Thomas N. Tentler. *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977. Pp. xxiv, 395. \$25.00 hardbound.

Erasmus said they were "like cuckoo calling to cuckoo": those authors of manuals that advised confessors on the conduct of the sacrament of Penance. Cuckoos are notoriously mimetic, have unusual breeding habits, and are parasitic on other birds. The simile seems apt. Thomas N. Tentler's study effectively demonstrates the enormous tedium of this pastoral literature about sin and the conditions for its absolution on the eve of the Reformation. After an historical background, he introduces the genre of confessors' manuals, then analyzes the practice of auricular confession as it is recommended in that literature: the necessity of sacramental confession, its frequency, its good and complete conduct, and the expertise of the confessor. He investigates these authors' advice on the operation of the sacrament. He examines their attitudes toward sin, especially sexual transgressions of married penitents, as indication of social control. But Tentler challenges Erasmus' allusion to the mere parasitism of such manuals with a more sophisticated understanding of the genre. He analyzes not only the tension between discipline through guilt, and consolation, but their compatibility in that system. He argues for the irony that it was in their very charity to console Christians that these authors controlled them.

This is a very fine and very fair study of an issue that easily courts simplistic and sectarian interpretations. Tentler's preface to the subject is a model of clarity and instruction. The discussion proceeds with judgement informed by extensive research. The language sometimes falters, however. An argument of Augustine's is anachronistically labelled "scholastic," as is mediaeval devotion, "pietistic." It is not always clear whether "guilt" refers to culpability or feeling, or both; the distinction is crucial in sacramental theology. The word "magical" is undefined. Readers will be thrown back on ordinary connotations of "hocus pocus... presto chango," or abreast of technology, the analogy popular in some theological discussion prompted by Vatican II, of confession as an automatic car wash. A scholarly decision about whether confessors' manuals on the eve of the Reformation promoted magical practice would require not only historical investigation, but mastery of the important studies on magic and religion in cultural anthropology and the history of religions, and profound philosophical analysis relating semiotics and sacraments. These particular criticisms do not undermine the general achievement of Tentler's research, however.

A significant question concerns the nature of that achievement. Tentler sets out his intention: "This is a study of a religious institution. It explains, in language as free from theological technicalities as possible, the ordinary teaching about sin, guilt, and forgiveness in the decades before the Reformation. At the same time it describes what was required of all Christians who had attained the age of reason and who sought justification through ecclesiastical penance." A serious difficulty arises for this reviewer in that teaching is not necessarily practice, nor literature an institution: and clearly not in this case where the application of manuals to the practice of auricular confession is undetermined, and, I think, undeterminable.

Tentler defines his authors as "those authorities whose ideas and writings governed sacramental confession from the advent of printing until the beginning of the Reformation." Yet their government of the actual practice of confession is precisely

what Tentler's research does not establish; it is what his analysis assumes. Again, he claims that "they were authorities in every sense of the word." Unless these authors were bishops, however, their manuals did not compose the *magisterium*, the official teaching authority of the church. They were self-appointed "authorities." Their manuals would have commanded no more assent than any other advisory pastoral literature, such as any theologian might have written. Their subject was of grave ecclesiastical importance and social import, and no doubt the significance and apparent popularity of the genre derive from this. Obviously these manuals met (and generated?) some pastoral concern, whether real or imagined, of their authors and readers. Tentler speculates insightfully and convincingly on this. But the literature was not, on the evidence forwarded so far, binding. Where it can be established that certain of these manuals were composed by bishops, such as Antoninus of Florence, or better, prescribed by them as normative, then Tentler's argument would be considerably strengthened concerning the practice within such jurisdiction.

Tentler mentions "the people who bought these books," "the reading public." Who were they? Perhaps if this information could be retrieved with some precision, and if comprehensive and reliable profiles on the clergy in those critical decades could be compiled, historians might better estimate how and why the manuals were read. Tentler assumes reasonably that they *were* read. But how were they read? How were they applied? Tentler's interpretation presupposes that they were read universally and thoroughly, and that they were applied rigorously. This assumption may be entirely correct. His learning on the subject entitles his view to full consideration from a general reviewer. But it may have been the case that the manuals were merely consulted from time to time, perhaps regarding only certain difficult circumstances of sin.

Tentler readily admits that "no one can know what went on in individual confessions." Yet the institution he would reconstruct was composed precisely of such individual acts. This reviewer would have been much more reserved about what information can be recovered historically about and from an institution that is composed ultimately of secret acts. The question, then, is not whether Tentler has contributed a valuable study. That is certain. The question concerns what the study is about: whether it truly analyzes an institution, or whether it analyzes a literature that concerns that institution and has probably influenced it in some undetermined way. I would suggest the latter achievement. It may be reasonably assumed that the practice of auricular confession proceeded by canon law and by a personal and pastoral discretion in some way informed by contemporary manuals. Tentler's book must be recommended as an instructive and incisive guide through that literature. The translation from literature to life seems unsupportable, however. Without the testimony of actual confessors and penitents about real experiences, historians must be limited to modest uncertainty about the institution of auricular confession on the momentous eve of the Reformation.

MARJORIE O'ROURKE BOYLE, *Toronto*