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Review of Patrick O'Banion, *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain*.

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Patrick O'Banion, *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain*. Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 248 pp.

The regulation of confession was at the heart of Tridentine reforms, and yet, due to the secret nature of this sacrament, studying confession can seem akin to investigating the infamous tree falling in the forest. In *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain*, Patrick O'Banion argues that previous studies' reliance on prescriptive literature is "highly problematic," because these texts describe an "ideal" that rarely corresponded with the "local reality" (14). O'Banion supplements prescriptive literature with more descriptive sources, mostly in the form of Inquisition testimony, but also including economic data, and local legislative and administrative documents. His central thesis is that attention to practice over theory reveals confession to have been less a tool of unilateral "social control" and more a negotiation between clerics and confessants seeking a "mutually satisfying" confessional experience (42, 44, 170). As this phrase suggests, O'Banion's work fits squarely within the recent "synthetic" trend in the early modern historiographical dialectic, which tends to question both Maravillian narratives of oppression and utopian models of resistance and subversion.

The book is divided into six chapters, an introduction and conclusion, and a very thorough bibliography of archival, printed, and secondary sources. The first two chapters, "How to be a Counter-Reformation Confessor" and "How to Behave in Confession" are the strongest in the book. O'Banion argues against the idea that confessors "working on the front lines" used the confessional to achieve cult-like control over their flock, or that the flock was disposed to be brainwashed. Instead, he argues, most priests were themselves negotiating between, on the one hand, complex and ever-changing Church dictates, and on the other, a population of increasingly informed parishioners. O'Banion makes the convincing argument that laypeople as well as confessors were familiar with the mass-produced and affordable confessors' manuals, and thus entered into the sacrament as something of informed consumers, able to "evaluate the behavior of their confessors" (40). Confessors knew this and were careful not to alienate or antagonize their flock. O'Banion cites the diversity of the confessional manuals, their "variety of opinions, even contradictory ones" (63), to show that the local realities, combined with the theory of Probabilism, made confessional practice more diverse and flexible than Tridentine decrees would suggest.

Chapter Three focuses on post-Tridentine legislation designed to enforce Lenten confession with the parish priest, and attempts to track compliance over the period 1500-1700. O'Banion uses Inquisition sources to show a decline,

beginning in the late sixteenth century, in parochial confessions; he argues that Spaniards showed “remarkable intentionality” and took advantage of loopholes in order to choose their own confessors (88). The most widespread of these loopholes, the *bula de cruzada*, is the subject of Chapter 4. The majority of this chapter consists of a summary of the history of the bull; towards the end, O’Banion musters convincing evidence to show its increased use in post-Crusading times as a means of giving parishioners flexibility in their choice of confessors. This is typical of the sort of “middle ground” O’Banion sees between “social control” and open resistance. Early modern Spaniards did not oppose the system, but they did take advantage of loopholes created by conflicting interests within that system – between Rome and Madrid, between doctrinal rigor and financial viability – to exercise some autonomy.

The final chapters focus on how various marginalized groups negotiated the sacrament of confession. Chapter Five explores the effects of social status and gender, while Chapter Six studies the confessional practices of *judeoconvertos*, Gypsies, and *morsicos*. These are the least original chapters, largely because of the excellent work that has already been done on these communities. In Chapter Six, the close focus on confession fades and the general conclusion—*convertos* assimilated, Gypsies escaped control, and *morsicos* “languished between” the two and thus became an intractable problem for the Crown (167) – seems somewhat schematic.

In all, this is a useful, well-researched, well-written and very accessible study of confession in Iberia from 1500-1700. At times the author’s use of representative anecdotes from Inquisition testimony is awkward; it is not always clear why a particular case has been chosen or just how representative it is. The inclusion of a conclusion in each chapter, as well as the introduction and conclusion to the book, makes the work easy to excerpt for class purposes, but it leads to repetition. The book is not entirely able to overcome the historiographical limitation acknowledged at the outset; the question of exactly *what* constituted “a satisfying confession” for various groups – how they conceived of the relation between the priest’s words of absolution and God’s absolution – remains elusive. The work is not, nor does it pretend to be, particularly interdisciplinary. A reader with a literary, visual culture, or theoretical bent, however, will find in O’Banion’s book provocative material and a rich bibliography upon which to build.

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