

Voices of Conscience: Royal Confessors and Political Counsel in Seventeenth-Century Spain and France

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As suggested by its subtitle, Nicole Reinhardt's fine new book undertakes a double mission. On the one hand, this is a study of a specific practice and the men who participated in it. Like other Catholics, the kings of 17th-century Spain and France were expected regularly to undergo the sacrament of confession, acknowledging their sins, accepting a priest's criticisms and admonitions, repenting, and finally receiving absolution. Unlike other Catholics, though, kings could choose the priests to whom they thus subjected themselves, and to some extent they could also define the scope of their priests' questioning. In both Spain and France, those choices took on a new degree of formality around 1600. The king's confessor became an officially acknowledged court figure, and contemporaries discussed his duties at length. On a narrow reading, Reinhardt's book is about the 40 or so men who held this position in the ensuing 150 years. She asks how they did their jobs, what culture and reasoning they brought to the task, what questions they asked or failed to ask. Given their potential influence over royal consciences, confessors had a necessarily fraught relationship with other power players at court, and Reinhardt seeks to chart these relations as well.

But of course the confessors' work also touched on much larger questions running through early modern political life, and another way to read Reinhardt's work is as an exploration of all political advice-giving in the early modern centuries. Any effort to guide kings posed thorny problems in an age of increasingly absolute monarchs, and the confessors simply displayed those problems in especially high-intensity form. Contemporaries worried about who qualified to offer advice, how much kings had to listen, or what formats advising should follow; should it take place mainly in formal institutions like councils of state, for instance, or in the more intimate exchanges between kings and their favorites? More pointedly still, royal confessors embodied the problem of Christianity's place within political advising and decision-making. Did politics follow Christian morality, and did moral standards apply in similar ways to kings and to private citizens? Through the specific example of the confessors, *Voices of Conscience* thus takes up some of the most basic questions of early modern political life. As if that were not ambitious enough, Reinhardt's addresses these themes as they played out in the era's two greatest powers, each the subject of a vast historical literature, and her chronological framework is equally capacious; the 17th century of the book's subtitle in fact extends back to Machiavelli and forward to Louis XV, in the mid-18th century. It's thus not surprising that this is a big, challenging, and extraordinarily learned book. Its 375 pages of text are organized into five parts and 16

chapters, and an additional 32 pages of bibliography follow. It lists works in a half dozen languages, manuscripts from fifteen separate depositories, and hundreds of published sources.

Given this immense array of topics and documents, it's hardly surprising that the book is also somewhat sprawling in character, with topics covered in one section popping up again in others. (The difficulty of the prose is more surprising; the book would have benefited from firmer editorial oversight.) The confessors themselves only appear in the third chapter of part one, following extended explorations of the practices and theories of early modern counsel as found in the two kingdoms. Part two examines some specific cases of confessorial reasoning and advising, concerning big-ticket political issues like war, taxation, and nomination to office. Part three includes further case studies: a richly documented example of one confessor's opinions, the debates surrounding Spain's 1609 expulsion of the Moriscos, examples of collisions between confessors and royal favorites. Part four focuses on images of the royal councilor, both secular (like the Roman philosopher/politician Seneca, a great favorite with the early moderns) and sacred (like the Old Testament prophets, whose example consoled 17th-century confessors when the going got tough).

Finally, Part V examines criticisms of royal confession, which began early in the 17th century and continued into the 18th. Some of these came from absolutism enthusiasts, who thought it unseemly that majesty be subjected to priestly evaluation. Other criticisms came from rigorists like the Jansenists, who disliked the easy-going approach taken by France's Jesuit confessors. But there was also a more fundamental contradiction in the confessional process, and as the 17th century ended it finally came to seem insoluble: the king's public actions simply could not be judged by the religious yardsticks that applied to ordinary people. As that idea sank in, the very notion of a "royal confessor" came to seem a contradiction in terms.

Throughout, Reinhardt stays close to the documents she has uncovered, and her documentary fidelity is both a strength and a weakness. In providing extended explications of specific documents, she necessarily touches on multiple themes that a more analytical approach might keep separate; that's one reason readers may find it difficult to follow the book's organization into sections and chapters. In addition, the documents aren't evenly divided between the two countries, and that imbalance shapes some of Reinhardt's analyses. We learn a great deal more about Spanish clerical opinion than about French, since Spain's political organization generated abundant documentation of insider advice-giving, from clerics and laymen alike. Nothing comparable survives for France; on the other hand, France produced a rich pamphlet literature that helps illuminate public opinion, especially concerning the shortcomings of royal confession. But Reinhardt's approach has advantages that more than compensate for its difficulties. Her book brings us into direct contact with those who lived through the confessional process, and with how they navigated its contradictions.

Any comparative study of Spanish and French politics in the 17th century recalls J. H. Elliott's *Richelieu and Olivares*, first published in 1984 and still regularly featured in graduate seminars on early modern Europe. Though with many nuances and complications, Elliott emphasized the fundamental similarities between Spanish and the French monarchies; their political leaders confronted similar challenges and reasoned about them in comparable ways. Of course France ultimately triumphed in the struggle for European hegemony, and that triumph had encouraged historians to see it as the more flexible and better organized state, the better adapted to the challenges of the age, ultimately the more modern. But for Elliott these assessments were illusions generated by hindsight. The two states were not in fact so different, and the contest between them could have ended differently had circumstances been slightly different. The basic patterns of early modern political organization counted for more than national differences.

Reinhardt places more emphasis than Elliott did on differences, both in how the two states were organized and in the political cultures that informed their actions. Most important for her purposes, Spanish and French kings had differing relations to the sacred. For centuries, French kings had claimed a special connection to divinity, that gave them near-priestly standing; at their coronations, they were anointed with holy oil, and their touch miraculously cured those afflicted with scrofula. Thus acting as God's anointed, French kings could insist that their confessors confine themselves to personal sins, and leave matters of state alone.

Spanish kings made no such claims, and Spanish royal ceremonial emphasized instead the practical and this-worldly. The ironic result, as Reinhardt shows, was a far greater involvement of clerical advisors in political affairs. Spanish kings allowed their priests latitude to speak on political issues and listened carefully to them. Royal confessors joined the Council of State and the expert panels (*juntas*) that advised on specific issues; even monetary policy was viewed as an appropriate subject for their intervention. A few French confessors sought influence of this kind, but they were quickly silenced. They were to concern themselves only with the king's personal failings, not with his performance in office.

Reinhardt insightfully attaches this contrast in confessional practices to larger differences in the two countries' political cultures. From the 16th century on, Spain had a vigorous tradition of political consultation and deliberation. Spanish kings had established a series of specialized councils and boards, staffed with educated professionals and charged with providing expert opinions, and they had also to deal with entrenched representative institutions. France had no such organizational structure. Its royal council was a shifting collection of whichever individuals the king wanted to consult, and its record keeping was equally haphazard. It wasn't just spiritual advice that counted for less in France; its kings wanted less advice of all kinds, and they insisted on setting the terms for whatever advice-giving they tolerated.

Yet Reinhardt also shows that Spanish and French confessional practices converged more than might be expected, given such very different starting points. Spanish confessors were far more ready than their French colleagues to opine on public issues, but from the outset their opinions tended to the pragmatic. They understood that the state had its own reasons, and that its welfare entailed moral calculations quite different from those that applied to ordinary people. Conversely, it was France that produced the harshest critiques of royal confessors, as too lax in their guidance, too easily swayed by arguments for reason of state, too accepting of despotism; and these arguments (as developed for instance by Blaise Pascal) caught the attention of the French public. For all their differences, thus, Spain and France ultimately found themselves entangled in similar political ironies, as each sought to apply Christian standards to political life. In showing how those efforts ultimately failed, Reinhardt has illuminated some of the basic realities of early modern political life.

The author thanks Professor Dewald for his review of *Voices of Conscience*. She does not wish to respond.

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