

A Book Review on Confession and Absolution – Lutheran Style

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Colleagues,

This week's posting offers readers Wayne Holst's review of Ronald K. Rittgers' case study on Confession and Absolution in Lutheran theology and church life in the earliest days of the Reformation. The identities of author and reviewer are in the text that follows. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE REFORMATION OF THE KEYS: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth Century Germany,

by Ronald K. Rittgers. 2004.

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 318 pages. Hardcover. \$49.95US. ISBN #0-674-01176-7.

Reviewed by: Wayne A. Holst

Why would anyone want to invest time and energy in a book on private confession as practiced in sixteenth century Germany when many Protestants – from day one – rejected it, and when many Roman Catholics themselves have abandoned it as a religious obligation?

The answer is because some developments in early Reformation Germany continue to have contemporary implications –

spiritually and theologically. English-speaking people have been quite unaware of this story, but it is to their current benefit to be introduced to it.

The Reformation of the Keys by Ronald K. Rittgers, Associate Professor of the History of Christianity at Yale Divinity School, is much more than an esoteric sojourn into Reformation history.

The author suggests four goals guiding his presentation. To examine the issue of private confession, which has received little attention from English-speaking scholars; to show how the reformation of private confession was part of a reformation of (the power of) the keys that had important implications for politics and piety in the German reformation – so that the book is really about the keys and not just confession; to suggest how the reformation of the keys provides new light on the way reformers and lay rulers used authority – not simply to discipline and control, but also to protect and console the human conscience; and to attempt a kind of history that takes theology and historical context seriously. Context is important for the author. That is why his study is not only about ideas related to confession and the keys. It is also about how these ideas became incarnated into the life of an important German city profoundly influenced by the Lutheran reformation.

These worthy goals notwithstanding, this reviewer interprets the work as a nuanced, academic study of how Lutherans, almost from the beginning, attempted to formulate a reformed position standing between traditional Catholics and more reactionary Protestants during tumultuous times. Rittgers, indirectly if not directly, shows how Lutheran theology sought to bridge Catholic and Protestant understandings of important but conflicting theological and spiritual issues. That stance, while perhaps more radicalized in earlier times and on some issues, has not substantively changed in half a millennium.

2.

The book demonstrates that Lutheranism began as a conservative reform movement within the catholic tradition. Lutheranism affirmed and retained what it considered evangelically sound from Catholicism. Lutherans did not, for example, totally reject the medieval system of private confession and penance administered through a priest (the classic sacerdotal system and the doctrine of the power of the keys which was based on Mt. 16:13-20).

Instead, Lutherans retained and yet substantially modified what they inherited; replacing it with a system of pastoral and general soul-care negotiated in co-operation with lay civic authorities. Here is a case study of how lay political leaders in the German city of Nurnberg (known also today as Nuremberg) gradually divested power and influence from the traditional clergy-controlled structures that had defined their lives. Civic authorities replaced the old with a new system both Protestant and lay-dominated. In so doing, Rittgers reveals an early example of what we today might call secularization (or to put it another way, give evidence of the sacralization of temporal authority).

This is an extensive assessment of archival and printed documents. It is not a comparative study of various theological understandings of confession or a reflection on the sacred intimacies of the confessional. Those who would disagree with Rittgers on this or that theological/spiritual point should remember that the author is a church historian, not a systematician or spiritual director. The written word – especially from civic archives – while enlightening, is not always sufficiently nuanced to convey meanings that are satisfying to religious or spiritual readers. City archives would not be expected to serve as the best preserve of theology or spiritual guidance.

This is also not a primer on the development of the Lutheran

theology of confession. Rather, it is a chronology of what actually happened to Lutheran theology and practice in a city whose senate was among the original signatories to the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Augsburg was a foundational defence of the Lutheran Reformation) and Nurnberg was the first imperial city to adopt the Lutheran reformation.

The author attempts to demonstrate how confession (in this case, the acknowledgement of sin made privately and heard by a priest) was disengaged from penance (satisfaction required from the penitent for wrongs committed). In truth, the city magistrate sought to reject the latter, in accord with the teaching of the reformers.

Luther supported private confession from the beginning but objected to the way it had been practiced due to human manipulation. At the outset he favoured a renewed, voluntary private confession. In time, however, Lutherans grew worried about wholesale rejection of the practice because of the resulting popular reaction to things Catholic.

3.

In time, Luther wrote guidelines for renewed private confession in, for example, his small catechism of 1529. So Luther supported private confession from the beginning. His new emphasis was on linking the examination of faith with voluntary confession of sin. This he sought to make mandatory for participation in the Lord's supper.

For centuries, the Catholic church had combined confession and penance in order to maintain what was experienced by the reformers as spiritual control over the laity and to reinforce what they saw as works righteousness.

Rittgers demonstrates how Lutherans wanted their authority to be different. Both lay and clerical leaders sought to protect and console as well as to discipline and control. Rittgers argues that Lutheran private confession attempted to balance

spiritual freedom with moral discipline. Luther's teaching of justification by grace through faith granted individuals a certainty of conscience and a greater sense of individual freedom.

Translated into the civil practice of the day, modified versions of private confession were developed and these eventually became part of normal evangelical piety. Compromises ensued in the wake of debates involving various interest groups – often in an atmosphere of Sturm und Drang.

While the Catholics had used the doctrine of the keys to define and defend their authority, as well as to console the faithful, the reformers promoted a fundamental transformation that would rid the church of what they considered to be clerical abuses. Under the Catholic regime, the faithful often languished in suspension between the hope of forgiveness and the fear of damnation. This ambivalence kept them unsure if they were truly pardoned from admitted sins. Luther wanted them to be assured of forgiveness after an authentic confession that reflected acceptance, through faith, of the pure grace of God.

Rittgers shows how the central dilemma confronting leaders of the German reformation was how to enforce moral social discipline without damaging individual spiritual freedom.

Rejecting penance, Lutherans were compelled to develop private and general confessional forms that relied on civil enforcement that balanced discipline and freedom. Discipline for them was administered by city councilors and not church authorities. Ironically, while the laity experienced relatively more spiritual freedom through these sacramental reforms than through the old Catholic sacrament of penance, civic authority often proved more discouraging than church law. Humane city council-regulated confession became the exception rather than the rule. The result, for the faithful, was a mixed bag of spiritual liberation and new forms of

imposed social restraint and enforced conformity.

4.

Rittgers gives a detailed summary of the disputes and controversies surrounding the introduction and implementation of evangelical confessional forms in the city through the mid-1500s. (The Peace of Augsburg 1555 was formalized between Catholics and Lutherans, but it did not include the Calvinists). In the process, Nurnberg civic council sought to prevent their Lutheran clergy from lording it over lay consciences even as it wanted its pastors to promote religious and moral conformity.

The Nurnberg fathers were laudably concerned about the city's moral condition and oversaw both public and private confession to assure personal and social discipline. These difficult realities were no doubt compromises the Lutheran reformers were loathe to accept because it went against many of the Christian freedoms they had fought hard to recover.

Rittgers explains how basic Reformation teachings morphed politically from positions of protest into a state religion. He shows how leading clergy like Andreas Osiander attempted to retain both pastoral and political control of the confessional process in attempts to maintain what was in essence an evangelical sacerdotalism. Ultimately, however, the council prevailed.

As stated previously, Luther and his Wittenberg associates came to support private confession but – to many who had to work out agreements with civic authorities – they failed to provide it with a pragmatic theological rationale. Once the new order was in place, however, the focus shifted to the catechetical instruction of the young so that a new generation would have a better understanding of the resulting civil order.

Lutheranism became the state religion in many parts of

northern Germany. But the Nurnberg story was unique in terms of scope and notoriety.

The Reformation understanding of the meaning of authority came to a head in Nurnberg and settlements were worked through here. The author gives a positive accounting of what evangelical catechists taught the young but he is unsure as to whether evangelical disciplines resulted in any major moral improvement. The substitution of faith for sorrow for sin, and the authority of the Word for the ministrations of the priest succeeded in solving some problems but resulted in creating others.

In a nutshell, sacred authority was secularized and secular authority was sacralized. Whereas previously, ultimate authority was the purview of the church, it now rested essentially in the hands of the state. The two kingdoms theology of Luther went through a certain adaptation in Nurnberg. In the end, both magistrates and clergy came to respect the divine turf that lay beyond their purview. Each sought to honor the conscience of the laity and the Word of God as ultimate authorities in matters pertaining to confession.

5.

This reviewer concludes through his reading of this real life Nurnberg case study (it is not an idealistic theological treatise removed from the challenges of daily living) that Lutheranism was, even in its formative years, a conservative reform movement. Nurnberg challenges those who would make of early Lutheranism a much more radical and polemical reformation. The Nurnberg story of a thirty-year period when the Reformation was at its apex, is one during which a relative equilibrium prevailed in spite of conflicting religious and secular entanglements. Leading laity and clergy struggled to retain the essential substance of traditional Catholicism and to integrate this to new evangelical

understandings and practices.

With Rittgers, readers might equivocate – or hesitate to conclude – whether the new moral and spiritual state of the city was any better than the old. But in a true sense such a question is irrelevant because times had irreversibly changed and there was no going back to the past.

Secularization became a legacy of reformed Catholicism in the West. In their reduced territories and more so in America, Catholics would benefit from greater freedoms resulting from the influence of the Reformation. At the same time, those who claim the Reformation as their spiritual heritage have a debt to the Catholic tradition for redefining in the Counter-Reformation the frame of reference against which Protestants could measure their challenges and refine their faith.

In summary, the public record, now half a millennium old, demonstrates how Lutheranism served as a bridge between numerous political and religious groups committed to the social and spiritual well-being of Nurnberg. Lutheranism stood for evolutionary – not revolutionary – change in an era of complex socio/religious ferment.

The Reformation of the Keys could be faulted – perhaps because of the personal inclinations of the author – for assessing too artlessly and irenically, in places, the circumstances it evaluates and for putting the most charitable construction on some quite unseemly behaviour.

Nevertheless, the author prompts our praise for offering an intriguing perspective of how early to mid-sixteenth century Nurnberg was transformed while navigating severe societal destabilization that continued for years into the future. His work helps to counter some current Reformation historiography that gives undue attention to discipline and control issues and not enough regard to serious efforts at integrating the Lutheran principles of freedom and grace into the civic

process.

6.

Counterbalancing religious and political influences in times of destabilization is the continuing task of any society. Today, we may find it hard to identify with or fully appreciate the Nurnberg story. But, short of living in social anarchy, the call to work for renewal in the midst of seeming chaos remains the same for us.

Reviewer's Bio: Wayne A. Holst is a writer and a facilitator of adult spiritual development at St. David's United Church, Calgary, Alberta. He served as an ordained Lutheran pastor, missionary and church executive for twenty-five years and taught religion and culture at the University of Calgary for more than a decade.

Addendum on Confession Today

For a reflection on contemporary confession here is a link to an article by this reviewer for Sojourners Magazine, May-June, 2002. It is entitled –

CONFESSION: Doorway to Forgiveness, by Jim Forest. Orbis Books

(2002): <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0205&article=020532e> (shortlink version) <http://makeashorterlink.com/?B4C613F8C>