old *Gebhard* handbooks as a comprehensive survey of German history. The format of combining an "Encyclopedic Overview" and "Tendencies of the Research" in a single volume gives the series a historiographical dimension that traditional textbooks cannot achieve while still providing the "straight facts" that are a staple of those textbooks.

This volume by André Holenstein is, in many respects, one of the pivotal volumes for assessing the accomplishments of the series as a whole. It covers a topic and time period that has undergone a fundamental reevaluation since the old *Gebhard* volumes and which continues to evolve in new directions because of the reception of innovative methodologies.