

Sin in the Sixties: Catholics and Confession, 1955–1975. By Maria C. Morrow. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016. xvii + 264 pages. \$65.00.

doi: 10.1017/hor.2018.38

In 1869, in his book *Sin and Its Consequences*, Henry Edward Cardinal Manning of Westminster patiently described sin based upon the scriptural understanding then reigning. Mortal sin, for instance, was a “sin unto death” (1 John 5:17). Venial sin, though iniquitous, permits of life. Sins of omission bring a plea: “From my secret sins cleanse me, O God” (Ps 8:13). Manning acknowledged temptation, but also grace and the works of penance.

In a hundred years’ time, with shifts in cultural perceptions of sacramental confession affecting its popularity and understanding, the concomitant nuances of sin have undergone significant transformation since the nineteenth century. Maria Morrow’s revised dissertation tracks the shifts in penitential practice in the United States in the years prior to and after the close of the Second Vatican Council. After a quick review of the concept of sin in the Catholic tradition, she explores its remedy, penance, and in subsequent chapters surveys the breakdown of the notion—from “actual and personal” sin to “relative and general” among lay Catholics. The argument is that the alteration in the spirit and letter of the traditional meaning has helped usher in the decline of the sacrament in our own day and that this implies a perceived moral vacuum in American society. Morrow’s book also encompasses penitential practices outside of the confessional box. She does not detail how the clergy themselves viewed the sacrament—either in the period in question or today.

Naturally, culture alone cannot be held to blame for the church’s own preferences; theologians of the period must shoulder some responsibility for the changes (or awakenings, depending upon one’s point of view). Morrow does well to call up some of the work of Jesuit fathers John Ford and Gerald Kelly, as well as Redemptorist father Bernard Häring. The first two are beholden to certain neo-Scholastic strains and casuistic models, while the latter saw sin (as well as notions of obedience, freedom, and responsibility) in more nominalistic and Kantian terms (81). Morrow notes that the “old school” theologians clung to the arid legalism of the manuals, while theologians like Häring wrote for “secular Christians” (85). For him, freedom and responsibility went hand in glove, while obedience “took a backseat” (97). The ratification of this view, at least in part, is found in *Gaudium et Spes*, where blind obedience was decried as creating openings for fascism and war. When Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic constitution *Paenitemini* (1966), on the renewal of penance, a turn toward the authority of episcopal conferences was put into effect.

For Morrow, the American bishops are also complicit in the slow demise of the sacrament. When, also in 1966, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its “Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence,” it withdrew imperious language mandating the sacrament through some abstract and coercive obligation. Rather, the pastoral favored more voluntary terms where the accent was on personal freedom. It advocated for a conversion of heart through the careful guidance of the priest-confessor. By then, also, “the conventional list of sins had changed” (5). What made for a contrite heart was also, arguably, based more on interior feelings or experience than on right reason’s more objective criteria, which neatly triggered absolution even though penitents frequently backslid into recidivistic behaviors. This did not make the job of the priest any easier.

Though she does not explore either Saint Anselm’s penal-substitution theory or its more contemporary manifestations, Morrow makes a valiant attempt at situating self-imposed sufferings as a means toward the expurgation of sin. Borrowing from Robert Orsi, who has written about pain disciplining the ego, Catholic practices as variegated as novenas, Lenten fast and abstinence, regular Friday abstinence, first Friday devotions, parish missions and the like are all meant to generate attentiveness to sacrifice and the sublimation of self in favor of God. In so doing, Morrow surveys a deep and creative wellspring of Catholic activity in response to sin.

The book should be in graduate and seminary libraries and may do well in seminars on American Catholicism or liturgics.

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From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian’s Discovery of the Global Christian Story. By Mark A. Noll. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014. xvi + 204 pages. \$23.00 (paper).

doi: 10.1017/hor.2018.39

Noll’s book is the third volume in the series *Turning South: Christian Scholars in an Age of World Christianity*, edited for Baker Academic by Joel Carpenter. The point of each volume is to record and explore the work of Evangelical scholars on the historical and current growth of Christianity in the Global South. Until recently the Evangelical historians, Noll among them, had been working almost exclusively on Anglo-American evangelicalism. This is no longer the case.