

The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors

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Professor Robert Bireley SJ in his study *The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors* proposes to answer three closely interrelated questions. First, what influence Jesuits and Jesuit confessors in particular had on the policies of war at the courts of Vienna, Munich, Paris, and Madrid during the period of tangled conflicts commonly labelled the 'Thirty Years War' (1618-1648); secondly, whether or not there was a united 'Jesuit policy' concerning the war as well as a joint Jesuit stance on the relationship between religion and politics; finally, what principles and policies Jesuit superiors general employed guiding Jesuits confessors at courts often openly hostile to one another during decades of war.

Bireley undertakes to answer these questions by concentrating on the correspondence between the superiors general in Rome – Muzio Vitelleschi (superior general 1615-45) and Vincenzo Carafa (superior general 1645-49) – and the Jesuit confessors at the courts of Austria, Bavaria, France, and Spain between 1618 and 1648. His great familiarity with seventeenth-century politics and diplomacy, and his intimate knowledge of Jesuit debates and literature in particular allow Bireley to put these letters into their wider political context. He is the first to offer a comparative perspective and analytical narrative on the role of the princely and royal confessor in seventeenth-century European diplomacy.

The first and most obvious victim of the thorough evaluation of his sources is the myth of the Society of Jesus as a monolithic power fiercely committed to enforcing a unified Counter-Reformation ideology by manipulating the consciences of Catholic princes across Europe. The picture that emerges from Bireley's study is one of conflicting loyalties, personalities, and policies. Anything but supranational agents of

Counter-Reformation Catholicism, Jesuit confessors at early modern European courts are presented as divided in their beliefs, ideas and stratagems, as much as early modern Catholic Christendom as a whole.

The German Jesuits, for instance, appear as a group deeply split over the course of the Counter Reformation in the empire. Providentialist 'militants' like William Lamormaini in Vienna and Adam Contzen in Munich used their close relationship with the sovereign to press for a military solution to the religious situation in the empire. They did, however, face fierce opposition, and not only from lay counsellors and other religious and secular clergy in favour of a religious compromise and peace with the Protestant powers. Many Jesuit 'moderates' wrote to complain to the superior general in Rome, and published treatises heaping severe criticism and sometimes abuse on their 'militant' brethren and the princes they served. Bireley is able to identify the conclusion of the Peace of Prague in 1635 as something of a watershed in this respect. Death or decline removed the most fervent advocates of 'holy war' from the political scene – emperor Ferdinand II, Lamormaini, and Contzen – and the ever more widespread and pronounced weariness of war supported a sustained ascendancy of the 'moderates' in Munich and Vienna – a party that included Lamormaini's successor Johannes Gans SJ.

As to the courts of France and Spain, at no point during the period under investigation did French or Spanish Jesuits obtain influence on religious and foreign policy comparable to that of their brethren in the empire. In Spain the Jesuits did not even provide the royal confessor, though Bireley is still able establish a comparative perspective by including Hernando de Salazar and Francisco Aguado, the very different Jesuit confessors of the count-duke Olivares. Olivares as well as cardinal Richelieu, the leading statesmen of Spain and France respectively, again conceived of their foreign policies in terms of 'reason of state' rather than 'holy war'. Olivares and Richelieu were able to do so not the least because of theologians' ability to reconcile and marry the demands of 'reason of state' with those of Catholic doctrine – though this is a subject in its own right demanding much more research.⁽¹⁾ The extent to which Protestant princes and counsellors conceived of the conflict as a 'holy war', too, will have to be part of a fuller picture of the role of religion in early seventeenth-century European politics. These questions, however, lie well beyond the scope of this study. What Bireley shows with admirable clarity is that Jesuit confessors quarrelling among themselves almost as much as with the confessional enemy were in no position to enforce or even stimulate a unified Jesuit-Catholic policy.

They were in no position to unify the Counter-Reformation not the least because the individuals concerned greatly differed in character as well as the understanding and practice of their spiritual office. William Lamormaini and Johannes Gans in Vienna, Jean Suffren and Nicholas Caussin in Paris, or Francisco Aguado and Hernando de Salazar in Madrid were poles apart in terms of personality, style, and the ways in which they approached their office and used their spiritual authority. What is more, the actual ability of the confessor to influence political decisions was not just a matter of individual character, resolve, and political nous. Whether or not a confessor willing to intervene in policy-making was able to do so very much depended on whether or not his prince would allow it. Bireley has already shown that Lamormaini could take up his controversial position at the centre of Austrian Habsburg religious and foreign policy only because Ferdinand II wanted him to.⁽²⁾ Ferdinand III, on the other hand, made it very clear from the beginning of his reign that he would not permit his confessors to play a similar role. A Jesuit confessor – as any aspiring member of early modern court and government – also had to face the competition of those many courtiers and counsellors vying for the power that came with a close relationship to the ruling prince. The unfortunate and, as Bireley stresses, surprisingly naïve Nicholas Caussin realised too late that the one quality cardinal Richelieu cherished above any other was the willingness of the royal confessor to subject his will and opinions to that of the cardinal. At the very least he had to make sure that they did not get in the way of the cardinal's schemes. Richelieu never hesitated to act decisively when confronted with potential rivals for Louis XIII's favour, and reminded the superior general of what he expected from the members of the Society and of what the Society as a whole in turn could expect from him. The role of the confessor thus emerges as diverse and changeable as the different cultural and ever-changing political environments of the courts of Vienna, Munich, Paris, and Madrid. Looking at the role of confessors and other religious and secular clergy in early modern courts and governments, again, helps us today to differentiate the early

modern political cultures with which we are confronted.

Jesuit superiors general in turn, whatever their personal political priorities and aims, saw much of their time and correspondence taken up by the need to mediate between Jesuits who – bound in loyalty to disagreeing and sometimes warring princes and statesmen – supported conflicting schemes. Frequently, Vitelleschi and his successor Carafa had to resort to rhetorical subterfuge and artifice in order to placate princes and favourites incensed by or suspicious about individual Jesuits' political and polemical activities. Perhaps the only unifying principle discernible in superiors general's dealings with their frequently insubordinate brothers is their sometimes desperate desire to prevent the ire of princes, infuriated by individual Jesuits' opinions and deeds, turning against the Society as a whole. Mostly successful in this respect, they were otherwise willing and able to accommodate widely differing and competing personalities, policies, and court cultures. They had to be. Superiors general in Rome felt themselves to be and indeed were dependent on their princely benefactors. They recognised themselves as equally dependent on individual Jesuit confessors' willingness to provide them with information, support policy initiatives devised in Rome, or to consider the likely consequences their individual actions might have for the reputation of the Society as a whole. Not least they depended on individual confessors' willingness and ability to stay in touch in the first instance. The levels of correspondence between the superiors general and individual father confessors vary widely. For the period between 1624 and 1635, for instance, Vitelleschi addressed just under 1,000 letters to William Lamormaini, and about 125 letters to Adam Contzen. Jean Arnoux, on the other hand, received a mere 77 letters during the four years (1617-21) he served as confessor to Louis XIII of France.

This rather uneven distribution of correspondence – Bireley's principal source – highlights the limits of his approach. We learn very much about the confessor's role and religious diplomacy in Rome, Vienna, and Munich, and a great deal about Paris. However, Madrid, despite the fact that it was at the centre of European politics, remains somewhat at the periphery of Bireley's otherwise excellent study. In general, Jesuit superiors general reacted to events and developments in Jesuits' careers at court rather than proactively guiding their sheep. While individual Jesuits could exert sometimes considerable influence policy making at European courts – their interpretation of what was in the best interest of the Society of Jesus and Catholic Christendom varying considerably – Jesuit superiors general did not enjoy the same privilege of instigating or manipulating national policies.

In many respects, Bireley's book is a history of the Jesuit superior general Muzio Vitelleschi's and individual Jesuit confessors' continual interpretation, adaptation and manipulation of the *Instruction for Confessors of Princes* issued by Vitelleschi's predecessor, Claudio Acquaviva, in 1602. Acquaviva had good reason to draw up the *Instruction*. The advantages that came with Jesuits being required as court confessors were plain to see for everyone – the spiritual guide of a prince would enjoy plenty of opportunities to further the good of the church and the Society. The disadvantages were equally evident. Individual confessors and hence the Society of Jesus as a whole could be identified with unpopular decisions and policies – as was the case with Hernando de Salazar, whose role in the development of taxes made him one of the least liked political figures in Spain and a prime focus of anti-Jesuit sentiments. Generally, Catholic and Reformed critics and enemies alike would suspect Jesuit confessors of manipulating the princely conscience to the advantage of the Society – thus William Lamormaini's offensive eagerness to secure restituted property for the Society of Jesus seems to have seriously damaged the reputation of the Society among other religious groups in Austria. It was even more dangerous, perhaps, for confessors to get tangled up in quarrels between princes or among factions at court. Jean Suffren is a sad example of a confessor caught between warring branches of the Bourbon family, although in his case the Society as a whole does not seem to have suffered.

Acquaviva's *Instruction* had sought to protect the Society from such harm by stressing, for instance, that confessors were “to avoid even the appearance of exercising political power”. What Acquaviva had left unanswered, however, was the resultant question of how exactly confessors were to define the boundaries between spiritual and political guidance in an age of escalating confessionality interlocked with raging national rivalries. If Acquaviva did not issue future confessors at courts with clear guidelines in the first instance, neither did his successors Vitelleschi and Carafa succeed in clarifying and resolving this particular dilemma. The political and religious contexts within which they operated, as well as the personality and

opinions of many of the individuals involved, tended to make any attempt at defining the boundaries between spiritual and political advice a largely futile undertaking. Not the least merit of Professor Bireley's study is to demonstrate that this was indeed the case.

Jesuit superiors general as a result frequently ended up between a rock and a hard place: compelled to negotiate the demands of popes, the expectations and occasional fury of princely benefactors, and the frequent stubbornness and independence of mind of Jesuit confessors. Much of Muzio Vitelleschi's correspondence with confessors deals with the ever-present fear that the activities of individual Jesuits in powerful and public positions would offend important benefactors and cause a backlash against the Society as a whole. His letters offering adhortation and advice are invariably polite, showing him ever so cautious not to offend the recipient. They did little to make confident and fiercely independent individuals like Lamormaini or Salazar change their minds and be more concerned about the reputation of the Society as a whole. Each and every one of these letters demonstrates how little influence the superior general could exert over his very own 'subjects' while they were ensconced in a position of trust and power at a princely or royal court.

Professor Bireley presents us with a detailed analytical narrative wrought from painstaking research in European Jesuit and non-Jesuit archives. His study integrates and expands upon his earlier works on Adam Contzen, William Lamormaini, and the early modern Catholic tradition of statecraft. Scholars and students working on the history of the Society of Jesus and the complex political and religious history of the first half of the seventeenth century will ignore it at their peril.

Notes

1. See R. Bireley, SJ, *The Counter-Reformation Prince: Antimachiavellianism or Catholic Statecraft in Early Modern Europe* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) and H. Braun and E. Vallance, eds, *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. Bireley, SJ, *Religion and Politics in the Age of the Counterreformation: Emperor Ferdinand II, William Lamormaini, S.J., and the Formation of Imperial Policy* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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