

Harald Braun, Edward Vallance, eds. *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xviii + 237 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-1565-8.



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Published on H-Albion (September, 2005)

This interesting and very welcome collection of essays grew out of a conference held at Sheffield in 2002 and “aims to take a fresh look at how ideas about the conscience and how the genres of casuistical literature developed from the late medieval to the early modern period” (p. x). The volume does so by bring together scholars who span time, space, and theme. The essays range from discussions of religious and political allegiance to casuistical advice about marriage, sex, and science. Collectively the work argues for the importance of casuistry across Europe in the early modern period and shows how “cases of conscience” offer a way for different types of historian into a range of topics and issues. A focus on the conscience, as other recent literature on the subject has stressed, is important for our understanding of notions of obligation, allegiance, duty, and rights. Conscience was a means by which authority was internalized, debated, and judged. And it could act both to uphold and challenge that authority.

As the introduction by the editors emphasizes, conscience was both a guide and a judge of moral actions. Since judgment was made on the basis of the general principles that informed the conscience, the first stage of this process was crucial if men were to judge rightly. It was the duty of individuals to educate their consciences so that they could judge correctly, and of casuists to show

them both their mistakes and how to reason rightly. Inevitably, cases of conscience therefore related to and offered advice about, a variety of different states of certainty: there were right and sure judgments, but there were also probable or simply possible alternatives. Some casuists demanded that the doubting conscience should choose the alternative with the least probability of error (and hence of sin), while others (the “probabilists”) argued that if one opinion was probable it was legitimate to follow it even when the opposite opinion was more probable.

John Spurr’s essay, in many ways acting as a second introduction (albeit placed towards the end of the volume), further sketches the nature of conscience and the oaths that often accompanied public acts of conscience. Taking oaths in this period was (as work by David Martin Jones showed a few years ago)[1] an important means to bind any community in ties of obligation and authority, and thus “played a pivotal part in defining and controlling allegiance and truthfulness, profanity and office-holding, and a host of other beliefs and behaviours” (p. 152). But they thereby also became politicized and contested, “an opportunity for others to oblige, discipline and coerce the conscience” (p. 151). Conscience could not be compelled and was a rational faculty; but the stress on its role as a guide that needed instruction raised the

fundamental difficulty of knowing whether one's conscience was rightly informed or not. As a result, "conscience and its claims were inherently destabilising" and uncertain (p. 155). Conscientious debates thus fostered anxieties about individual and collective judgments and moral actions.

The essays explore dimensions of these issues. One particularly interesting feature of the collection is the exploration of differences and similarities across Catholic and Protestant casuistical literature. The editors argue that "the conceptual gulf between reformed and Catholic moral theology was narrower than was suggested by some English casuists" (p. xii). Protestant divines were often approached for advice about cases of conscience, by the laity as well as by fellow clerics. And they had grudgingly to admit that they had used Catholic works due to the lack of reformed moral theology. Moreover, the reformed religion placed the conscience at the heart of the regeneration of sinful men. James Keenan's contribution nevertheless challenges the claim that puritans appropriated Jesuit casuistry, arguing instead that the root was catholic devotional literature. The evolution of puritan practical divinity, exemplified in the case of William Perkins, was one from the devotional to the moral. Alex Walsham's essay takes a different tack to the catholic-protestant divide, exploring attempts by zealous clerics of both faiths in the late sixteenth century to persuade church papists to their standpoint. This "engendered a symmetrical set of cases of conscience on each side of the Reformation divide" (p. 34) about how far to comply with a heretic church. Robert Persons, for example, quoted the French Calvinist John Garnier "to drive him his point that no true believer should entangle himself with wicked idolators" (p. 42). Moreover, Walsham successfully shows not only how dissimulation was one means to square the circle of competing allegiances to church and state, but also how anxiety about dissimulation fostered a case for toleration based on the inviolability of conscience. Integrity to conscience, even though the conscience might be plural and hence relative, thus became valuable. Dissimulation is also a theme running in Harald Braun's essay on the radical Jesuit and "second Machiavel" Juan de Mariana who, in cases of necessity and last resort, justified the prince's embrace of every form of deception "lest if he be too conscientious he involve himself in danger and the commonwealth in many losses" (p. 61). Mariana concluded, however, that the

only source of moral and political advice is the church (which explains why his work was published by a clerical adviser of the king). The predominant role accorded to the clergy over conscience is explored in another essay, by Nick Davidson, on the inquisition. Pope Paul IV argued that liberty of conscience was a "plague" (p. 49) and Cardinal Pole agreed: liberty of conscience led to chaos and self-destruction. It was thus the duty of the church to obstruct demands for liberty of conscience wherever they appeared.

Another theme running through the volume is change over time. Edward Vallance's chapter charts the decline of conscience as a political guide, based on an exploration of the parallel controversies over state oaths in 1649 and 1689. Vallance argues that by the early eighteenth century the law, "interest," and the judgment of parliament, rather than casuistic reasoning, were increasingly invoked to resolve scruples over taking oaths. "Writers in the Allegiance controversy [of 1689] placed seemingly little value on the role of the clergy in resolving political cases of conscience" (p. 75). That shift is also apparent in David Turner's essay on the moral and sexual advice offered at the end of the seventeenth century, not by clerics but by the printed periodicals that flourished after the lapse of the licensing act in 1695. Yet whereas Vallance argues for the demise of conscience as a political guide, Turner stresses the enduring and increasing role of conscience for sexual mores.

To be sure there are big questions that are alluded to rather than confronted by the collection and that might have repaid attention. One concerns the declining belief in Calvinistic orthodoxy, which might pose questions about chronology and about what was distinctive about protestant casuistry. Another is the relationship between the conscience, notions of the self and autobiographical forms of writing. Literary scholars have had much to say about conscience, and are under-represented in the volume. But as a whole the collection is a very successful collaborative investigation into one of the key aspects of the early modern mind and soul.

Note

[1]. David Martin Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England: The Political Significance of Oaths and Engagements* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1999).

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Citation: Mark Knights. Review of Braun, Harald; Vallance, Edward, eds., *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

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