

---

H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 101

Jean-Pascal Gay, *Jesuit Civil Wars: Theology, Politics and Government under Tirso González (1687-1705)*. Catholic Christendom, 1300-1800. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012. xii + 323 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$134.95 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-3852-6

Review by Thomas Worcester, S.J., College of the Holy Cross.

This book builds on Gay's doctoral dissertation, published in 2011 and is also related to a 2012 volume that he coedited. [1] A *maître de conférences* in the History Faculty at the University of Strasbourg, Gay has in a very short time published an enormous amount, all of it having to do with theological developments and controversies among and between Catholics in the seventeenth century. Unlike many French academics, Gay does not automatically and uncritically applaud Blaise Pascal's well-known anti-Jesuit polemics, but rather offers a much more complex analysis of how moral theology and related disciplines did or did not engage the nuances of the intersections between law and conscience, certitude and doubt, traditions and modernities.

Dale Van Kley, in his book on the religious origins of the French Revolution, posited a rigid dichotomy between Jansenist promotion of individual conscience and Jesuit commitment to obedience to secular and religious authorities. [2] Such a simplistic view of Jesuits cannot survive an attentive reading of Gay's *Jesuit Civil Wars*, a book whose first chapter is largely about how French Jesuits in the 1680s found themselves in a situation where they could either obey the king or the Jesuit superior general, but not both. One of the disputed matters concerned the Gallo-Belgian Jesuit province and whether or not it would come under the jurisdiction of the French Jesuit Assistancy (an administrative grouping of Jesuit provinces). Louis XIV insisted that the disputed province be formally added to the French Assistancy, and in his frustration over resistance to his wishes forbade French Jesuits from any communication with their superior general in Rome, thus putting them in a very difficult position. Gay shows how some of the Jesuits in France were in fact Gallican sympathizers, defenders of Louis XIV's actions, and eager to have a Jesuit vicar named for France who could take the place, at least temporarily, of their superior general, the Spaniard Tirso González. The king's Jesuit confessor, François de La Chaise, was a key advocate of this and more generally of a regalism in which the Church was a part of the State. [3] Other French Jesuits did not see matters that way, and in the event a compromise, brokered by Pope Alexander VIII, was eventually reached, under which the Gallo-Belgian province became *de facto* but not *de jure* part of the French Assistancy.

The Society of Jesus has never had as its superior general a Frenchman, the closest being the generalate of Charles de Noyelle, a francophone Belgian (1682-86). This book illustrates well how, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, within the very international Society of Jesus, national tensions were not far from the surface, tensions between France and Spain among them. Tirso González (1624-1705), was elected superior general of the Jesuits in 1687 and served in that capacity until his death in 1705. As Gay shows clearly and in much detail, his eighteen years as superior general were anything but calm, and his teachings and actions were relentlessly critiqued by other Jesuits.

In his *Provincial Letters*, Pascal mocked and dismissed Jesuit moral theology as lax and as excusing every kind of sin. Yet, as Gay shows, what most Jesuit theologians of that period taught was

probabilism, an approach to moral theology not original to them, and one that attempted to take account of a legitimate diversity of possibly licit actions in a given set of circumstances. A probable opinion was a credible opinion on the morality or immorality of such an action, and there could be some opinions that were more credible than others. Extrinsic probability derived from the opinions of theologians and other authorities on such cases; intrinsic probability derived from an individual's conscience before God. Probabilism held that an individual need not follow the more probable opinion—such as one held by a great many theologians—but that it sufficed to follow a probable opinion. Probabilism acknowledged the reality and the legitimacy of doubt in moral decision making. It eschewed a simplistic moralism in which absolutes of right and wrong were proclaimed regardless of the messy realities of daily life. Probabilism that was put to pastoral use bridged the gap between the abstract debates of clerical theologians and the immediate needs of priests hearing confessions, that is, the need to help penitents who might be confused about the morality or immorality of a course of action. Probabilism was thus closely associated with casuistry, a way of applying moral principles to individual lives by privileging the particular details of each case. If an action is intrinsically evil it may never be licit, no matter the context, but if its morality or immorality depends on circumstances and/or consequences, casuistry may help to provide a probable opinion on an action's sinfulness or lack of sinfulness.

Tirso González devoted his years as superior general to combating probabilism in the Society of Jesus, and to replacing it by probabiliorism, an approach to moral theology that privileged the more probable, and marginalized the merely probable. Though this may sound like hair splitting, Gay does an excellent job of showing how much it mattered at the time, and indeed how much it really does matter. As a young Jesuit priest, González had embraced probabilism. It had informed his work as a rural missionary in Spain, where he preached repentance and heard the confessions of average people. He went on to become a theologian, and, at some point, he underwent a kind of conversion in which he came to view probabilism as a mistake, as a way of misleading the faithful, and as a kind of stain on the reputation of the Jesuits. With a convert's zeal, González viewed his election as superior general as providential, as God working through him to move the Society of Jesus to reject probabilism in favor of probabiliorism.

Gay carefully examines the ways in which many Jesuits disagreed both with the theological agenda that González pursued, and with the means by which he pursued it. González understood his authority as absolute, on the theoretical model of absolute monarchs of his day such as Louis XIV. As Gay effectively shows, the Jesuit Constitutions foresaw something a bit different, with the superior general imagined as prayerful, and as consulting other Jesuits frequently, especially his official "Assistants" in Rome, and his Admonitor, whose job was to advise the superior general privately and frankly. Also, any Jesuit retained the right to write a letter directly and solely to the general on any matter of concern to him. Before making decisions regarding the whole Society of Jesus or any part of it, the general was to do a lot of patient listening and discerning. Gay makes clear that González paid little attention to what other Jesuits thought, unless they agreed with him. As time went on, he worked ever harder to insure that only his supporters were appointed to important posts. Such a procedure went against the Constitutions, which required that recommendations be obtained from a variety of Jesuits about a man's aptitude for governance, and not simply about his position on one particular issue, theological or otherwise.

Early modern Jesuits published a great deal. The printing press was a privileged agent for educating the ignorant, and for calling sinners to reformation of life. The abundance of Jesuit-authored publications included both scholarly tomes in Latin as well as works in the vernacular, some of them best-sellers.<sup>[4]</sup> Once elected superior general, González wished to continue to publish in Latin, especially on probabilism and probabiliorism. Gay details how this desire did not go unchallenged, both because González seemed to think that as general he was above the usual process of pre-publication censorship that existed in the Society of Jesus, and because of the content of his work, which was extremely divisive among Jesuits. Because this divisiveness was in print, it became very public, and González did not recoil

from that. He seemed not to care if his style and his agenda appeared to echo at least some of Pascal's polemics, or if his manner of governing was destructive of a Jesuit *esprit de corps*. These conflicts account for the title of the work under review.

After the 1705 death of González, the process detailed in the Jesuit Constitutions for election of a general was set in motion with the calling of a general congregation, a meeting of certain Jesuit officials as well as elected representatives. They chose the Italian Michelangelo Tamburini as the new general. Gay highlights how, in its discussions and documents, the 1706 general congregation clearly disowned aspects of the previous generalate: "there does not remain one aspect of González's disputed style of government that was not addressed by the Congregation" (p. 282). Yet this was done without condemning González by name. Gay also points out that after the death of González, his influence was minimal, since there were few probabiliorists in the eighteenth-century Society of Jesus.

This book is not an easy read, and historians without much philosophy or theology may be perplexed at times. French terms are occasionally more transliterated than translated—surgeons are rendered as chirurgians (p. 80, note 3), preaching as predication (p. 113)—but this book amply repays the persistent reader. Jesuit history has, in recent decades, become a very lively topic among a wide range of historians, especially the period from 1540 to 1773, that is, from the foundation of the Jesuits to their (temporary) suppression in 1773.<sup>[5]</sup> Gay makes a very important contribution to our understanding of this complex history, in particular to how what may seem an obscure controversy touched a number of visceral and enduring issues, issues pertinent far beyond the Jesuit context. These issues include the freedom of the individual conscience and the roles of various authorities and of various degrees of doubt in moral decision making. Ashgate books are never inexpensive, but this one is surely worth the price.

#### NOTES

[1] Jean-Pascal Gay, *Morales en conflit. Théologie et polémique au Grand Siècle (1640-1700)* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011) and Gay and Charles Olivier Stiker-Métral, eds., *Les Métamorphoses de la théologie. Théologie, littérature, discours religieux au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012).

[2] Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[3] This is the Père La Chaise after whom the famous Parisian cemetery is named. On the history of royal confessors, see Georges Minois, *Le confesseur du roi: les directeurs de conscience sous la monarchie française* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

[4] The indispensable introduction to the history of works published by Jesuits remains Carlos Sommervogel et al., *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, 9 vols. (Brussels: Schepens, 1890-1900). On Sommervogel's work, see Robert Danieluk, *La Bibliothèque de Carlos Sommervogel: le sommet de l'oeuvre bibliographique de la Compagnie de Jésus* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 2006).

[5] For recent work on Jesuit history, see, Jonathan Wright, *God's Soldiers: Adventure, Politics, Intrigue, and Power: A History of the Jesuits* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Thomas Worcester, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Emanuele Colombo, "Gesuitomania: Studi recenti sulle missioni gesuitiche (1540-1773)," in M. Catto et al., eds., *Evangelizzazione e globalizzazione: Le missioni gesuitiche nell'età moderna tra storia e storiografia* (Rome: Società editrice Dante Alighieri, 2010), pp. 31-59.

Thomas Worcester, S.J.  
College of the Holy Cross

[tworcester@holycross.edu](mailto:tworcester@holycross.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172